



## Teaching Mores

A few years ago, the faculty of Moral Development at the Reformed University-College in Zwolle, The Netherlands, published a study (*Mores Léren*) about the alignment of parents and teachers in moral upbringing. Teaching *mores*, plural of the Latin *mos*, is about instilling the fixed customs and manners of a society. The study was conducted at one of the Reformed elementary schools in Bunschoten-Spakenburg. A parallel study was done at another local Christian school. Bunschoten is part of a relatively closed community, known, among others, for its traditional dress and mores, and amateur soccer teams. Over thirty percent of its population of 20,000 is Reformed of some sort, over twenty percent belongs to our sister churches, and of its thirteen elementary schools, twelve are Christian. Bunschoten's strong collective moral sense is an integral part of town culture. There are benefits of moral conventions and social control, but this culture also accepts undesirable rough behaviour, coarse language, exclusion, and ambivalence on alcohol-use by minors. Teachers are said to handle behavioural issues by control and direction, rather than through bonding and relationships. This article presents a summary of the study and some reflections.

The school clearly presents itself as Christian.

*Its mission "aims to provide a safe and protected environment, in which each child feels accepted and receives space to develop socially, emotionally, cognitively, creatively, and culturally. Its starting point is the uniqueness of each child and it attempts to meet individual differences in approach and style."*

It propagates a Reformed identity, in which teachers see and treat each child as valuable, base their actions on Christian values and norms, and seek good cooperation between home, church, and school. The basis of education is the Word of God, with stated implications for loving God above all, and one's neighbour like oneself. This leads to expectations like respect for differences, patience to guide students, no bullying; a climate of order, peace, and regularity, and recognition of everyone's responsibility and independence. The study was initiated because of discrepancies between the stated identity and reality.

### **The study**

This study is of interest to all who have good intentions for raising their children – but are prone to sustain wrong behaviours. It seeks to help teachers be better role models and improve cooperation between home and school in moral upbringing. In a written component, participants first had to rate values for their relative importance, and then select possible applications to moral situations. The background to these responses was then explored further in separate focus-group interviews with parents, with teachers, and with students. In brief, the study found that the adults stressed *outward behaviours* rather than intrinsic values, referring, in descending order of importance, to values like: showing respect and being polite, being obedient and following rules, being dependable, and being fair. Students, on the other hand, gave preference to learning *character* values, and ranked them differently: being fair, having one's own opinion, showing respect, being dependable and trustworthy. Other values ranked lower and are not included here.

Some examples will illustrate how these values are applied in practice. When a child is excluded from a game for not wearing brand-name clothes, should the teacher lead a *whole class* discussion about this, or only with the *students involved*? Forty percent of the parents and students and thirty percent of the teachers think the former; forty-five percent of the teachers and thirty percent of

parents and students choose the latter. (The authors regret that less than half seize the teachable moment with a class discussion.) What should a teacher say when grade 5/6 students want to organize a class party with alcohol? Half of the adults want the teacher to just give his opinion; the others recommend a class discussion first. Students are not interested in the opinion; they know it is illegal. Yet, several of them publicly consumed alcohol before, even with parental consent. In a third example, all participants rank the value of respect highly, but nearly half the students indicate that they don't treat each other that way, and only about twenty-five percent of adults are convinced that they do. Most adults also know that swearing and bullying happens at school. Participants agree that the teachers' most important value-related tasks are to correct students for inappropriate behaviour, to teach them to behave respectfully, and to be a role model.

## **Interviews**

The focus-group interviews zoomed in on five key areas, as presented below. First, the interviews confirmed that internal bonds and strong social control of Bunschoten's culture make it difficult for youth to make independent choices. Few youths opt for postsecondary education; most aim to get a job at age thirteen or fourteen and spend their money on goods and alcohol (and sometimes drugs); few people express scruples with under-age drinking.

As for values, apart from transferring knowledge, teachers say they value developing a sense of community, and working out of a faith-conviction of love for God and the neighbour. They try to create an atmosphere of pleasant interaction and joy, in which saying sorry and starting anew are possible. They also value building trustworthiness and justice, as well as independence and assertiveness. Parents value the school's work on social awareness, with values like mutual acceptance, honesty, and dependability; they stress good behaviour more and attitude development less than teachers. All oppose bullying. Adults place little value on teaching children how to constructively handle criticism.

Teachers feel that parents are first responsible for *upbringing*, and that the school plays an (important) secondary role. This necessitates good home-school cooperation and approachable teachers, even as the school maintains its own responsibilities and policies. Parents like this school for upholding their norms and values, and for the identity the children share with peers. They expect the school to let the normative light of Scripture shine on reality: Teachers should tell students not to drink before age sixteen, prepare them to stand up for themselves with scriptural norms and values, and have an eye for individual differences. Children think teachers should reward good behaviour and punish bad; but at home, they find, it helps better to talk.

Parents value good *interaction* between staff and home, which, they think, may need to be more intensive. Sometimes they only talk about issues with like-minded others, and then children don't see how they can get resolved. Parents find that more consultation about upbringing would be good: home-school communication suffers when both parents work, and children spend after-school time with some outside supervision service. Children trust that outcomes will be good when they discuss issues with teachers. They value being helpful to others, but keep unwanted interference at bay. All find that swearing and bullying happens a lot, and that there are differences between home and school when it comes to sticking up for oneself. This is one area in which home and school can help each other better.

Adults believe that a common *faith* conviction strongly influences upbringing at home and at school: it generates togetherness and belonging. This comes out in Bible lessons, prayer, and singing Psalms, but also in one's attitude: You've been baptized and act accordingly by loving God and the neighbour. Teachers are expected to be models of good behaviour; parents choose this school because it connects to what they believe and teach. Parents are satisfied with the school, but realize that it is hard to transfer values. Children observe in practical things that it shows that they are children of God: don't swear, and trust that prayer gives courage to address difficult but good things. They tell their wrongs to God more easily than to adults.

## **Study conclusions**

There is embarrassment about the use of alcohol (and drugs), as parents and teachers alike wish to base their actions on norms from God's Word, which inspire virtues like neighbourly love, faithfulness, compassion, and forgiveness. Parents expect support from the teachers in instilling such virtues and attitudes in their children, and wish for more intensive communication on this. They express a strong need for building school-community – and not just around soccer. Bunschoters work hard and put much effort into joint causes, and, together with a conformity supporting culture, this can be a good aspect of bringing up a child.

Despite the positives, there are also negatives. Conformity inhibits independent choices, and leads to double standards. The culture of hard work, making money, and keeping up with trends, contributes to waste and alcohol use. Parents know it is wrong, but do little to teach self-control, responsibility, and long-term thinking. Children must yet learn how to handle criticism, take personal responsibility, and formulate faith-based opinions apart from peer influence.

Teachers can teach independence and assertiveness, and develop intrinsic values by discussing reasons for rules – rather than just laying down the law. The community values good behaviour, but promotes compliance and conformity only:

*Correction is aimed at behaviours, rather than intrinsic commitment. They don't connect having respect to keeping rules and being polite: They find respect important, but still bully and swear. Adults think that it will take much effort to embrace the need for change, and then to implement it. The behaviour is "in their genes." Yet, more young people do now choose for postsecondary education.*

## **Study recommendations**

The study has several recommendations. First, building on strong cohesion, the common Christian identity, and cooperation between parents and teachers, moral upbringing can be strengthened at school and at home. Intrinsic motivation can be developed by giving children responsibilities and letting them develop their own opinions. Mutual support and communication can be strengthened between parents and teachers.

Keith Sikkema

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