We use cookies to ensure that we deliver the best user experience of our website. If you would like to, you can change your cookie settings at any time. Continue

UK Riots

The riots, values and the role of education

Professor James Arthur

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

Read full opinion (/research/impact/perspective/riots-arthur.aspx)

Have your say

This debate has now closed.

Feedback

M on 21 August 2011, **John** wrote

There are several things requiring further clarification within this opinion piece. The first and foremost is that the first statements of this piece are unexamined hypotheses. It is highly debatable whether or not the riots were spontaneous, versus triggered by local events and the circumstances of those experiencing those and similar events around the country, for example. It is a further, rather large, leap from this to state that there was "no apparent reason" for the riots.

Unless, and until, both of the aforementioned hypotheses have been shown to be well supported, there is little to no reason to couch any discussion of enhanced "character building" in schools within the context of a discussion of these riots.

As addressed in the piece, administering character building in a multicultural context is complicated. There is a related issue, however, that was not adequately addressed in the piece. The author states that we need to "reinstate the moral authority of the teacher." While most people, including myself, can see the value in this, there is an equally critical need to monitor the moral authority of the teacher and to keep it in line with the values not just of the larger culture but of the parents and caregivers of the children who are being resided over by this moral authority. For example, the author refers to "greedy businessmen" and "hedonistic celebrities." Surely, businessmen and celebrities occasionally have offspring who attend schools. While this is a somewhat extreme example, it makes the point that parents may have complicated values, such as values for earning money for oneself and one's family, or being successful in athletics, that do not necessarily and absolutely clash with active and positive participation in a moral society. Therefore, the design and implementation of moral education is not only complicated by the existence of multiple cultures but also by the existence of a limitless number and combination of value systems within any given culture - including within individuals who identify themselves with the predominant culture. The author has provided his own value judgments, which one could argue, when taken on face value, go beyond the basic values required for encouraging positive participation within a moral society.

A final issue to be addressed is that of individual differences in children. When society implements character building rules, guidelines, and lessons, the emotions of the implementers often become high, the authority shines through, and conflicts may arise between the interpretation, importance, and hierarchy of morals, and associated moral behaviour, between teacher and student, among others. This will undoubtedly be more common when the personal morals of the teacher (and her/his culture) and that of the student (and her/his culture) are not the same. It will also undoubtedly occur in some cases where the student is not able to participate in "moral education" and associated activities, or in educational and societal activities more generally, to the same extent as other children. For example, when the child has a known or unknown behavioural, social, or learning disability. The already highly complex multiple-cultural and multiple-value situation is further complicated, then, when that moral education is influenced by the moral values and moral authority of each of the individual 200,000 teachers who implement "the plan" with 4,000,000 students. The result, as anyone who has been through the education system knows, is that children with such difficulties are often seen as "misbehaving" and the result is that their relationship with their teacher, and along with it their academic education - the primary goal of schooling - suffers.

This critical commentary comes from someone who feels strongly that moral education at an early age played a meaningful and valuable role in his personal growth and personal and professional achievement into adulthood. However, my personal moral education came in a defined context that was agreed upon by my parents and my teachers. Therefore, unlike the current proposal, there was individualisation of not only culture but also individualisation of taught values within that culture. Even within this context, however, I am sorry to say that a number of my peers did not have the same positive response to their moral education. This is to say, as suggested above, a small number of these individuals experienced difficulties in this moral education context that then spread to affect their academic relationship with their teacher and, in turn, their academic opportunities and achievement. Moral education appears to be even more complex than morality itself.

Report this comment (/webteam/bigdebate/ReportCommentsForm.aspx?commentID=1.&commentUsername=John&commentPageURL=/research/impact/perspective/riots.aspx)

© University of Birmingham 2014