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Teacher Morality and Disposition: A Summary and Analysis of Osguthorpe's Article from a
Policy Perspective

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Summary

Osguthorpe (2008) states that a good teacher should not only possess a strong knowledge of the content and good instructional pedagogy but should also have a good moral character. This issue is approached by creating a conceptual framework for a moral character, discussing why we want teachers with strong moral character, discussing how morally good a teacher needs to be, and what should be done if a teacher does not possess a strong moral character. Students observing a teacher with a strong moral character will learn moral behavior through witnessing the behavior of their teachers. Teacher education programs should include coursework on moral behavior and should accept students with a strong moral disposition. The reason schools want teachers of a strong moral character are that these teachers will convey a strong moral disposition that will facilitate the development of students with strong moral character. These teachers will then be able to teach morality through direct instruction. It is difficult to create a scale of morality, as it exists in absolutes with a person either being moral or not. Schools want teachers who can demonstrate moral behavior inside of the classroom despite what their behavior may be in their personal lives. Some of the moral traits schools are looking for are responsibility, fairness, patience, and open-mindedness. Teachers with poor moral character may demonstrate poor moral behavior in the classroom, which will negatively affect the students. Even if the students do not develop poor moral character based on what they observe, teachers of poor moral character may be more likely to not be prepared for class, will be unfair, and will not regard the learning needs of their students. Rather than to be selective about the moral character of the teachers who enter the field, teacher preparation programs should include educating teachers in moral behavior as part of their curriculum. This practice will be helpful in that teachers who already possess strong moral character may not be able to translate that behavior into the

Comment [pme1]: Is that the assertion of the author?

Comment [pme2]: Hmm. So it would be okay for teachers to rob banks and torture kittens as long as it was after school?

classroom. Therefore, teacher education programs should focus more on this in addition to the education they provide for content knowledge and pedagogy (Osguthorpe, 2008).

Analysis

In order to engage in this practice, policies would need to be developed at the school, district, state, and federal levels. Establishing policies for an abstract and subject concept such as morality would be challenging and the areas that would need to be addressed are identified below.

At the school level, policies would have to be established that specifically define moral behavior based on state and federal guidance that was universal to all cultures. Policies would also need to be developed to observe and evaluate the morality of educational practices in the classroom. In addition to observations being made regarding content knowledge and pedagogy, moral instructional practices would need to be added to the teacher evaluation process. These behaviors may need to be evaluated more frequently than the standard evaluations a teacher receives. While there may already be a disciplinary process in place for teachers who are overtly unprepared for class or treat students unfairly, a system would need to be established to identify when this behavior occurs more covertly. Professional development programs within the school would need to include moral teaching practices and how a person should conduct themselves in front of the students. Finally, policies would need to be developed that ensured administrators also engaged in moral behavior with the students and teachers to ensure consistency.

At the district level, policies would need to be developed for the hiring practices of teachers that would include an evaluation of moral character. While hiring practices currently include a criminal background check, a more intensive evaluation would be required to identify

Comment [pme3]: Why more frequently?

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the values discussed in the article (fairness, patience, etc.). Policies would also have to be developed to guide schools in disciplinary practices for teachers who are not engaging in moral teaching practices. A process would need to be created for teachers to appeal negative evaluations they have received in these areas. The district would help the school in creating a moral development curriculum not only for their teachers but since Osguthorpe's article calls for direct instruction of morality, a curriculum is necessary for students. Both curriculums would need to be culturally sensitive in their development. District policies would also need to be developed that would help facilitate recruiting teachers who have a strong moral character.

Policies at the state level would need to include a specific definition of moral teaching practices. These definitions would be required to identify strong moral attributes that were universally accepted by all cultures. Since many different cultures are represented within a state the teaching practices that are developed must be respectful to all of them. Once those attributes were defined, state policy makers would need to develop policies that ensured that the identification of those attributes in an individual did not contribute to discriminatory hiring practices. Defining culturally universal moral attributes would be a difficult if not impossible task that many policy makers would avoid because of the political implications of being associated with creating a definition of morality. Alternative policies may be presented that focus on specific character attributes (responsible, patience, etc.) as opposed to the abstract concept of being moral. An alternative policy of character traits focuses more on the behavior of a desirable employee rather than the overall values and belief systems that morality implies. The addition of a moral character requirement for teachers would potentially decrease an already shallow pool of applicants into the teaching field. Additional state funding may be necessary to generate higher salaries that may increase the number of people in the applicant pool.

Comment [pme4]: Seems that lots of these would end up in the courts.

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At the federal level, policies would need to be developed to ensure that the states did not engage in discriminatory hiring practices based on their definitions of a moral character. Alternative policies may be developed that moved from the terminology of moral or virtuous to terms of strong character. These terms may focus more on the nature of Osguthorpe's proposal that teachers be fair and responsible. Using terms such as moral or virtuous may result in the involvement of organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to ensure state policies do not impede upon the rights of others. Federal policy makers may enact these alternative policies and mandate the states move away from using language that is abstract and may be insensitive to cultural values.

While the ideal situation would be to have teachers of a strong character in every classroom in American there are a number of complications that exist in trying to mandate that scenario. Identifying a universal and culturally sensitive definition of morality would be very challenging and could lead to discriminatory hiring practices. The morality that the teacher conveys to students may not be consistent with the morality they are taught in their home. Engaging in the practice of identifying and teaching morality presents some very challenging issues particularly when the morals conveyed in the classroom are inconsistent with morals being taught at home. It may be important to include these practices in courses on pedagogy but to try to recruit teachers based on them and include specific coursework creates a multitude of policy issues that may be very challenging to overcome.

[Every so often, I wonder what on earth gets into the brains of the JTE editors. That someone has to write an article arguing that we want to produce teacher who know right from wrong and who are fair, suggests that the teacher education world is in a sorry state. The policies associated with the author's suggestions would likely emerge through policies to change standards. 24.5 points.](#)

References

- Osguthorpe, R. D. (2008). On the Reasons We Want Teachers of Good Disposition and Moral Character. *Journal of Teacher Education* 59(4) 288-299.