The riots, values and the role of education

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Last week thousands of young people spontaneously rioted in a number of English cities for no apparent reason.

In the aftermarth of the riots there have been many calls for the renewal of public and private virtues. We appear to want to change people for the better and so improve the quality of public life. In English society the development of a young person's character is too often seen as an entirely private matter for individuals or their families. Character is intimately linked to the ethos of society itself and is shaped by public forces. It is a major component of the making of a citizen. The new coalition government in Britain perceives education as an important element in its conception of 'The Big Society', but it has not yet described what it intends to do. Speaking in January 2010, the now Prime Minister David Cameron set out his vision of building responsibility in contemporary society.

According to Cameron, the central question is how government can 'help build responsible character in people', and the answer he gave was a focus on three areas of character formation in early life – the family, the school and the wider society. After the riots David Cameron made it clear that he believes 'there is a major problem in our society with children growing up not knowing the difference between right and wrong. This is not about poverty; it is about culture – a culture that glorifies violence, shows disrespect to authority and says everything about rights but nothing about responsibilities.' The government has recognized that there is broad-based and growing public support for 'moral education' in schools, but it still has not been able to specify what it will do other than outline some very broad statements about building the character of young people. The educational policies of the new coalition government are of course still forming – at present those that have been announced are largely structural and are to do with the organization and financing of the education and schooling system. What is missing is a values based policy that gives some clothes to the rhetoric of building character.

Few in England would consider the school the most important focus for building the character of the young. The mass media, religious communities, youth culture, peer groups, voluntary organizations, and above all parents and siblings, can account for significant influences on character formation. It cannot be readily assumed that the school makes more of a difference than any of these. However, it is reasonable to assume that certain positive features of the school will contribute to character development. Teachers will commonly argue that there is little room in the school curriculum to educate for moral character and that in any case there is no agreed way to determine what is good and bad character in a multicultural society. They say this despite the fact that young people encounter questions of character in their daily lives, both within and outside their schools.

Whilst teachers are concerned with how students act, this is currently dominated by a focus on student behavior. This renders teachers as facilitators and managers of young people, rather than moral educators and role models encouraging them to become certain sorts of people. We need to re-establish the moral authority of the teacher.

Schools are unavoidably moral places. Schools teach morality in a number of ways, both implicit and explicit and yet very few schools feature 'moral education' as a discrete and recognized subject within the curriculum. Instead, schools have a moral ethos embodied in rules, rewards and punishments, dress codes, relationships, styles of teaching, sports and in the kinds of respect accorded students and teachers. Schools ought to be able to convey to students what is expected of them, what is normal, what is right and wrong. It is often claimed that values are caught rather than taught; through their ethos, schools can socialize children into patterns of moral behavior.

Many young people in England surely want to live for something higher than mere consumerism. Few will look to religion for such a commitment, preferring instead to attach themselves to secular interests whose moral basis is questionable – celebrity culture, designer clothes, and money. The moral exemplars they see around them, as presented in the media, are often corrupt public officials, greedy businessmen or embrace a culture of a hedonistic celebrity.

There is a pretence in all contemporary western democratic societies, including America, that a central, and even essential, 'virtue' is individualism. In this context, young people are free to make their own choices within a culture of 'rights'

Within this context research suggests that many young people, particularly in socio-economically deprived areas, feel disengaged from the world around them. They do not seem intrinsically related to the world through family, birthplace, neighbourhood, religion or community. For this reason young people frequently have to forge their own destiny by exercising choice – concerned less with what is right than with what their perceived rights are. The lack of a clear and considered moral framework is stark, particularly when young people are faced with prescient moral dilemmas. The balance between an unbounded individualism and the social dimension is a major problem and many would argue that it needs to be re-balanced in favour of the latter – a balance which appreciates individual interests in the context of the common good.

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