Raising Moral Children

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Key Moral Capacities

• Moral Literacy

What We Focus on Too Little:

1. Moral Identity: Moral Motivation/Moral dispositions
2. Moral Awareness/Circle of Concern
3. Managing Destructive Emotions
How much do kids and adults prioritize caring?
## Making Caring Common Survey

**Method:** Student survey, administered to 10,000+ middle & high school students in 33 schools, 2013-2014

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Student data:
Caring vs. achievement and happiness

Proportion of Students Ranking Value First

- Caring
- Achievement
- Happiness
Some youth are highly focused on their own happiness

- “It's important to focus on oneself over others.”

- “Happiness is my primary goal in life. Achievement and moral ‘goodness’ are only important if they make me happy.”

- “My first responsibility is to make sure that I am enjoying life. My second responsibility is that I do well and set myself up for future success. Caring for others is last because it does not effect me as much.”

- “If you are not happy, life is nothing. After that, you want to do well. And after that, expend any excess energy on others.”
The cost of subordinating caring

• When youth don’t prioritize caring, the bar is lower for bullying, sexual harassment, and many other types of harm
• Youth may be less motivated to develop empathy and other SEL skills
• Youth may be less prepared to be constructive citizens who can put common good before their own
Gaps between adults’ beliefs and youth’s perceptions

• Studies show that parents and teachers from across ethnic groups report placing great importance on children being caring

• Most parents say they value their children's caring over their achievement (Suizzo, 2007)
How youth perceive parents’ priorities

Proportion of Students Ranking Value
First for Parents

- Caring
- Achievement
- Happiness
How youth perceive parents’ priorities

Youth were four times more likely to agree than disagree with this statement on MCC Survey: “[My parents] are prouder if I get good grades in my classes than if I’m a caring community member in class and school.”
Gaps in perceptions of school adults’ priorities

Proportion of Students Ranking Value First for Adults at School

Proportion of School Adults Ranking Value First

- Care
- Academics
- Athletics
- Arts
- Others

- Caring
- Achievement
- Happiness
Student data:
Performance values over moral values

Proportion of Students Ranking Value First

Proportion of Students Ranking Value First for Other Students
Caring is still important but secondary

- 47% of youth rank caring second when asked to rank happiness, achievement, and caring

- 45% of youth think that their parents would rank caring second when asked the same question

- **Many youth** act altruistically
  - 38% would “definitely” and 48% would “probably” tutor a friend
  - 15% would “definitely” and 45% would “probably” volunteer on a Saturday to help out at a school event
Some youth are highly focused on caring

• “If I am a good person who cares about others, then in my mind I am already happy.”

• “I'd rather be a good person who is respectful of everyone than someone who is doing good in school and being disrespectful.”

• “I like to help others. Sometimes I help others to the point where I don't even get enough time to help myself.”
Problem may be tacit daily messages

- Parents’ and school’s day-to-day messages may stress **achievement & happiness over caring**

- For example:
  - Amount of time and concern focused on academic achievement
  - Dinner table conversations focused on achievement
  - Not reaching out to friendless kids, not writing thank you notes, not expressing gratitude
The irony

All the focus on happiness may be making children less happy

All the focus on achievement may not be increasing achievement in affluent communities (Luthar)
Important individual and race, class, culture differences

Meaning of achievement and hard work:

• For many youth, achievement and hard work have a clear moral purpose: supporting their communities, honoring their parents, defying stereotypes.
MCC Survey: The bottom line

1. Emerging trend of achievement as #1 priority
2. Caring is the lowest priority
3. Youth are still prioritizing happiness over caring
4. None of this actually makes them happier
Important caveats

- Preliminary analysis; not a random sample
- Happiness, achievement, and caring/ethics are certainly not mutually exclusive
The Contexts of Moral Development are Evaporating

- Schools
- Colleges
- Religious Institutions
Caring Schools Initiative
Changing Teen Social Norms

From Upstanders to Changing the Tide
Five Key Strategies

1. Utilizing Data
2. Mobilizing Youth
3. Low-burden and “Small” Things that Create Caring Communities
4. Relationships and Adult Development
5. Making Moral Values a Priority
Utilize Data: What Gets Assessed Gets Addressed

• Conduct survey of students and staff

• Utilize a range of strategies and reassess

• Be transparent about data and hold yourself accountable.
Mobilize the Energy and Wisdom of Youth

Youth as Community Builders

1. Meaningful student governance
2. Youth Capstone
Low-burden, “Small,” High-leverage Strategies that Build Empathy and Respect

Examples:

• Principal knows the name of every kid in the building and greets every kid at the door every day

• Teachers have support and skills to respond to insults like “that’s so gay”

• Bathrooms, hallways and buses are safe
• Meditation/Mindfulness/Stress Reduction

• Circle of concern exercise

• Use of arts, afterschool and other school settings, e.g. video, portraiture and bio projects
Relationships and Adult Development

• Make sure every child connected to an adult: Relationship Mapping.

• Opportunities for adults to discuss their relationships with kids/biases, etc.

• Adult self-care, resilience and development
Making Moral Values a Priority

• Close **rhetoric/reality gap**

• **Every adult an effective upstander** and support and training for school adults
Cont..

• Conversations with students about what values are most important to adults and students and why

• Thoughtful incentivizing—recognizing caring and responsibility
Evidence-based SEL and Character Development Programs

1. Evidence-based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs
   http://casel.org/in-schools/selecting-programs/additional-resources-for-safe-and-sound

2. Center for Character and Citizenship:
   https://characterandcitizenship.org/


4. Facing History and Ourselves: https://www.facinghistory.org

5. Open Circle: http://www.open-circle.org

Realities of Implementation: What’s Realistic and Inexpensive in Short Run?

1. Systematic Focus on Relationships
2. Students as Change Agents/Community builders
3. Ethically Rich Curriculum
5. Continuous Improvement Via Data
Making Caring Common:
www.gse.harvard.edu/mcc