

## The Common School and the Teaching of Morality

Ayeni, J. O and Ayeni, M. A

Department of Educational Foundations and Management,  
Faculty of Education,  
Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

**Corresponding Author: Ayeni, J. O**

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the common school and its feasibility in teaching morality. The common school, often referred to in some quarters as public school, is conceptually defined as that which is established by the community to accommodate people of diverse cultures and impart knowledge and community values. This is distinguished from other schools established by individuals or faith-based communities for a different purpose. The common school is committed to impart the comprehensive ideal, which is summed up as propagating community values, the crux of which is morality. This position paper examines the plausibility of teaching morality through religion and some school subjects. It however emphasised the relationship between religion and morality and justified the need to use religion and other subjects to teach morality. It concludes on the need to give prominence to the teaching of religion since it is more appetitive to teaching morality.*

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**Keywords:** common school, religion, morality, culture, education

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### INTRODUCTION

Common school may be conceived as identifiable with 'public school' as it is known in some quarters and the term is preferable in use since every school, is a public asset irrespective of its ownership and control. 'Common school' would be used in this paper to express and represent all that may be understood by 'public school'. The Blackwell Publishers in Britain devoted an edition of their Journal of Philosophy of Education to this issue of common school, as a dedication to the memory of their last editor, Terence H. McLaughlin (1949-2006). The journal opened up perspective to thinking about common school. This paper revisits the issue with interests in the teaching of Morality. Much of the references shall therefore come from this publication.

The school is an agent of the community for propagation of knowledge and values. As an institution, it is an extension of the community to which it belongs and therefore is expected to assist those who pass through it to learn the culture and values of the community. Every school is perceivable as an agent of the community. Community is an aggregate of individuals in which everyone enjoys self-recognition and is able to interact with others for a purposeful end. This may not be an accurate definition of the term but it serves our purpose to see community as composite of individuals and corporate bodies. It is not unusual to have two or more smaller communities within a large community. The school exists as a micro-community within the macro-community to impart knowledge and values for the growth of the larger community. In some parts of the world, notably in Britain and Nigeria, voluntary

associations establish schools to run along with the common schools. These associations exist as smaller communities within the larger community of the state. They are mainly faith communities. Many of them operate the schools to the directives of the state while some operate independently of the state directives except on matters relating to public examinations. For instance, the 1944 Education Act in Britain permitted and supported schools established by voluntary agencies. These schools were controlled by the agencies within the stipulated framework of the education system of the state. (Pring, 2007). The Nigerian experience up till now is a co-existence of common schools with voluntary agency schools. The common schools are schools established and controlled by government. They are usually referred to in Nigeria as public schools. The voluntary agency schools, otherwise known as Private Schools are established and controlled by individuals and other bodies.

The issue of 'moral' implies behaviour and the adjectives 'moral' and 'immoral' suggest behaviour which is acceptable and unacceptable respectively. The idea of moral education therefore comes of place as a point of concern in view of the fact that the school is expected to teach morality among other things. Morality is concerned with good and bad behaviours. It is a social phenomenon, since it involves the evaluation of the consequences of our actions for other people and their actions for us. Morality is equally perceived as the core of human and societal living since every community has its own rules of conduct that are founded on the culture that sustains them. The issue now comes up on whose morality the schools should accord primacy when

there is conflict of ethical rules between the larger community in which they are located and the smaller ones that establish them. For example, the ethical rules taught in common schools may not cohere totally with those taught in voluntary agency schools yet each set of rules is believed to serve the purpose of human and societal development judging from the motives of those who teach them.

### **The Concept of Common School**

The notion of common school cannot be conceived in one single definition certain attributes combine to make up the concept. The first is the idea of commonness or communality which carries the impression of the possession of same features or characteristics. In this sense, common school is an educational institution that is jointly possessed by people in a particular community and is entrusted with the responsibility to teach what is valuable to the community. The salient points to note here include the joint possession of the educational institution and the community value system as the expected focus of operation.

Other ideas that make up the concept of the common school may concern what take place there. The curriculum, the teachers as well as the teaching methodology must have a bearing with the community. The school must offer an environment where everybody feels in place irrespective of religious, political or racial leanings. Terrance McLaughlin (2003) gave a definition of 'common school' as "a school that is open to, and intended for, all students within a given society regardless of their specific differentiating characteristics". A critical issue on common school here is the emphasis on equal and justifiable admission and learning opportunities.

Now one may ask: what does it entail to operate a common school? To this, Richard Pring (2007) gave an answer that it is being committed to the comprehensive ideal. His answer appears plausible but rather nebulous in the sense that the idea of comprehensive ideal is subjectible to various interpretations. Whatever may be identified as the comprehensive ideal may not be a feature of the common schools alone. Commitment to the comprehensive ideal is a broad description of what is expected of every school system, whether it is a common school or not. A further examination of Pring's thought would elucidate this point. He asserted that one essential point that marks the comprehensive ideal of the common school is the abolition of the restriction of the age of admission to eleven years. This is seen to provide a common dividend of citizenship, beginning from childhood. The common school therefore is to address such issues as equality of opportunity, respect for individuals, preparation for good living in the society,

and care of its cultural values (Halsey, 1978). But one would remark that all these expected ideal outcomes are not exclusive characteristics of common schools since they are equally achievable in the non-common schools. It very much depends on the effectiveness of the planning and programming in these schools. The comprehensive ideal which is seen as the core value of common school had remained an elusive point in Pring's thought.

Graham Haydon (2007) enumerated some authors' views on values that constitute the comprehensive ideal. We shall itemize some of them in a few words. They include:

- Commitment to the good of the community, stressing its democratic nature.
- Comprehensive ideal should foster mutual respect, understanding and harmony.
- Integration of students across their diversity to be outweighed by the demands of social justice.

These points are commentaries to the lead paper of Pring (2007) on the common school in which he stipulated the attainment of the comprehensive ideal as the central point of focus. Reflecting on these points one would still maintain that the notion of comprehensive ideal is elusive considering the fact that the comprehensiveness of what may be seen as ideal remains nebulous since the terms in which they are to be understood are not clearly stated. One may raise questions on what sense these ideals are seen as comprehensive. This could be in terms of value of contents, the clarity of thought or the feasibility of the attainment of these ideals. Besides, whatever attributes may be adduced to the comprehensiveness of the ideals mentioned, they are not sufficient to accord them as prerogatives of the common school alone since both the common and the voluntary agency schools stand to achieve these ideals. Pring dwelt much on the engagement of the comprehensive ideal with culture. He asserted that it seeks to nurture and promote common culture while it recognises diversity of cultures. He made a distinction of culture into descriptive and evaluative sense. According to him, a descriptive sense of culture embraces shared practices, together with the understandings and values embedded within those practices through which groups of people make sense of experience, value certain things and activities, are able to anticipate how others see things and attribute particular significance or meaning to them. By implication, culture is definable in terms of groups of people in a community and their values. The global society is a composite of various communities and cultures, one therefore expects multiplicity of values and corresponding activities to sustain them. These activities build up as traditional ways or practices of the communities. At the base of every culture is belief. Belief and culture are concomitants. This is because people live up to the values they believe in,

and their living styles are expressions of their commitment to these values. As to the evaluative sense, Pring takes culture to refer to assessment of values inherent in certain activities that enhance the human capacity for understanding, feeling, relating and adapting to situations. This point is calling attention to the judgmental nature of culture and the antecedents to certain practices among a group of people. There is diversification of culture in which there are several cultures introduced by people of various communities and orientations. This gives way to one culture being rated as superior, or inferior to the other. The evaluative sense of culture explains the practice of segregating people to their various ways of learning, understanding and exposure in respect of life, values and situations. From this perspective therefore one would say that people are perceived to exist in classes created on the basis of how close or distant they are from pre-established values, set within the society.

This perception forms the pedestal for such people to be appraised as cultured or condemned as uncultured or rated as 'high cultured' or 'low cultured'. Such terms are descriptive of levels of closeness to the perceived ideal.

#### **Common School and Teaching of Religion and Morality**

An entry point to discussion on this issue is to consider the fact that the teaching of religion carries consequences for morality irrespective of the faith professed in the religions. Actually the common school situation can be conceived as different from the faith-based schools where the academic and social life of teachers and pupils are oriented towards and controlled by the faith professed and practised by the communities that establish the schools.

Kelvin Williams (2007) in his critique of the incursion of religion into the civic life made a distinction between the French perception of the common school and the British perception. According to him a common school in France is characterised by the absence of religion. The curriculum is not open to any particular religious confession. In Britain, however, what makes a common school is the comprehensiveness of its curriculum, which is broad and non-selective. It is neither paying particular attention to any religion nor eliminating religion totally. This is equally applicable to Nigerian common schools.

The dichotomy between the curriculum of the common school and that of non-common (separate) schools that are associated with faith-based communities exists in view of the dual purpose of the school for education and evangelization that characterise the non-common schools especially the faith-based schools. While the faith-based schools are

allowed to exist in some parts of the world to teach and build up the citizenry and as well introduce faith confessions, the existence of such schools is totally abhorred in other parts. In France, for instance, operating a faith-based school, otherwise known as religious schools is considered to be an encroachment on the civic rule since it is inconceivable that such schools cannot do but promote religious confessions which could inevitably divide the citizenry. Such confessions are expected to be reserved to the places of worship. Religion is thus seen as an impediment to the making of the common school.

Kevin Williams again, gave this hint:

The notion of using the curriculum to promote a particular religious view of the world would be considered, in the 21st century in most liberal democracies an unacceptable encroachment of religion into the civic space. This marks a huge transformation of the strong historical connection between schooling and religion, a connection that is to be found in the Jewish and Islamic traditions as well as within Christianity. (p. 675)

One would make out from this that religion is considered an aberration to democratic life of the school system in France. There may be no end to a debate on this sensitive issue. Controversial as it may seem the truth of the matter is that religion, whatever the faith confession may be, embraces the social and moral life of a people and the school is expected to build up the social and moral life of the people, among other functions. It would be sheer futility to exclude the teaching of religion from schools. What may be arguable concerning the relevance of religion in schools, concern the faith confessions and the ways of worship. An essential function of religion that could make it desirable in schools, is the commitment to the teaching of morality. Every religion carries some teaching on morality, which is a teaching on the need to do good and avoid evil. If the school is expected to produce trustworthy and dependable citizenry, every avenue to achieve this must be employed, and religion is one of such avenues. A position that religion should be kept out of school or even the public forum may not augur well for any community.

Let us critically examine this remark:

When we deal with one another as citizens we leave our faiths at home. Those who use God-talk in the public square need their mouths washed out with liberal soap. In schools we seem reluctant to seek even mutual understanding of our diverse religions. We avoid theology, let alone theological politics. (Strike, 2007 p 694).

The issue of liberalism in religion and the need for people to relate purely on humanitarian grounds is stressed here as an appreciable point but a remark of this nature is highly emotive and brushes aside the

strong affective nature of religion. The remark advocates leaving one's faith at home as a sign of liberal relationship. But this is impossible since a person cannot be divorced from his religion. Religion is, among other things, affective experience in a person and it goes with him wherever he is. What may be suspended or put at rest for a while is the demonstrations and the practices of one's faith-commitment, one's religious convictions cannot but make an impact on one's perceptions and relationships. Religion may be likened to the mother-tongue and background culture which cannot but have impact on one's speech behaviour and other behaviour.

In view of this therefore, it is expected that the school as an agent of formation should recognise and respect religious convictions. To make religion a point of teaching calls for training people of multi-cultural backgrounds and beliefs to learn the values that may be seen as common to them and as well impart generally acclaimed social values in the language and culture of the religions. It is not necessarily to impart the dogma of particular religions, as this may be left to individual worshipping communities to do. In Britain, just like what operates in Nigeria, the question whether morality can be totally separated from religion is not a vital one, since religious education is still retained by statute in public schools. But it is expedient to note that more people in a materialistic and computer age, question the right to teach religion in schools, where we have a secular educational system. In Britain, the problem is simply stated. If morality can be totally separated from religion, well and good. It matters little whether religion is taught in schools or not, since the school can still discharge its social responsibility to teaching morality. The Britain approach to accommodating religion in schools would be preferable to the practice in the United States, for instance, of separating the church from the state which led to separation of religion from schools since the schools are strictly the belonging and responsibility of the state not the church. In their practice, the British do not phase out religion in schools, rather they blend it with education. This also happens in Nigeria.

The common school may not rightly be seen as an organ to crush particular sets of beliefs and theological professions rather it should be seen as an agent of harmony of people of various religions. A core issue in every religion and society is morality. Every religion has something to do with morality to a great extent. The society imparts morality as essential aspect of citizenship education. If the common school is looked upon to achieve citizenship education, morality which may be considered as a springboard for this has to be taught and it may not be best taught in isolation from religion. A position that it is in the domain of religion that most serious problems occur

in terms of the comprehensive ideal (Halstead, 2007) lacks sufficient proofs. A common misconception is to see the faith-based schools as prone to causing division among people because of the diverse orientations and attitudes that may be imbibed from the religious impact on these schools. But any type of school is prone to make distinctions among people. The special schools, for instance, which are traditionally known to cater for people with particular disabilities creates social distinction between people with such disabilities and those without them. Some expansive private schools are established not principally to enhance high standard but to create a class distinction between the wealthy and the poor. This is judging from the exorbitant fees the schools charge. Much money is spent on building up the school environment to register the class discrimination at a glance. Again, single-sex schools exist to create distinction on the basis of gender. Creating distinctions among people is an inevitable reality that one needs to face.

The common schools which accommodate different cadres of people cannot but make some distinctions as they operate. Such distinctions may be on the basis of academic performance, demonstration of skills and moral behaviour, among others. A comprehensive ideal of the school system is to entrench effective management of differences among people in the face of these distinctions. One of the assets to doing this is religion, with its teaching on morality. Problems on the attainment of the comprehensive ideal may be associated with abuse of religion. These come about for example, when politics is brought into the practice of religion. Again, Strike (2007) in his list of expectations of the common schools mentioned the need to be open to religious dialogue without endorsing any particular religion as well as the necessity for moral consciousness. This, one would say, would create the platform for the attainment of the much desired comprehensive ideal. Morality therefore needs to be taught to enhance the comprehensive ideal.

#### **Challenge to the Teaching of Morality**

For morality to be taught effectively as a goal of the common school there is a need to explore rules of conduct, norms, laws and duties that impress upon social life of a people as well as their free will. This makes appeal to Kantian ethics. Immanuel Kant was a philosopher of the 19th century, whose theory on morality is still relevant for philosophical considerations till today. In what he called "categorical imperative" he enumerated three principles on which morality can be established. These can be stated thus:

- a. The individual human being possesses absolute worth.
- b. One should act as to treat humanity either in oneself or in another person as an end in itself, not as

a means to an end.

c. Each person possesses autonomy of the will that enables him or her legislate the moral law, such a will is free and independent. (Kant, 1909)

Thus from these principles one would understand morality as of the whole person, whereby an individual recognises this wholeness in himself or herself and in the other person. Through the exercise of will power a person seeks to do things of value to enhance this wholeness.

Kant (1909) once distinguished between moral inclination and moral obligation. He saw moral inclination as expressive of free response to do good or avoid evil, while moral obligation connotes compulsion to respond to a situation in a stipulated way. The latter was considered by him as the yardstick for morality. But one would uphold that teaching morality would embrace the two perceptions. There are instances in which one's inclinations may blend with one's moral obligations, just as there are instances while the two could be apart yet a person is expected to respond morally. For example a person may be inclined to assist a physically handicapped to walk at one instance simply out of compassion for him as well as out of the moral obligation to assist the poor. At another instance he may assist the same or similar handicap simply to avoid blame.

If the person assists the handicap out of a sense of compulsion or obligation such a person cannot be said to be morally committed to the handicap since he does not act freely to protect him. On the other hand, if the person assists the handicap out of inclination to do so, that person acts morally since such behaviour is acceptable to the society and he is personally committed to it. There is therefore a need for certainty of moral expectation and derivation of fulfilment shown in outward commitment before a case of moral behaviour can be established. Kant's position rejects that a person acts morally upon one's inclination rather he submits that one acts morally only when one does what one is expected to do in spite of one's inclinations. But one may question further whether a person can carryout his obligations without the inclination to do so. To this question one may call attention to the fact that inclinations are tendencies in a person to exercise the will power. Whatever a person does is presumed to arise from inclination to do so, notwithstanding the drives to the action. This is simply because one entertains the free will to respond to the drives. This makes him personally committed to an action. Kant made another distinction between actions that are "in accord with duty" and those performed "from duty" but this distinction is not clear. He admitted that the distinction is difficult to make when he said:

We can readily distinguish whether the action which

agrees with duty is done from duty or from a selfish view. It is much harder to make this distinction when the action accords with duty and the subject has besides a direct inclination to it. (p. 37)

Harder still one may say, is the distinction when the action accords with duty and the subject acts from duty without inclination to it. One may continue to wave around the terms "Duty" and "Inclinations" till no sense is made of what constitute morals on the interplay of the two terms. One point is clear, it is that the essence of morality is to be found in the motive behind an action. The issue of motive conjoins inclinations and sense of duty. Simply put, no one can be said to act morally without an inclination to do so and without committing oneself to some duty. In a secular society like Britain and Nigeria, the teacher is empowered to teach morality but he is forbidden to convert any pupil to his own beliefs through his teacher. He must avoid forming the pupil's mind in a religious sense, as assiduously as Rousseau demanded that the teacher must avoid forming the child's mind in the intellectual sense. He may teach his pupils the desirability of living at peace with himself and his neighbours, in terms of common sense and human experience. He may not attempt to communicate his experience of the 'Peace of God' which passeth all understanding and the desirability of attaining such peace. The teacher in the are of morals, is an interpreter, he must impart knowledge of good and bad to his pupils, forms moral habits, teach moral skills and develop moral motives. Teaching morality is not the same as imparting knowledge only nor a skill only because morality as Herbert (1957) put it is an ultimate aim of education itself. His expression to describe the process was that 'outer compulsion must lead to inner freedom'. The teacher must ensure that the individual passes from a static state of order to a dynamic state of self discipline. The transition from the static to the dynamic state is to be achieved by teaching.

Morality which essentially bears upon rules of conduct can be taught anywhere including the common schools. Families, worshipping communities, clubs and associations amongst others could provide the forum for the teaching of morality. Teaching of morality entails informing people on moral rules and directing them to comply with these rules. This is based on the fact that every behaviour has a foundation in some rules a person sets for himself. The behaviour is adjudged as moral or immoral depending on the sanity of these ulterior rules which are expressible in exterior acts. Although it is possible that some exterior acts may not sufficiently express the ulterior motives or may be totally different from them, the point remains that every action has its source in internally conceived motives and personal rules of conduct. An attempt to teach morality would seek to influence a person on

development of motives and rules of conduct. This again falls back to developing in a person the inclination to carry out legitimate exterior acts.

A curriculum on morality may be polymorphous. This is because every school subject and subject matter carries consequences for morality if it is taught along that line. Subjects such as history, literature, government, geography, sociology, psychology, law and religion, amongst others have moral dimensions to their teaching. Other subjects like mathematics and the sciences which apparently do not exhibit moral dimensions can still be taught with moral implications. This is simply based on the fact that every school subject, is taught to enhance human development and morality is a crucial aspect of human development.

Notwithstanding the involvement of morality in school subjects, morality can still be taught as a subject on its own. In teaching it one may have recourse to adopt the methodology of other school subjects. For example, one may adopt the normative approach as in law, civics or religion; or he may adopt the historical approach as peculiar to subjects like history, anthropology and sociology. Again the rational approach which is peculiar to philosophy may be adopted to teach morality. Curriculum experts have a stake in planning and programming useful and relevant courses of study on morality.

## CONCLUSION

Moral education is an essential aspect of people's development in as much as it prepares them to relate best to the value systems of their community. The common school with attendant community orientation is looked upon as an agent of moral education. People's response to cultural differences in the multi-cultural societies could be influenced by the moral orientation they receive. All sectors of the educational system should therefore pay attention to the need to impart the right orientation to people in order to build a sane society. The teaching of Religion should be given a boost because of its sensitivity to moral matters. The predominant religions in an area may be taught in the common schools. While admitting the threat this may pose to liberalization of faith commitment, there is nothing wrong for people to understand the beliefs and practices of other people since it is through the knowledge of this that they may clearly understand the difference in their faith confessions and other people's beliefs. Hopefully, this could set a pedestal for mutual understanding and respect without subjugating one religion to another. Since a common factor in every religion is morality and morality is a felt need of every society, this aspect should be emphasized in teaching religion in common schools. The knowledge of various religions is an essential tool for relating well with adherents of these

religions. Establishment of schools by various religious communities may be allowed and encouraged since this could promote the teaching and learning of religion and morality. Such schools may offer challenges to the common schools in respect of teaching morality. The inspectorate division of education may need to be active in moderating excesses that may arise from fanaticism and unscrupulous abuse of religion.

Common schooling as a practice should manifest in every community in the sense that people in a given area irrespective of race, language, gender, ethnicity and other differences should be exposed to the same courses of study within a liberal atmosphere. The ethical values that could achieve this liberalism should be taught and imbibed, such values include justice, freedom, personal autonomy in matters of subject of specialization and rational morality among others. The private proprietorship of the schools should not debar people from attaining these educational values.

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