

Fethullah Gülen: A Vision of Transcendent Education

Charles Nelson
Kean University
charles.p.nelson@gmail.com

Abstract

School curricula in the U.S. have focused on the acquisition of knowledge essential to future careers while ethics and values have been considered peripheral to student development. However, due to a sense of a moral crisis in the U.S. and in its schools, a character education movement has arisen in an attempt to instill virtue into U.S. students. Similarly, another education movement has arisen inspired by the writings of Fethullah Gülen. This movement has founded hundreds of schools around the world, seeking to integrate science and spirituality in an attempt to raise a “Golden Generation” of individuals who will usher in a world of peace and harmony. Working toward this goal, Gülen-inspired teachers prefer to teach ethics by example rather than through lecture in order not to create conflict between themselves and community expectations. In a culture of individualism and Wall Street and political scandals, however, it is not clear whether U.S. students in general would be inspired sufficiently by moral exemplars alone to inquire into the reasons for their behavior, much less to be transformed into a “Golden Generation.” Consequently, this paper explores educational research findings and the writings of Fethullah Gülen, concluding that in a U.S. setting, at least, Gülen-inspired educators should consider incorporating practices of moral reasoning and action into their curricula.

Introduction

What should be the end of education? Almost all students in my experience, when encountered with this question have responded, “to get a good job and make money.” As a teacher, I can only recall two, perhaps three, students who saw school primarily as an opportunity to learn. In fact, only recently have I myself begun to consider education as more than a means to obtaining a better job that brings a higher standard of living.

My students and I are not alone. The 1983 “A Nation at Risk” report stated, “Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling.” According to the report, the “basic purposes” are to produce “highly skilled workers” to turn back the U.S.’s “15-year decline in industrial productivity” and regain its position as “the preeminent country for generating the great ideas and material benefits for all mankind.” In Canada, a similar perspective is present. “According to the National Alliance of Business in Canada, the fundamental responsibility of the school is to ‘teach basic skills’” (Shaker, 1998). Even some within the character education movement, to be discussed below, apparently focus on character insofar as it will benefit business. In the 2002 Carolina Education Brochure, Inez Tenenbaum, State Superintendent of Education, says, “Strong character traits such as honesty, integrity, and responsibility are not only what businesses expect of their employees but also what will lead schools and communities to higher levels of success and achievement in South Carolina and internationally.” Perhaps, such a perspective is to be expected, as many have long considered schooling to consist of the three Rs: reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic (cf. “School leavers ‘lacking three Rs”).

Naturally, schools should equip students with skills and knowledge for their future careers. That schools’ “basic purposes” should be limited to these objectives is shortsighted. They present a materialistic worldview that schools are no more than factories and students no more than products. Concurring, Postman (1995) states that schools today serve the gods of Economic Utility, Consumerism, and Technology, and neglect the metaphysics of education.

A materialistic perspective is not without consequences. Violence is increasing in schools (Bulach, 2002). In high school, 75% of students cheat on at least one exam; 40% steal from a store; and 40% will “lie to get a good job” (“2002 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth,” cited in Lickona, 2004; see also Goodman, 1998). Cheating is on the rise in college, too, and a decade ago, it was already at 82% for engineering students; what is worse is that, according to one professor, “[s]tudents are no longer embarrassed by it” (Selingo, 2004).

Of course, these statistics also indicate that in high school one-fourth of students are not cheating and that a majority are not stealing or lying. Moreover, it would be simplistic to attribute America’s moral climate to materialism alone. Rather, interactions among a variety of social, cultural, and economic factors have created an environment that downplays ethics. Still, materialism’s contribution to the lack of ethics in the U.S. today is not insignificant.

In reconsidering the end of education, I have come to the conclusion that without neglecting to prepare students for future careers, it should be to transform students into lives worth living. Others have come to the same conclusion. In the U.S., a character

education movement has gained strength. Outside the U.S. is another movement, one inspired by the writings and teachings of Fethullah Gülen, which offer a vision that can transform education and students' lives. This paper looks at these movements. It will look at the character education movement in the U.S. first. Next, it will consider Fethullah Gülen's education movement. Finally, it will make a few suggestions on how Gülen-inspired schools might adapt their approach to developing students' character in a U.S. environment.

Character Education in the U.S.

Regardless of cause, education in the U.S. has moved from teaching wisdom to subjects. Whitehead (1929) writes,

The fading of ideals is sad evidence of the defeat of human endeavor. In the schools of antiquity philosophers aspired to impart wisdom, in modern colleges our humbler aim is to teach subjects. The drop from the divine wisdom, which was the goal of the ancients, to text-book knowledge of subjects, which is achieved by the moderns, marks an educational failure, sustained through the ages. (p. 45)

This “fading of ideals” has not gone unnoticed. Blain and Levell (2002) state that in the U.S. because there is a perception of a “moral crisis in western society,” schools have begun to turn to character education, an attempt to instill values in students without reference to religion. This attempt has stirred up controversy on several fronts, one of which asserts that it is not possible to separate values from religion. Others feel civics education, character education's sibling, is “mumbo jumbo” taking time away from more important subjects, and others still oppose its universal orientation (Kristjánsson, 2004). Another front is that of Kohn (1999), who asserts that character education is unlikely to produce any lasting change in behavior as the method of instruction is primarily that of transmission rather than of students constructing and internalizing such values into their lives. Davis (2003) states that character education is simply flawed.

Actually, character education was the norm in education from Plato until the middle of the 20th century (Kristjánsson, 2002). It was once prominent in the U.S., but as research in the 1930s showed its ineffectiveness and as moral relativism became prevalent in the 1960s, educational institutions moved to values-free curricula that incorporated either a values-clarification or a “moral reasoning” approach to developing character (Murphy, 2002). Both approaches stressed that morality was not the teacher's province; rather students were to develop their own moral standards (Levins, 1997). The former does not work, but the latter does develop cognitive reasoning skills (Murphy, 2002) and thus has a role to play in character development.

More recently, character education has started to return to U.S. schools. However, what is meant by character education varies widely. For some, as indicated above, it is another approach to preparing students for the work force. For others, it makes the running of schools easier by preventing discipline problems. Levin-Epstein (2002) begins an article by saying, “Want to cut suspension rates, lower discipline referrals, and generally improve the climate in your school?” (p. 1). Others still are more interested in how character education will affect student learning (Lickona, 2004); in other words, subject matter remains the center of school learning.

Many see character education as civic virtue. Education Secretary William Bennett tied civic and moral values together, asserting the U.S. was morally superior to the Soviet Union (cited in Richburg, 1988). Vinson (1998) in his complaint against the National Council for the Social Studies position statement mentions only civic and democratic character. Murphy (2002) reports that about one-fourth of Blue Ribbon schools (schools recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as outstanding) define character education as “good citizenship.” Meier (2002) considers civic virtue to be an essential part of any democracy but goes beyond this. Believing that students need to be prepared to take part in democracy, she asserts that they need to be with and around adults and teachers they trust and who trust and respect them.

About one-third of Blue Ribbon schools consider character education to focus primarily on ethics and values (Murphy, 2002). One educator who sees character education as dealing primarily with virtue is Thomas Lickona, a developmental psychologist and professor of education at the State University of New York at Cortland. Lickona (2004) lists ten essential virtues: wisdom, justice, fortitude, self-control, love, positive attitude, hard work, integrity, gratitude, and humility. It should be noted that Lickona is one of the few who explicitly mentions the virtue of love.

Transforming education

The effectiveness of character education programs, according to Revell (2002), remains unclear. Conducting research of 12 schools (seven elementary and five high school), Revell focused on issues of citizenship and identity and reported that high school students tended to be “cynical or sceptical about specific character traits promoted by Character Education,” especially those students in non-magnet schools who were even “hostile” (pp. 427-428). Despite the similarity of programs across schools and the enthusiastic support of parents and school staff, students’ attitudes toward the programs’ tenets varied according to personal experiences in their communities.

Naturally, experience affects learning. However, other factors are likely at play, too. One factor is that character education is almost nonexistent in teacher preparation programs (Milson & Mehlig, 2002). Teachers and schools have little, if any, theoretical or practical experience in implementing character education. Although expertise is required to teach a “subject,” it apparently is not required to teach character. Second, and just as importantly, many proponents of character education programs focus on the students and neglect the character of school staff. (Exceptions exist, for example, Lickona and Meier.) Huebner (1999) is worth citing at length on this point:

First, recent discourse about moral and spiritual values in the classroom is incorrectly focused. That discourse assumes that there is something special that can be identified as moral or spiritual. This assumption is false. Everything that is done in schools, and in preparation for school activity, is already infused with the spiritual. All activity in school has moral consequences. The very highlighting of the need to teach moral and spiritual values in schools implies a breakdown not in the spirituality and morality of the student, but a breakdown in the moral activity and spirituality of the school itself, and of the people in control of the school. Those in control of the schools cover their own complicity in the domination system by urging the teaching of moral and spiritual values.

They do not urge that the moral and spiritual climate of the schools, which they control, be changed. That teachers do not feel the freedom to be critical and creative is a sign of their enslavement to other principalities and powers. The need is not to see moral and spiritual values as something outside the normal curriculum and school activity, but to probe deeper into the educational landscape to reveal how the spiritual and moral is being denied in everything. The problem in schools is not that kids are not being taught moral and spiritual values, the problem is—the schools are not places where the moral and spiritual life is lived with any kind of intentionality. (pp. 414-415)

Quite naturally, students would be cynical about programs that attempted to transform the students' character but not the character of the school itself. Of course, the moral activity and spirituality of communities is important, too. For character education to be successful, we need to return not simply to ideals but to the intentional living out of ideals by schools and communities. And the foremost ideal is that of love.

The requirement of love for a "sane society" was emphasized by Erich Fromm (1955). With love come attitudes, such as "care, responsibility, respect and knowledge" (Fromm, 1955, p. 33). Likewise, Bertrand Russell (1961) considered love and knowledge essential for character and progress: "There is only one road to progress, in education as in other human affairs, and that is: Science wielded by love. Without science, love is powerless; without love, science is destructive" (p. 158).

Without love, any attempt to inculcate character values is driven by goals of material success, such as providing "skilled workers" and avoiding discipline problems. Such goals are not necessarily detrimental to education. However, when love is not the guiding principle, these attempts to instill values are no more than indoctrination designed to produce obedience rather than character (Kohlberg, 1999; Kohn, 1999), attempts that do not work but instead promote cynicism, skepticism, or hostility.

For the ideal of love to live in schools, there must be a shift away from the school as a factory in which teachers view students as objectives rather than human beings, a factory in which knowledge is produced rather than character constructed (cf. Huebner, 1999). Instead, there must be a move toward schools and educators who not only have a mastery of their subjects but also embody character and love.

Fethullah Gulen's Vision of Education

As we turn from education in the U.S. to the education vision of Fethullah Gülen, we see parallels. Like Postman and Whitehead, Gülen (1998) sees failure in institutions of education as a result of veering from human values and ethics to those of material success, producing generations "devoid of any ideal" (p. 110). Scientists, for example, have been taught to find new ways to dominate nature and other human beings (Gülen, 2003), and not taking responsibility for the consequences of their work, they have created major global problems, such as environmental pollution (Gülen, cited in Agai, 2003). On a local scale, corruption and greed appear to be widespread. Only until "the material and spiritual realms are reconciled" in the upbringing of young generations will harmony and understanding become prevalent (Gülen, 2000).

That reconciliation, Gülen asserts throughout his writings, requires knowledge and love. Knowledge is the province of the sciences and provides students with the intellectual abilities to benefit others. Alone, however, the sciences are insufficient in leading people to benefit others. Love is needed.

For Gülen (2002), “Love is a person’s most essential element” (p. 41). “By love, Gülen means self-sacrificing love that initiates action by absolute obedience to God and out of concern for others rather than individual reward or utilitarian calculations for one’s happiness ... This love entails self-sacrifice, abnegation, and the personal conviction to transform life on earth” (Yavuz, 2003, p. 34; see also Özdalga, 2003a, 2003b). Such a love is the foundation of pedagogy.

Consequently, not all teachers are educators. Concurring with Russell (1967) and Huebner (1999), Fethullah Gülen (2004) asserts, “Education is different from teaching. Most people can teach, but only a very few can educate” (p. 208). Teaching, in other words, is merely the conveying of knowledge. Educating includes giving knowledge but also imparts sacrificial love and moral guidance:

True teachers sow the pure seed and preserve it. They occupy themselves with what is good and wholesome, and lead and guide the children through life and whatever events they may encounter. (Gülen, 2004, p. 208)

Thus, teaching is a “sacred” activity, and helping students to develop the capacity to bring about positive change is a teacher’s “foremost duty” (Gülen, 1998, 2004). Teachers are responsible for providing knowledge with the wisdom to use it and for providing moral guidance—not by preaching values, but by embodying spirituality and love.

The end of Gülen’s educational vision is to raise a “Golden Generation,” a generation of ideal universal individuals, individuals who love truth, who integrate spirituality and knowledge, who work to benefit society (Gülen, 1998). Such a person is *zul-cenaheyn* “one who possesses two wings,” exhibiting a “marriage of mind and heart” (Gülen, 1996b), a merging of universal ethical values with science and modern knowledge (Gülen, 2004) that produces “genuinely enlightened people” (Michel, 2003; Gülen, 1996a) who, motivated by love, take action to serve others (Gülen, 2000; Yildirim & Kirmizialtin, 2004).

Gülen-inspired Schools

That vision has led Gülen and his followers in the early 1980’s to begin a zealous educational project of building educational institutions all over the world. In Turkey and in other countries, hundreds of schools, along with seven universities, have been founded.

These institutions resemble other schools in terms of curriculum and materials. Laboratory and computer equipment for science and language classes is up-to-date, the quality of education is excellent (Agai, 2003; Balci, 2003; Özdalga, 2000; Yavuz, 2003). Thomas Michel (2003), Secretary for Interreligious Dialogue of the Society of Jesuits and ecumenical secretary of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, reports that the students have outstanding performance in academic competitions in the natural sciences, information sciences, and languages, and he considers them “to be among the most dynamic and worthwhile educational enterprises ... in the world” (p. 70).

These schools also excel in the moral character of their staff and teachers. For instance, the Philippine-Turkish School of Tolerance is in a city where half of the population is Christian and the other half is Muslim. According to Michel (2003), the school provides more than a thousand students more positive ways to interact than the violent example set by military and paramilitary forces. He states that the school lives up to its name, providing a bastion of tolerance in an otherwise religiously polarized area of the Philippines, and that it has excellent relations with Christian institutions in the region.

Another example is the Gülen schools in Albania. Agai (2003) notes that because Albania “formed its national identity in opposition to the Ottoman Empire” (p. 44), it does not want Turkish nationalism or Islam promoted in its schools. Nevertheless, the schools have gained the approval of the public and the government due to their quality education, focus on science, and universal values.

Interviewing women teachers at several of these schools, Özdalga (2003b) found that they shared certain values: “love (universal love, encompassing the whole of humanity), pietism, humility, self-criticism, societal (not political) activism, and professionalism (teaching)” (p. 63). Another value held by these teachers was that of avoiding conflict and “maintaining peaceful relationships” (p. 69). These values naturally lead to the movement’s tolerance and understanding for other traditions and religions, so that rather than lecturing on their values or teaching specifically about Islam, they communicate their values by “being a good example through one’s deeds” (Özdalga, 2003a, p. 86).

Transforming character

In both academic and spiritual matters, Gülen (2004) asserts, a “school must be as perfect as possible” (pp. 206-207). Gülen schools excel in academics because the instructors strive for perfection not only in having a command of their subject matter but also in (1) loving and caring for their students and (2) developing their own character as much as, if not more than, their students’ character. To transform others’ character, one must first transform one’s own, and “being a good example” is a crucial component in the transformation process.

Yet, a school should not depend solely upon setting “a good example” for developing character in students. Character development does not differ from other learning. Whether from a cognitivist, sociocultural, or a social constructivist perspective, learning is considered to be a process of actively constructing knowledge and enacting practices (e.g. DeVries & Zan, 2005; Engeström, 1987; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Piaget, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978; von Glasersfeld, 1995). Although much learning, probably most, begins with observation (cf. Bandura, 1977), generally speaking, observation must be followed by action to construct learning (cf. Gülen, 1998, p. 99).

Looking at the activity of the Gülen community, we see that Gülen adherents are not limited to observing the moral example of Fethullah Gülen. Rather, they read, study, discuss, and reflect on his writings, along with Said Nursi’s and the Qur’an. Moreover, they act upon what they know, internalizing their knowledge in their deeds, as evidenced by businessmen who found and support the schools and by teachers leaving Turkey for other countries at considerable sacrifice.

The Gülen community's activity embodies the teachings of Fethullah Gülen on learning and transforming character, teachings that stress the need for *action* governed by *reflection* and *intention*.

Action, according to Gülen (1996b), "should be the most indispensable element or feature of our lives" (p. 85). For Gülen, taking action means to be constantly striving to realize one's goals for the service of others, and it is essential for keeping one's identity free from the influence of others.

Action needs to be guided by *reflection*. Fethullah Gülen (1998) asserts that people need "*to review and re-evaluate the established views of man, life and the universe*" (Gülen, 1998, p. 8, italics in original). Through reflection, people can establish clear objectives; in fact, they need to do so if they "do not want to become lost in the flood of thoughts" (Gülen, 2000, p. 64). If even "founders and directors of institutions should frequently remind themselves of why the institutions were established, so that their work does not stray from its objective, but remains fruitful" (p. 65), how much more so for students in transforming their character!

Reflection prepares the way for *intention*, concerning which Gülen (1998) states, "Sound minds and character develop from pure thoughts and intentions" (p. 33). Actually, intention is "one of the supreme principles of religious life in Islam" (Goldziher, 1981, p. 42). Its importance is underscored by being the topic of the first hadith in Bukhari's collection: "The reward of deeds depends on the intentions and every person will get the reward according to what he has intended" (p. 49). In other words, intention determines the nature of a particular action. Even in legal systems, intention separates between, for example, premeditated murder and manslaughter. In Islam, if a religious duty is performed without "a specific intention to do so, [it is] unacceptable to God" (Gülen, 2005, p. 103). Along these lines, simply behaving morally is not enough; one must intend to do so.

The link between intention and action is an important one. Juarrero (1999) posits that actions are "behavioral trajectories constrained top-down by an intention" (p. 151). Behavior—the enactment of meaning, moral values, and beliefs—results from a self-organizing process of a person's history of reciprocal interactions with his/her environment, a process in which interdependencies between intentions and actions, individual and society, are entrained. If intentions are not regulated and are not followed by action, people will follow the thoughts, intentions and actions of others (Gülen, 1998, p. 85). In other words, people conform to their social environment unless they intentionally will to do otherwise.

In the U.S., students' environment includes, along with their school and family, competing examples of corporate greed, political scandals, and wide-spread (often successful) cheating. Economic, social, and peer pressures can easily undermine the effect of moral exemplars. In addition, just as students' prior experience can distort their understanding of moral texts (Narvaez, 2001), so, too, can environmental influences shape their interpretation of moral models. Consequently, students need an education in not only subject knowledge but also moral reflection and intentional action. Along these lines, Fethullah Gülen (2004) writes, "Although knowledge is a value in itself, the purpose of learning is to make knowledge a guide in life and to illuminate the road to human perfection" (p. 206).

To make “knowledge a guide,” students must develop their ability to reason morally. In fact, one finding in research is that in an environment of open dialogue, students can develop their ability to reason through moral dilemmas that expose children to contradictions between their moral structures and more developed ones (Kohlberg, 1999).

In addition to studying moral dilemmas to develop their reasoning skills, students can study and discuss stories. Stories are not new. Homer’s epics, the Iliad and Odyssey, were used for teaching heritage and values. Roger Shank, an internationally prominent researcher in artificial intelligence, cognitive science, and learning theory, founded Socratic Arts, a company that designs curricula around stories. Shell International’s Global Scenarios are stories designed to aid their managers in making decisions. According to Yavuz (2003), Fethullah Gülen is the best religious story-teller in Turkey.

Stories work well at developing moral reasoning because “they recreate the open, nonlinear dynamics of the real processes they purport to explain” (Juarrero, 2002, p. 241), thus having the potential to challenge readers to reconsider familiar ideas from new perspectives. Not all stories, of course. Stories need to be open ended and invite thoughtful discussion rather than indoctrination.

Some research supports the value of stories in developing moral reasoning. Leming (2000) reports that a literature-based character program promoted cognitive skills among elementary students, but had “mixed results” with respect to affect and behavior. As Kohlberg (1999) states, reasoning is necessary for moral judgment, and moral judgment for moral action; however, moral reasoning and judgment are not sufficient for moral behavior. That is, one may be able to judge a situation correctly in terms of moral principles and still not take moral action. The practice of intentional action is required, too. One form of practicing moral action for students is Kohlberg’s “just community school,” in which the students participate in resolving issues related to morality and fairness. Whatever form is chosen, it is important that it satisfy needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others (Deci & Ryan, 2000) so that ethical values become integrated into the individual’s identity.

In short, moral reasoning, reflection, and judgment are necessary to guide intention appropriately, and conversely, action is crucial to entraining intentions. Thus, the students themselves must use their knowledge in action to integrate into their own identity moral reasoning and the love embodied by their teachers. Moral action in a community of moral people who love humanity is a crucial ingredient in producing a Golden Generation. More consideration needs to be given to methods for incorporating moral reasoning and intentional action into schools.

Conclusion

Many have been inspired by Fethullah Gülen to spend their time and wealth to establish schools of excellence. Why? It is not that he teaches something new or different. Rather, in part, it is likely due to a unique confluence of time, place, and context. In part, it is due to Fethullah Gülen himself. His stories, his moral example, and his teachings inspire others to take action, to sacrifice, and to serve humanity rather than themselves. From Gülen (2000), we read:

People of service must resolve, for the sake of the cause to which they have given their hear, to cross over seas of ‘pus and blood.’(p. 83)

Preferring the sacred cause over all worldly and animal desires; being steadfast in truth, once it has been discovered, to the degree that you sacrifice all mundane attachments for its sake; enduring all hardships so that future generations will be happy; seeking happiness, not in material or even spiritual pleasures, but in the happiness and well-being of others; never seeking to obtain any posts or positions; and preferring oneself to others in taking on work but preferring others to oneself in receiving wages—these are the essentials of this sacred way of serving the truth. (p. 84)

Such a call to sacrifice inspires educators to strive to perfect their own character and to love their students, a combination that can transform students into living lives worth living.

Even so, educational research findings and Fethullah Gülen's teachings on intention and action suggest that while Gülen educators practice the most important role of being exemplars of love and knowledge, they can further the effectiveness of their modeling by engaging students in moral reasoning and in taking moral action. It is through the interaction of the school's example of sacrificial love and the students' practice of moral reasoning and intentional action that Gülen's transcendent vision of raising a Golden Generation may come to pass in the U.S.

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