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Educating Children for Social Responsibility is International Concern

Kay Hyatt

College of Education, University of Maine

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ORONO, Maine -- Children use the lessons they learn in school about authority to pattern their behavior in society, according to a University of Maine professor who is one of approximately 30 educators helping plan an international conference that will explore the meaning and role of moral education in a world of changing geographic, political and social boundaries.

"At the simplest level, children who learn in school that social authority can be capricious or malicious will remain dubious about adult forms of social authority, and that will affect their adult behavior toward authorities and how they will act as adult authorities themselves," says Gordon A. Donaldson, UMaine professor of educational leadership.

The issues of social responsibility and the responsibility to develop it in children were pondered from many perspectives this fall as educators from the United States, Holland and the former Soviet Union met in Arnhem, Holland to draft the conference topics and format. Their research and discussions consistently affirmed the significance of social responsibility, concern over its perceived decline, and the importance of schools in defining, exemplifying and teaching moral decision-making and socially responsible behavior.

The conference on Educating Children in Social Responsibility to be held in Arnhem in August 1997 should give global exposure to the modeling and teaching of social responsibility as a dimension of education, according to Donaldson.

The conference planners explored and compared developments in the former Soviet Union, Western Europe and the United States and found strikingly similar themes in cultural perceptions of increased moral decline and lack of concern for the welfare of others. The need to instill social responsibility in present and future generations is seen as globally imperative, whether it stems from a rush to capitalism, extreme individualism, the clash of conservative and liberal views, the collapse of paternalistic government, or the search for stable authority figures.

The problem, regardless or origin or scope, they agree, can best be addressed by the schools, but school bureaucracy must change in order to reflect a culture of social responsibility.

The exercise of authority in schools and the differentiation of authority and power are central to the development of social responsibility in children, according to Donaldson, who led a planning session on the topic of authority, one of the themes of the future conference.
Many children's first face-to-face encounter with a societally appointed authority is when they meet their first teacher, he explains. Later, they learn about the bureaucracy and the relationship of their immediate leaders (teachers) to the formal leadership of the school (administrators and boards of directors). Donaldson contends that children frame their understanding of the authority structure of society in part from their perceptions of the authority structure of the school and the interactions of the people within that structure.

"To impressionable children, the face we put on their first encounters with authority can shape a lifetime of future experiences with other societally appointed leaders," he says. "Do we present ourselves as authorities to be obeyed? As authorities who care? As authorities who can be approached and questioned, or as authorities who care more about the institution than about individuals?"

Schools need to model a more ideal way of co-existence so that students leave school responsible for their own behavior and to one another as adults, Donaldson says. That means structuring schools where the basic functions of social responsibility are in place, where people interact in a way that portrays respect, trust, honesty and responsibility, and that support the positive behavior and values that can sustain society.

"In this shrinking world, there's no place left for society to hide social transgressors," says Donaldson. "Schools must help kids understand the basic principles of co-existence."

The issue of responsible authority will fuel more questions for the conference to consider, such as: Can schools be communities of interdependence and still succeed at their traditional missions? If schools are structured to develop social responsibilities among the adults and children there, what happens to the old notions of discipline, order and expertise? And, how should principals and other leaders be educated to think and act so that they encourage a culture of social responsibility where rights and responsibilities go hand-in-hand and where the principal is a coach, not a powerful controller of events?

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Contact: Kay Hyatt, (207) 581-2761