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developing the ethical minds of gifted adolescents

Abstract

In this paper, we present Gardner's conception of the ethical mind; make the case for adolescence as an important period for fostering the development of the ethical mind; and present obstacles that can thwart this development. We conclude with recommendations to parents and educators working with gifted adolescents that can be useful in surpassing these obstacles. Specifically, we suggest that parents and educators develop curriculum and discussion topics about ethical issues that make use of young adults' intense focus upon the self; offer opportunities for direct interaction with struggling fellow citizens; and present content about ethics in a variety of formats that play to differing critical thinking abilities. Each of these strategies can play an important role in fostering the ethical minds of gifted adolescents.

Recent scholarship suggests that large percentages of American adolescents engage in various types of unethical behaviors (Miller et al, 2007; Stephens & Nicholson, 2008). Since 1992, the Josephson Institute of Ethics has conducted a biannual survey of unethical behaviors amongst Americans of all ages. Results from the 2008 survey revealed that, in the past year, an astounding 64% of American high school students reported cheating on a school-administered test; 42% lied to save money; and 30% stole something from a store (Josephson, 2009). Moreover, the Josephson study found that 51% of teenagers agreed with the statement that, "Sometimes it is necessary to lie or cheat in order to succeed" and nearly 40% expressed a willingness to lie to improve their chances in the college admissions process. Equally disturbing was that 90% of

these same teens characterized themselves as "satisfied with my own ethics and character" and 64% characterized themselves as "more ethical than most people I know" (Josephson, 2009). As Michael Josephson has noted, "The evidence is that a willingness to cheat has become the norm and that parents, teachers, coaches, and even religious educators have not been able to stem the tide." (Callahan, 2004, p. 203).

These findings are underscored by research conducted at Harvard University's Good Work Project. According to Fischman and colleagues (2004), a significant number of young adults express the belief that their career aspirations necessitate ethical compromises. In other words, many young adults believe they cannot *afford* to be ethical at the present time; however, Fischman and



colleagues reported that “often this admission was closely followed by an assurance that when they themselves achieved prominence, they would behave in a different and morally laudatory manner” (p. 147). In stark contrast to these assurances, however, is evidence of “a close connection between youthful attitudes and behavior and continuing patterns of dishonesty as young people enter the adult world” (Josephson, 2009, p. 1). For example, the most recent Josephson study found that individuals who cheated on tests as teenagers were twice as likely (as non-cheaters) to be dishonest in their professional lives and 50% more likely to lie to their spouses or cheat on their taxes (Josephson, 2009).

Where do gifted youth fit into these findings? On one hand, a number of scholars have found a small negative correlation between a student’s grade point average and self-reported dishonest behaviors (McCabe & Trevino, 1996; Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes, & Armstead, 1996). However, a survey conducted in 2000 by *Who’s Who Among American High School Students* suggested that academic dishonesty is rampant among high achieving American teenagers as well. The annual *Who’s Who* survey explicitly seeks out more than 20,000 high-achieving high school students with aspirations of pursuing higher education. In 2000, 80% of the high school students surveyed by *Who’s Who* admitted to engaging in some form of cheating behavior. It should also be noted that this figure held true for the portion of high-schoolers within this group who reported maintaining ‘A’ averages. In short, it would seem that unethical and dishonest behaviors can be characterized as equally problematic among gifted and high-achieving teens as among the larger population of American adolescents.

The Ethical Mind

In his 2007 book, *Five Minds for the Future*, psychologist Howard Gardner argued that it will be crucial in the 21st century for parents, educators, and community members to nurture the ethical minds of adolescents and young adults. The ethical mind is one which allows individuals to recognize their roles and responsibilities as members of various local, national, and international communities. According to Gardner:

The ethical mind ponders the nature of one’s work and the needs and desires of the society in which one lives. This mind conceptualizes how workers can serve purposes beyond self-interest and how citizens can work unselfishly to improve the lot of all. The ethical mind then acts on the basis of these analyses. (p. 3)

In other words, adolescents with highly developed ethical minds conceive of themselves as having a role to play in improving the various communities of which they are a part. These roles typically include some or all of the following: son/daughter in a nuclear family; student in a school community; teammate in an extracurricular community; friend in a social community; and citizen in local, national, and global communities. Each of these roles is accompanied by particular responsibilities, and Gardner calls on both parents and educators to support the development of the ethical minds of adolescents so that these young adults will be able to recognize and honor these roles and responsibilities. According to Gardner, the stakes in this endeavor are high because “individuals without ethics will yield a world devoid of decent workers and responsible citizens; none of us will want to live on that desolate planet” (p. 19).

Of course, young adults with highly developed ethical minds must do more than simply recognize or acknowledge the roles they play in various communities; rather, these young adults must seek to fulfill their responsibilities to these communities as they go about their work and lives. Moreover, on the occasions when young adults find themselves behaving or contemplating behavior that is not aligned with their responsibilities to a given role, they must take the actions necessary to realign their actions and principles. For example, a student with a highly developed ethical mind will not turn in a plagiarized assignment even if he temporarily considered such a step in the face of a looming deadline. Likewise, an adolescent with a highly developed ethical mind will not abandon her role on the high school math team (or the cheerleading squad) as a result of unconstructive pressure from peers to spend her extracurricular time in other ways. As Gardner notes, in any given situation, we must strive to equip young adults to pass the hypocrisy test—“abiding by their principles even when—or especially when—they go against their own self-interest” (p. 136).

An exemplar of an individual with a highly developed ethical mind is *Partners in Health* founder, Dr. Paul Farmer, who has become celebrated for his public health work in Haiti, Russia, Rwanda, and Lesotho. After graduating from college in 1982, Farmer decided to spend a year in Haiti where he volunteered at a local hospital (Kidder, 2003). In his biography, *Mountains beyond Mountains*, Farmer described a conversation that occurred during this year in Haiti with an older American doctor who had been working in Haiti for several months, but was now set (and eager) to return to the United States. When Farmer asked this doctor whether he would have difficulty leaving

behind a country with so many unmet medical needs, the doctor replied, “I’m an American, and I’m going home” (Kidder, 2003, p. 80). According to Farmer’s biographer: “He (Farmer) thought about that conversation all the rest of the day and into the evening. What does that mean, ‘I’m an American’? How do people classify themselves?” (p. 80). For Farmer, this conversation and the reflection that followed represented an important step in the development of his ethical mind. In contrast to this older doctor who was eager to leave Haiti, Farmer came to view his responsibilities to the people of Haiti to be as important as his responsibilities to fellow Americans. He took seriously his role as a global citizen and the responsibilities that he felt accompanied this role. Years later, after marrying and becoming a parent, Farmer struggled with the question of whether his responsibilities to his nuclear family should supersede his responsibilities as a global citizen. As Farmer explained, “All the great religious traditions of the world say, ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself.’ My answer is, I’m sorry, I can’t, but I’m gonna keep on trying.” (p. 213).

By his own admission, Dr. Paul Farmer serves as an example of an individual whose sense of responsibility to the roles of doctor and citizen goes far beyond that of most other people. In citing Farmer as an *exemplar* of a highly developed ethical mind, we do not mean to hold him up as an example that all gifted adolescents (or adults) should seek to emulate. Farmer’s sense of responsibility to those struggling around the world represents a level of commitment and dedication of which few are capable. As his long-time colleague, Dr. Jim Kim, has noted, “Paul [Farmer] is a model of what *should* be done. He’s not a model *for how it has to be done*. Let’s celebrate him. Let’s make sure people are inspired by him. But we can’t say

anybody should or could be just like him" (Kidder, 2003, p. 244). That said, it does seem reasonable to suggest that the frequency of ethical lapses described in the introduction to this paper could be greatly reduced if parents and educators are able to help adolescents strengthen their sense of responsibility for roles such as student, teammate, friend, worker, and citizen. Gardner (2007) refers to this strengthened sense of responsibility as the cultivation of the ethical mind, and unquestionably Dr. Paul Farmer can serve in this endeavor as a role-model to be admired if not emulated. Or as Dr. Jim Kim has said, "Paul has created... a road map to decency that we can all follow without trying to imitate him" (p. 244).

Adolescence and the Ethical Mind

In many ways, adolescence represents the ideal developmental period for fostering the development of the ethical mind. According to a number of scholars, considering one's roles and responsibilities to a particular community requires a level of critical thinking that only develops in adolescence (Dawson, 2002; Fischer & Bidell, 1998; Karcher & Fischer, 2004). Specifically, Fischer and Bidell conceive of adolescence as the developmental period in which individuals progress through four micro-developmental steps: focusing, substitution, compounding, and inter-coordination. Each of these micro-steps represents an increased ability to carry out abstract thinking and to understand more complex representational systems. According to these scholars, then, as adolescents progress through the high school years, they grow increasingly capable—from a cognitive perspective—to do the critical thinking necessary to contemplate their roles and responsibilities within an interlocking set of communities.

Psychologist Erik Erikson's (1968) work on the development of a complex worldview also makes a case for adolescence as the ideal developmental period for nurturing the ethical mind. According to Erikson, it is during late adolescence that "youth seek to identify with values and ideologies that transcend the immediate concerns of family and self and have historical continuity" (p. 32). In other words, Erikson conceives of adolescence as the period in the life span in which individuals begin to break away from a blind adherence to the worldview and ideologies espoused by their parents and, instead, begin to seek out perspectives and ideologies offered by teachers, mentors, peers, and organizations. Erikson defined ideology as "a system of ideas that provides a convincing world image," and he suggested that adolescents require exposure to such ideological structures in order to organize their experiences and growing understanding of the world (p. 31). Sources of such ideologies include "religion and politics, the arts and sciences, the stage and fiction" (Erikson, 1965, p. 24).

In this process of exploring alternative perspectives and ideologies, Erikson (1965) reported that adolescents explicitly seek out affiliations with communities and networks beyond their nuclear family. According to Erikson, these affiliations allow adolescents to counteract their "newly won individual identity with some communal solidarity" (p. 24). It is, in large part, for this reason that adolescents are uniquely susceptible to dangerous affiliations such as cults but also idealistic affiliations such as the Peace Corps. In short then, Erikson conceived of the adolescent identity crisis as involving recognition and reflection upon the various (and extended) communities of which one is a part. Gardner (2007) would likely argue that this identification and reflection constitutes an important step in the

development of teenagers' ethical minds. By this we mean that, in order to recognize one's responsibilities to a variety of communities, an adolescent must first come to recognize the various communities of which he or she is a member. The succeeding steps, of course, entail recognizing and acting upon one's responsibilities as a member within these various communities.

Finally, it is important to note that a number of psychologists regard adolescence not only as a fertile period for the development of an individual's ethical mind but in fact a uniquely significant period for such development (Damon, 2008; Flanagan et al, 1998; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). For example, psychologist William Damon (2008) has asserted that, "There is reason to believe that a person's crucial orientations to life incubate during adolescence. If civic concern is not among them, it may never arise" (p. 57). Likewise, Constance Flanagan and colleagues (1998) have argued that it is crucial to offer experiences to young adults that connect them "to the broader polity and, in that process, [help them] develop an understanding of themselves as civic actors" (p. 458). In these words, both Damon and Flanagan characterize adolescence as a crucial period in the lifespan for fostering reflection upon one's roles and responsibilities within the larger community—in short, the development of adolescents' ethical minds.

Resistances and the Ethical Mind

In the preceding section, we sought to demonstrate ways in which the cognitive development and identity development that takes place during adolescence present a fertile moment for the development of a youth's ethical mind. However, our own research into the development of social

responsibility during adolescence also reveals several cognitive and identity "obstacles" that can impede efforts by parents and educators to foster the development of adolescents' ethical minds. Here, we consider those obstacles which have the effect of working *against* the development of the 'ethical mind' and offer recommendations for overcoming these obstacles.

An Ethic of Autonomy

According to Gardner, the development of the ethical mind entails recognizing (and acting upon) one's responsibilities to a variety of roles. However, our recent study of affluent American teenagers revealed the extent to which adolescents can resist the concept of social responsibility. During the 2006-2007 academic year, we conducted a mixed-methods study of an academic course for students at Glenview High School¹ entitled 'Literature and Justice' (For a full description of this research study, see Seider, 2008, 2009a). Glenview High School is a public high-school in an affluent community outside Boston, USA, and Literature and Justice is a semester-long course in which Glenview seniors can enroll to meet a portion of their English/Language Arts requirement. The Glenview High School course catalog offered the following description of the Literature and Justice course:

In this course students will examine the question, "How do we determine what is just and unjust in the world in which we live?" Topics will include prison policy, juvenile justice, issues of poverty such as homelessness and hunger, and illegal immigration. Students will explore issues of ethics, justice, and obligation to others through various fiction and nonfiction works.

¹Both Glenview High School and all of the students in this paper are referred to by pseudonyms

One unit within the Literature and Justice curriculum focused on global poverty, and at the conclusion of this unit, participating Glenview students were assigned to write an essay articulating their beliefs about their own obligations as 'global citizens' to combat poverty and hunger in the developing world. These essays were collected, coded, and analyzed as part of our larger research project, and the results of this analysis were surprising.

Of the 38 Glenview students in Literature and Justice who completed the assignment, 25 (66%) asserted that they possessed no responsibility for the wellbeing of those in need in other countries. In other words, the majority of these young adults rejected the idea that they were citizens of a global community with accompanying roles and responsibilities. How did these 25 students justify this perspective? The two most common explanations focused on a libertarian belief in 'keeping what you earn' as well as a conception of social responsibility as limited to a tight circle of family and friends.

First, nine students asserted that affluent Americans like themselves and their families have worked hard for their wealth and, as a result, have no obligation to concern themselves with the wellbeing of others. For example, one Glenview teen, Lauren, wrote that, "People work to earn money, and it should be up to their discretion how they wish to spend it... If that means not giving any money to foreign aid, then so be it." Likewise, another student, Douglas, argued that, "We work too hard to attain our goals to worry about people in need in other countries; helping could interfere with our own goals."

Eight other Glenview students asserted that their responsibilities to other people are

limited to family and close friends. For example, Julie wrote:

An individual person has two obligations in their life. One is to themselves, and the other is to their family. A person must take care of themselves and their family before worrying about anyone else. No one is obligated to donate their hard earned money or time to anyone else.

According to Julie, the only role for which an individual possesses iron-clad responsibilities is that of 'family member.' The role of citizen— whether local, national, or global— is definitively excluded from her perception of social responsibility. Other Glenview students expressed a similar sentiment. For example, Evan wrote that, "There is no reason to be giving away more money that I have worked hard for to people I don't know." Recall that students like Julie and Evan are expressing these perspectives at the conclusion of an academic unit that focused on world hunger and global poverty. It would seem that their investigation of global challenges did little to expand their beliefs about an individual's roles and responsibilities or, to use Gardner's terminology, their ethical minds.

An explanation for these results can be found in the scholarship on schemas through which individuals make sense of the world (Rosch, 1978; Schank & Abelson, 1977). A schema is a cognitive system which helps individuals to organize and make sense of some aspect of the world. Anthropologist Richard Shweder (1990) has reported that there exist three different ethical schemas through which individuals and cultures typically structure their beliefs: ethics of autonomy, ethics of community, and ethics of divinity. Those who draw upon an ethic of autonomy focus on individual rights, believing that individuals can behave in

their own best interests as long as their behavior does no direct harm to others. Those who base their values upon an ethic of community focus on their roles, commitments and obligations as members of a group or groups. Finally, those who prioritize an ethic of divinity allow their actions and values to be guided by religious authorities and texts.

In the 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) famously praised Americans for balancing a deep belief in individualism with a commitment to the public good. However, Robert Bellah and colleagues (1985)—in their study of individualism and commitment in contemporary American life—found that Americans now speak a “first language” of personal goals and ambitions and only a “second language” of religious and social obligations. In other words, Americans’ commitment to individual rights and freedoms has come to overwhelm their sense of responsibility for fellow citizens.

In a follow-up study to Bellah’s, Jensen (2005) found a discourse of individualism to be particularly prevalent amongst Americans in late adolescence and early adulthood. As for why this might be, psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2000, 2004) has characterized late adolescence and early adulthood as the most “self-focused” age of life— a period in which individuals are deeply engaged in reflection about significant vocational and romantic choices. According to Arnett, many young adults like our participants from Glenview High School are far more focused upon individualistic matters— college admissions, earning good grades, finding romantic partners— than they are on the responsibilities and obligations that accompany the various ‘hats’ they wear.

Recall from earlier in this paper Gardner’s (2007) encouragement to parents and educators to cultivate the development of their adolescents’ ethical minds— their recognition of roles and responsibilities accompanying membership in various communities. In Shweder’s (1990) terms, Gardner is encouraging parents and educators to help adolescents develop a cognitive schema that is more evenly balanced between an ethic of autonomy and an ethic of community. The challenge, however, is that, according to Jensen (1995) and Arnett (2004), the developmental stages of late adolescence and young adulthood are ones in which individuals are particularly focused upon individualistic choices and behaviors. We offer recommendations for reconciling these conflicting impulses below.

The Ethical Mind and the American Dream

In a speech he gave often on the campaign trail of the 2008 Presidential campaign, President of the United States Barack Obama (2004) urged Americans to recognize the responsibilities that accompany their role as American citizens. According to Obama:

If there’s a child on the south side of Chicago who can’t read, that matters to me, even if it’s not my child. If there’s a senior citizen somewhere who can’t pay for her prescription and has to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it’s not my grandmother.

In these words, Obama offered examples of challenges that he believed *all* Americans should feel responsible for alleviating. In so doing, he underscored Gardner’s (2007) assertion that a highly-developed ethical

mind is one which recognizes the responsibilities that accompany one's role in a variety of communities including that of citizen of a particular nation. Our research with those same Glenview teenagers, however, highlighted another schema widely held by American adolescents (and adults) which works against Obama's assertions about the responsibilities that American citizens possess for one another. This schema involves what sociologists refer to as the dominant stratification ideology (Huber & Form, 1973) or what is more commonly referred to as the 'American Dream.' (Hochschild, 1995).

Another unit within the Literature and Justice curriculum focused on poverty and homelessness inside the United States. In this unit, students participated in a variety of activities that included studying profiles of men and women living at a Boston homeless shelter, a case-study about affordable housing shortages, journalist Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting by in America*. Surveys given to students at the start and conclusion of Literature and Justice, however, revealed that Glenview students did *not* demonstrate increases in their sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of poor Americans (Seider, in press). Qualitative interviews with these Glenview teens revealed that their sense of responsibility for struggling fellow Americans was greatly tempered by their fundamental belief in the 'American Dream.' Hochschild (1995) defines the American Dream as "the promise that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success...through their own efforts" (p. 6). A belief in this promise is one of the most deeply held beliefs in American culture regardless of ethnicity, class status, or geography (Bullock & Lott, 2001; Flanagan & Tucker, 1999; Flanagan et al, 2003; Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

In their classic study of Americans' beliefs about inequality, Kluegel & Smith (1986) concluded that Americans' widespread belief in the American Dream has led the following three corollaries to become prevalent schemas in the United States as well:

- Opportunity for economic advancement is widespread in America today
- Individuals are personally responsible for their positions
- The overall system of inequality is therefore equitable and fair.

In interviews with the Glenview teenagers at the conclusion of Literature and Justice, one can see that, for a majority of the interviewed teens, their belief in these corollaries inhibited their development of a sense of responsibility for Americans struggling with poverty and homelessness. For example, one student, Frank, expressed his recognition from the units on poverty and homelessness that poor people are poor "because of education. They can't get good educations and therefore can't move up in the way that everyone else does." However, Frank also offered the following justification of the existing social structure:

A lot of times the way things are is unjust. And people sort of have to come to terms with things that some people will be better off than others. And that's sort of the way it's always been. Like even with cavemen, you know. Some were built better, and they survived longer.

In these words, Frank acknowledged the existence of inequity in the United States but then shrugged off any responsibility for the wellbeing of fellow citizens by characterizing this inequity as inevitable ("the way it's always been") and the result of differences in talent and intelligence ("Some were built better"). The 'American Dream'

framework through which Frank makes sense of the world allowed him to evade a sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of those who are struggling.

Likewise, another Literature and Justice participant, Dan, noted in his interview at the conclusion of the course that, "Now I realize...there's people living different ways and in different situations who don't have these opportunities that we have." At two other points in this interview, Dan reiterated his realization that, "We have these opportunities that a lot of other towns do not have" and that, "We're in this fortunate situation, and these kids [from poorer communities] don't have all these opportunities." Despite these realizations, Dan continued to evoke a belief in the American Dream. In this same interview, Dan characterized the United States as "this land of opportunities" and also characterized inequity as simply inevitable.

As Dan explained:

It's just the way life is, I guess. Like some people are more fortunate than others. But I don't know. Sometimes there's something you can do; sometimes there isn't. Like it's just, I guess, lucky or not.

In a manner similar to his classmate Frank, Dan's sense of responsibility for struggling Americans was eclipsed by his pre-existing belief that opportunities for advancement in the United States are widespread ("this land of opportunities") and inevitable ("It's just the way life is.")

Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of scholars have found middle-class and affluent adolescents to be more likely than adolescents from poor and working-class backgrounds to characterize individuals as responsible for their economic status (Cozzarelli et al, 2001; Leahy, 1983; Stuber,

2006). In one study, Skafte (1989) showed photographs of poor and wealthy individuals to a sample of white, middle class adolescents. The adolescents characterized the wealthy individuals in the photographs as smarter, happier, more confident, and more honest than the poor individuals in the photographs. In contrast, Chafel and Neitzel (2005) found that poor and African American children were more likely than affluent white children to express their support for providing aid to the poor. In considering these findings, Flanagan et al. (2003) asserted that adolescents' attributions for inequality are highly dependent upon how "the social contract works for people like them."

To our knowledge, there have been no studies comparing beliefs about the American Dream among teenagers in gifted and talented programs vs. regular education programs in the United States. However, it seems reasonable to speculate that gifted youth—who are likely to feel that the social contract is working quite well for 'people like them'—are equally likely or more likely than their peers to espouse a strong belief in the American Dream. The concern here, of course, is that a schema prioritizing the American Dream would seem to be at odds with the development of the ethical mind. According to Gardner (2007), "The ethical mind ponders the nature of one's work and the needs and desires of the society in which one lives. This mind conceptualizes how workers can serve purposes beyond self-interest and how citizens can work unselfishly to improve the lot of all." (p. 3). However, an American adolescent's commitment to improving the lot of all seems likely to be diminished if that adolescent believes opportunities for economic advancement are plentiful and that all citizens have equal access to those opportunities. Put another way, recognizing

one's responsibilities to fellow Americans seems to require a recognition of 1) the struggles facing the 37 million Americans living below the poverty line; and 2) that the vast majority of these struggling Americans cannot simply help themselves whenever they choose to do so. In the final section of this paper, we offer recommendations for encouraging gifted adolescents to think critically about the veracity of the American Dream.

Trolley Cars, Structures, and Critical Thinking

Earlier in this paper, we noted that the development of the ethical mind requires an ability to carry out critical thinking that only develops in adolescence. Or as Gardner (2007) explained, "Only as the years of adolescence approach do students become able to think schematically and analytically about the contours of the roles that they will one day adopt" (p. 143). However, it is also important to bear in mind that this ability to carry out critical thinking develops at different rates for different individuals (Karcher & Fischer, 2004). In our study of the Glenview High teenagers participating in Literature and Justice, we found that teenagers' disparate development of critical thinking skills can impede an educator's ability to foster the ethical minds of his or her students.

In the Literature and Justice unit on global poverty, one of the primary assigned readings within this unit was utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer's (2000) essay entitled "The Singer Solution to World Poverty." In this essay, Singer utilizes a trolley problem—a particular type of thought experiment in ethics—to argue that affluent individuals possess responsibilities as global citizens for those suffering from

hunger and poverty in the developing world. Specifically, Singer asks his reader to imagine a man named Bob who has to choose whether a runaway trolley car will crash into his valuable and uninsured Bugatti or, alternatively, a small child playing on the train tracks. Singer characterizes this scenario as analogous to the choices facing affluent Americans, and he draws upon this scenario to assert that affluent Americans do indeed possess responsibilities for the wellbeing of those in the developing world. This essay was published in 1999 in the *New York Times Magazine*, and, in the month following its publication, two hunger relief organizations—UNICEF and OXFAM—reported an increase of approximately \$600,000 via the phone numbers that Singer referenced in his essay (Singer, 2009). It would seem that the essay had a persuasive effect upon a portion of its readers.

Recall from above that, at the conclusion of the unit on global poverty, Glenview students were assigned to write an essay espousing their own beliefs about the responsibility of affluent individuals as 'global citizens'. In analyzing these essays, what became clear was that a significant number of Glenview adolescents were confused by the analogy Singer had drawn between the trolley problem and world hunger. For example, in making his own claims about social responsibility, one Glenview student, Nathan, referenced Singer's trolley problem. According to Nathan, "The scenario with Bob and the Bugatti is extremely unrealistic, and no one would ever find themselves in that situation." This statement by Nathan seemed to indicate a failure to recognize Singer's use of the trolley problem as a rhetorical tool in making a larger argument. Likewise, another student, Sophie, wrote in her essay that, "The car can eventually be replaced, but a

human life once it is taken can never be replaced. We should never put any sort of possession like a car or a TV before a human life." In these words, Sophie seemed not to understand Singer's argument that affluent individuals are making an analogous decision to Bob every time they purchase non-essential items instead of donating that money to overseas aid.

Students like Nathan and Sophie seem not yet to have developed the higher order thinking skills necessary to understand Singer's use of a trolley problem as an analogy (or at least not without greater scaffolding from their teacher). Because these higher order thinking skills develop at different rates in different youth, we should expect that different adolescents will be prepared to consider their roles and responsibilities as citizens of local, national, and global communities at different points in their academic careers. Below, we offer suggestions for educators to accommodate this uneven development of critical thinking skills.

A second example of the impact of disparate critical thinking abilities was evident in the Glenview teenagers' response to learning about different causes of poverty and homelessness in the United States. Within this unit, participating students were taught about causes of homelessness that included lack of affordable housing, job shortages, the post-traumatic stress disorder of Vietnam veterans, the impact of reducing funding for mental health facilities, and the phasing out of single room occupancy hotels. However, each of these attributions for poverty are significantly more complex than the explanation offered by the dominant stratification ideology (i.e. the American Dream); namely, that there are numerous opportunities for economic advancement, but poor and homeless

Americans are not taking advantage of them.

In his 2004 book *Changing Minds*, Gardner described the difficulty of "replacing a simple way of thinking with a more complex way" (p. 92). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that 71% of Americans surveyed for the 2006 World Values Survey expressed their belief that anyone who works hard enough can escape poverty or that the majority of Literature and Justice participants resisted the course's content that called the American Dream into question (Gudrais, 2008). For both groups, characterizing the poor as lazy or untalented is a far simpler schema than attributions for poverty involving post-traumatic stress disorder or affordable housing shortages. From a cognitive perspective, then, parents and educators face a challenge if their goal is to encourage gifted adolescents to question the veracity of the American Dream and, in so doing, consider their responsibilities to fellow citizens who are struggling to get by. Such a goal requires adolescents to replace a simpler schema with a more complicated one. In the section that follows, we offer recommendations for this endeavor.

Recommendations for Developing the Ethical Mind

In this paper, we have sought to demonstrate ways in which adolescence represents a fertile moment for the development of the ethical mind while also highlighting several obstacles to this development. These obstacles include a propensity for American adolescents to hold worldviews deeply influenced by the dominant stratification ideology (e.g. the American Dream) and an ethic of autonomy as well as differences among adolescents in the development of higher order thinking skills. Here, we offer recommendations to parents and educators

for overcoming these obstacles.

Countering an Ethic of Autonomy

As noted earlier in this paper, an ethic of autonomy— a schema that prioritizes the rights and liberties of the individual— has become the predominant worldview among Americans, but particularly for Americans in late adolescence and early adulthood (Bellah et al, 1985; Jensen, 1995). Arnett (2000) has theorized that this focus on the individual is particularly strong during these developmental periods because these periods represent a peak period of self-focus within the lifespan. Faced with important decisions regarding their education, vocation, and romantic lives, young adults spend a significant amount of time and energy focused on the self. One possible response by parents and educators is to take advantage of this focus upon the self in their introduction of the challenges facing others both nearby and across the globe. For example, educators might choose to introduce adolescents to lessons on social responsibility with questions that focus on the personal (Seider & Huguley, 2009):

- What do you think about your own future?
- When you think about your future, what factors do you control?
- What factors do you not control?
- When you think about your ideal future, what are the supports in your life that might help you achieve your goals?
- What are the obstacles that can stand in your way?

Beginning with questions like these— questions which seek to tap into the issues that adolescents are already considering— may be an effective entry point for drawing gifted adolescents into an investigation of

the types of support that all people need to live healthy and successful lives.

Educators might also focus on the personal by asking adolescents to practice perspective-taking (Selman, 1980). For example, an educator might ask gifted students to imagine themselves growing up in a developing country or attending an dangerously under-resourced public school. In these situations, what kinds of support would they need to make it safely to adulthood? To graduate from high school? To go on to college? What kinds of resources would be most helpful to them in striving for these goals? Through this perspective-taking, a parent or educator can encourage adolescents to consider their role as a citizen of a particular community, nation and world to help provide these supports to struggling fellow citizens. In so doing, they foster the development of these adolescents' ethical minds.

Questioning the American Dream

Another obstacle to the development of the ethical mind raised in this paper is the prevalence of the dominant stratification ideology (or the 'American Dream') as a schema within the United States. As discussed above, the belief in the American Dream of the Glenview High School students participating in Literature and Justice seemed to thwart the course's attempt to deepen their sense of social responsibility for fellow American citizens contending with poverty and homelessness. In short, learning about the various causes of poverty did not sufficiently raise doubts in the minds of these teenagers that opportunities for economic success in America are widespread and available to all.

Perhaps the Glenview teenagers would

have reacted differently if the Literature and Justice course had given them the opportunity to interact more directly with men and women contending with homelessness. In a recent study of Harvard College students volunteering at a local homeless shelter, we found that participating students came away from the experience with the recognition that the homeless men and women they encountered at the shelter were neither stupid nor lazy nor fundamentally different from themselves (Seider, 2009b). One Harvard student, for example, explained his surprise at having met a homeless man “that graduated from Boston College and one that graduated from Harvard a while ago. They had jobs, they hit a rough patch, and now they are homeless. But they are looking for more” (p.3). Through his personal encounters with struggling Americans, this Harvard student’s conception of economic success as easily attainable in the United States was altered, as was his conception of the homeless as people too lazy to work for a living. The dispelling of these corollaries to the American Dream would seem to be an important step in the development of the ethical mind. In other words, adolescents who come to see the homeless as men and women no different than anyone else and in search of opportunities to help themselves would seem to be far more likely to conceive of themselves as possessing responsibilities for the wellbeing of these struggling fellow citizens. Again, this sense of responsibility is precisely what Gardner alludes to in his call for the fostering of adolescents’ ethical minds.

Representation Redescription and Critical Thinking

Finally, a third obstacle to the development of the ethical mind raised in this paper is that

higher order thinking skills develop at different rates in different individuals (Karcher & Fischer, 2004). As a result, the instructor of the Glenview High Literature and Justice course could reasonably expect some of the course’s adolescent participants to understand Peter Singer’s use of a trolley problem as an analogy for the relationship between the first and third world while other adolescents in the course did not yet possess the critical thinking skills necessary to make sense of this analogy. This divergence can present a challenge for educators interested in pushing the thinking of a classroom of adolescents of different ages, abilities, and stages of development.

In *Changing Minds*, Gardner (2004) asserts that, “Representational redescription is probably the most important way of changing the minds of students” (p. 140-141). Representational redescription refers to the use of many different formats to convey a lesson or idea. In other words, an educator interested in pushing his or her students to consider an issue such as global poverty would do well to present content related to this topic in a variety of different formats: academic papers, biographies, documentary, and even fiction, movies, and songs. For some students, grappling with the trolley problem and accompanying argument in “The Singer Solution to World Poverty” will be the ideal content for pushing their thinking on their role and responsibilities as a citizen of the world. For other students—particularly those with slower-developing higher order thinking skills, a documentary film that focuses on a single family in Rwanda might better serve that same function. According to Gardner, “The sought-after tipping point is most likely to be reached if a teacher uses several formats flexibly and imaginatively” (p. 140-141). In short, then, there is no single pathway along which all adolescents’ ethical minds

develop. As a result, the content and curriculum which an educator utilizes must be as diverse as the youth with whom he or she is working.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have sought to present Gardner's conception of the ethical mind; to make the case for adolescence as an important period for fostering the development of the ethical mind; and finally to highlight obstacles that can thwart this development. We concluded with recommendations to parents and educators working with gifted adolescents that can be useful in surpassing these obstacles. Specifically, we suggested that parents and educators develop curriculum and discussion topics about ethical issues that make use of young adults' intense focus upon the self; offer opportunities for direct interaction with struggling fellow citizens; and present content about ethics in a variety of formats that play to differing critical thinking abilities. We believe that each of these strategies can play an important role in raising gifted adolescents with highly-developed ethical minds.

Recall from earlier in this chapter that Gardner (2007) described the stakes in this endeavor as high. According to Gardner, the failure by parents and educators to develop the ethical minds of youngsters risks "a world devoid of decent workers and responsible citizens" (p. 19). This point was underscored in recent scholarship by Princeton economist Larry Bartels. In his 2008 book entitled *Unequal Democracy*, Bartels drew upon the voting records of United States senators to demonstrate that a senator's affluent constituents, individuals with incomes in the top third of the income distribution, exerted approximately 50%

more weight upon the senator's voting record than the preferences of middle-class constituents and exponentially more influence than constituents in the bottom third of the income distribution. Bartels' conclusion from this analysis was that poor Americans are effectively unrepresented in the political process while wealthy Americans exert a disproportionately large influence upon American policy. A discussion of the justness of these circumstances goes beyond the scope of this paper; however, these findings by Bartels do hold important implications for the education of gifted adolescents.

Many adolescents identified as gifted are likely to go on in adulthood to lucrative careers in business, medicine, and law, as well as to positions of influence in journalism, academia, and government (Jencks, 1979; Spinks et al, 2007). According to Bartels, in so doing, they will exert a disproportionately large effect upon the decisions of their elected representatives. As a result, these Americans' beliefs about social responsibility will have a particularly significant influence upon America's domestic and foreign policies in the 21st century. The 32nd President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1937) famously asserted that, "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have enough; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little." The commitment of the United States to continue to provide enough for those who have too little is predicated upon a citizenry that conceives of itself as possessing responsibilities for fellow citizens—locally, nationally, and globally. Crucial for continuing to produce such a citizenry are parents, educators, and community leaders committed to fostering the ethical minds of America's most talented youth.

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