

LifeGoals: The Development of a Decision-Making Curriculum for Education

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After more than two decades of academic and professional work focusing on the development of psychological theory, research methods, and decision modeling techniques in marketing, the author applies his knowledge to solve what he believes is the single greatest challenge facing the United States—the development of a curriculum and corresponding pedagogy to teach decision-making skills to at-risk children. The initial targets were elementary schoolchildren, but during the developmental process, the author expanded the curriculum to include at-risk young adults and, more recently, MBA students. This chapter began after he retired as professor emeritus (1995) from a school of management and embarked on this new journey into the field of education.¹

The reality is that too many children are making the wrong decisions. There is one horrific example after another in the news on a daily basis, not to mention the appalling statistics, especially for minorities, about such things as school dropout rates, children born out of wedlock to teen mothers, and violent crimes in schools. The battle for the development of children into good, responsible citizens is being fought today for the future of society. Consider four negative societal trends that define a child's world:

- Too-easy-access, high-technology, nonpersonal society;
- Questionable images and messages that are communicated 24-7 by the media and entertainment industries;
- The existence of poor role models for many children; and
- The economic and sociological realities of increasing numbers of single-parent and parent-absent households.

The United States prides itself as the land of opportunity, which stems from the freedom of choice. Along with freedom of choice, however, is the necessary requirement of personal responsibility for those choices. Too often, young people are quick to observe what the freedom of choice brings, but they fail to understand the corresponding responsibility that is also tied to each and every choice they make. Unfortunately, most of their decisions seem to be based on a desire for instant gratification, convenience, peer pressure, or avoidance of conflict. Rationalization of freedom of choice is easy, but the reality of taking responsibility for each choice is a much more difficult concept to communicate to today's youth.

Entering the third millennium, many parents are ill-prepared to combat the ever-increasing bombardment of sociopathic images in the media that are viewed by children

on a daily basis. The result of the direct and uncontrolled access to media that is available to children is perhaps best expressed by Albert Einstein's comment (in a 1946 letter to Dr. Otto Fullisburger): "I believe that the horrifying deterioration in the ethical conduct of people today stems from the mechanization and dehumanization of our lives—the disastrous by-product of scientific and technical mentality." When Einstein made this comment some 50 years ago, little could he imagine what technology would bring to today's society.

What does the future hold? The twenty-first century is undoubtedly one in which change is going to occur at an even faster rate, creating new challenges and potential pitfalls that could derail children (and society as a whole) more quickly than could ever have been imagined. Children are going to be continuously faced with decisions—some simple and some more elaborately confounded and complex—as new communication technologies more efficiently deliver even more destructive images. Moreover, children are confronted with confusing choice situations at younger ages and, unfortunately, with even less preparation in terms of the necessary grounding to make "good" decisions. By good decisions, I refer to decisions that do not limit children's future opportunities or potential successes.

With this realization, my goal is to develop a "choice model" for a children's curriculum, which, when mastered, would enable and empower children to live a better, more productive life by helping them set and achieve their own personal goals. My academic background in pioneering means-end theory and research (for a summary of consumer research applications, see Reynolds and Olson 2001) serves as the foundation for understanding the basis of choice. The underlying basis of this research is grounded in the premise that choice can be understood by the determination of the discriminating choice characteristic (attribute) and how it is given meaning by providing and satisfying both functional and psychosocial consequences and how these in turn derive their importance by satisfying a higher-order need (personal value). Applying a lexicographic, means-end framework offers several obvious advantages to the creation of a useful decision model for children. First, by defining a formal

¹For a more detailed discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of the decision model, teaching techniques, and lessons, including assessment methods, see the LifeGoals Web site at www.lifegoals.net.

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model of the components of a mean–end chain (consequences, outcomes, goals, and personal values), it is possible to develop a language that enables discussion among peers. Second, by uncovering the likely “ends,” or results, of their choices, children are forced to think about the future implications of their choices. Third, by having a model to frame decisions across competing higher-order, future-oriented meanings (goals or values), the trade-offs between choice options can be focused on and discussed, with the hope of building a general paradigm for choice evaluation. All in all, the adoption of a means–end orientation to teaching decision making to children appears to offer much promise; thus, my journey into education seemed a natural extension of my consumer choice modeling.

Development of the Decision Curriculum

Initial Research on Choice Understanding and Teaching

I began my developmental work by interviewing elementary schoolchildren in primarily economically disadvantaged areas across the country. I found that a vast majority of first graders did not understand the fundamental concept of choice. When I asked them how many decisions they made in the prior day or the prior week, the modal response was two for both time frames. I found that most second graders thought that the future was defined in terms of an hour from now. I found that virtually all third graders thought that consequences were always negative, likely a result of what they had been told and what parents and teachers had demonstrably reinforced. When I asked fourth graders if they had goals and, if so, what they were, only about half had seriously considered or set any concrete goals (beyond being a professional athlete or singer) for themselves.

My preliminary conclusion was that children, especially those in economically and socially challenged environs, have no real concept of choice, let alone of the decision-making process. With no decision model to rely on for guidance, they are vulnerable to all that today’s society has to offer.

In trying to gain an understanding of the educational issues related to this problem, I read many of the “character-building” curriculums. These show-and-tell lessons essentially ask children to abstract from virtues and values to their everyday problems, with no model, with no real-life examples, and with no general focus whatsoever on the decision-making process. For example, a typical character education lesson focuses on a specific virtue, such as responsibility, and the students read a story or a poem that highlights this virtue. The fundamental assumption underlying this approach is that when children understand the concept, they are able to apply it to their own choices. However, without a concrete choice model to rely on, my experience suggests that the desired results of consistent, positive changes in children’s decision-making ability are highly unlikely to occur.

After investigating what schools were doing, I extended my research by talking to “moral educators,” including religious leaders. I found that, in general, such leaders focused solely on right and wrong, with no mention or even recognition of the decision-making process. Observation of the

children being taught this “top-down” curriculum led me to conclude that educators’ attempt to teach golden rules and “miniethics” to elementary schoolchildren, though laudable, missed the reality of the child’s everyday life. With particular respect to underprivileged children, this method appeared as a great theoretical construct that, when applied to everyday life situations, fell flat on its face. This “moral” high-ground approach, when assessed through the question, “What *should* you do?” rather than “What *would* you do?” appeared to have no real impact on changing intended behavior. With this framing of the problem, my initial charge was to define a general decision model and then design a curriculum to teach it to elementary schoolchildren.

Defining the Strategic Imperatives of the Goal-Oriented Option Development (GOOD) Decision Model

To answer the question of how to teach decision-making skills to elementary schoolchildren, I organized and funded a group of teachers, parents, and academics, including child and social psychologists and psychometricians. The first year of work was spent experimenting with various approaches to teach decision strategies to children. Initially, no single approach emerged as a clear winner, but eventually the following set of core strategic directives for the development of a decision curriculum was developed:

- Expand the awareness of the *number of choices* that are made, explicitly and implicitly, by everyone every day of their lives;
- Create an awareness of the range of *choice options* available with regard to any significant decision;
- Increase understanding of the *determining characteristics of each choice option* within the decision context and their relation to the likely short- and long-term *consequences* of that choice (i.e., train students to think about future implications);
- Provide a *visual framework* to help identify and evaluate the causal relationships between *choice options* and *personal goals*, thereby providing a platform to discuss why they are important and how they can be used to guide future decision making;
- Set the stage for developing an understanding that *all decisions involve trade-offs* and provide the specific model as to how to evaluate trade-offs in an unbiased way;
- Provide the basis to explore and thereby define the underlying reasons that *goals* are important, namely, *personal values*;
- Make each lesson real to children by providing the opportunity to *conduct a mental “rehearsal”* before being confronted with the situation in the real world;
- Develop the ability to analytically *map the network of choice options* with respect to any decision or problem; and
- Develop a framework for teaching decision making that will *avoid source derogation* if taught, for example, in a standard lecture format by an adult.

The GOOD Decision Model

A general decision model was developed that provides the basis to satisfy the strategic imperatives that I detailed previously.² To illustrate, each lesson begins with a choice scenario, which may be defined in terms of time, place,

²The GOOD decision model is pending a patent and is used with express permission of LifeGoals.

involvement of others and their relationships, and the problem situation, such as the following:

Clint had been on the Internet for nearly an hour working on his science project. He had been to more than half a dozen [W]eb sites that offered pages and pages of information on volcanoes.

Clint was just about to log off from the Internet when he decided to check for any new e-mail messages. Clint had sent a few outgoing messages before digging into the research, and he was curious if anyone had responded yet.

Sure enough, there was some new e-mail, but when Clint checked the sender's address, he saw the message was for his big sister. Clint saw the message from her boyfriend, whom he and his mom didn't like at all.

If you were Clint, what would be your choice?

After the choice scenario is presented to the child, the teacher focuses on aiding the child's understanding and on elaborating choice options in terms of the consequences that are likely to occur, the corresponding longer-term outcomes, the goals that these outcomes could affect, and the reason goals are important (i.e., personal values). This process is done for the two key choice options, which are determined by the class, and are developed for both the positive and the negative poles that correspond to each choice option. To illustrate, note how each choice option in Figure 1 is causally linked to the higher-level components of the model.

The GOOD decision model framework is intended to frame and represent the entire decision-making process. The teacher serves as a facilitator by posing questions and assisting the children as they work through the sequential components of the model as a group. The employment of the Socratic method is central to the success of the model. The teacher focuses on communicating the decision-making

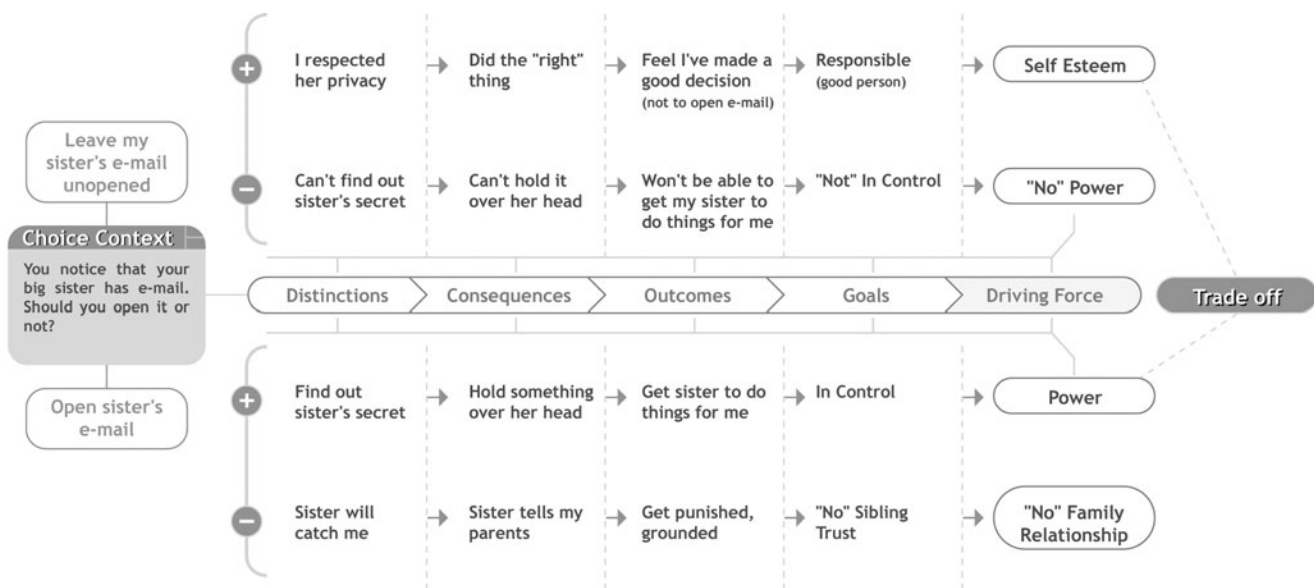
process, not the decision. In other words, the answers are in the students' heads, and it is the teacher's role to help uncover them. The answers to the teacher's questions that are summarized in the visual framework (see Figure 1) enable the students to uncover their own thinking about choices and provide guidance through the entire decision-making process.

Young children begin with basic discussions about choices. Higher levels of the model are defined and worked through as the class masters each of the prior levels. With 60 lessons available for each grade, students quickly develop the skills to map out their own decision analysis. Typically, almost all members of the class, even in the most underprivileged, inner-city areas, can work through all elements of the model by the fourth grade. This high degree of success is a direct result of both involving students in real-life situations and having them realize the impact of their choices on achieving their own personal goals.

Results of Pilot Research Using the GOOD Decision Model: Elementary Students

The first set of pilot tests determined that motivated teachers can be trained to teach the GOOD decision model in one day. However, as many as two or three follow-up discussions conducted about one month apart were required to ensure that the group could work through any problems that arose. When familiarity with the model and the teaching process is achieved, teachers (and students) gain questioning and answering skills that enable them to construct efficiently a complete group decision map in less than 30 minutes.

Figure 1. GOOD Decision Map of LifeGoals (Lesson 5b1)



Elementary Pilots: Phase 1

In 2000, the first beta test was conducted in seven different schools in three states (Michigan, Kansas, and Colorado) across all six elementary grades. The test group comprised 30-plus classes and was taught in eight lessons over a five-week period. During those eight weeks, teachers covered the LifeGoals curriculum, from defining choice options, to understanding the likely consequences and outcomes (i.e., longer-term consequences) of choice options, to ultimately associating these choice options with personal goals.

The test was limited in that every student, regardless of grade level, needed to be taught from scratch. In other words, students in the fifth grade needed to cover the basic concepts that would have been taught in the previous grades, meaning that they only received about half of the lessons that were specifically intended for their respective grade level. The control group in the beta test (same grades in the same schools) was taught the traditional character education curriculum that was used in their school (also 30-plus classes). Both test and control classes were given pre- and postassessments to measure the depth and quality of their decision-making skills.³ These written assessments, which begin in the third grade, involve giving the student a choice scenario and then asking him or her sequentially (1) to select the two most likely choice options and (2) the corresponding positive and negative consequences for each of the two choice options; then, through a short-answer format, the student is asked (3) to detail the longer-term implications of his or her choices (i.e., outcomes, goals, and personal values) in a two-step questioning process and then (4) to select the choice he or she would make and (5) to explain the trade-off rationale for the selection. The average time for the complete assessment is 20 minutes.

The key findings based on teacher reactions to the curriculum during the first beta test are as follows:

- *Teachers believed that the curriculum is effective.* Nine of ten teachers believed that the LifeGoals program was effective in teaching decision-making skills to their students. One sixth-grade teacher from Detroit saw the results immediately: “I had a few students who had some really, really tough times.... [O]ne of them really turned around after those eight lessons. Everything she did was different; the way she carried herself in the classroom was different.”
- *Teachers estimated that 30%–40% of the students learned their respective level of decision-making concepts in the eight lessons.* Teachers further estimated that with 100 to 120 lessons (the equivalent of two years of instruction), virtually all of their students could master and incorporate these decision-making concepts in their lives. In comparing the LifeGoals curriculum with the market leader in character education, Heartwood, one teacher said, “Reading a story is wonderful, but I think we need real-life examples (present in LifeGoals) first. I mean, my kids are seven.... [T]hey may really enjoy the story, but how in the world does that apply to them?”
- *When comparing LifeGoals with Heartwood, more teachers (82%) who have used both preferred LifeGoals.* In the follow-up interviews, each teacher was asked the question, “In terms of changing behavior, which method do you think has the most long-term potential and why?” Two reasons were given for why

the teachers generally preferred LifeGoals: (1) the cooperative learning component and (2) the ability to engage students to affect their thought processes.

The first beta test also served to answer the question, On what basis do children evaluate their choice options? As part of the research, students completed the assessment forms, which required them to generate a personal decision map (as Figure 1 summarizes) through a series of questions, from their choice options, to their perception of the corresponding likely consequences, to outcomes, to goals, and, if they are advanced enough, to values. The challenge was to understand the role of the positive and negative decision chains in the trade-off contrast students make, which subsequently influences which choice option they ultimately select.

To understand this trade-off, 500-plus third through sixth graders were asked to circle on their assessment form which pole (+ or –) for each of the respective choice options was the one they considered as a basis for their contrast underlying their choice.

- *When children used a negative pole as the basis for their choice, 69% of poor decisions occurred.* In other words, 69% of the poor decisions that children make can be attributed to one reason, namely, a biased contrast based on the negative pole. Using the previous e-mail example to illustrate this contrast, a student would circle the positive driving-force pole of the “Open” option (i.e., Power) and contrast or trade it off against the corresponding negative driving-force pole of the “Unopened” option (i.e., “Not in Control”). At the driving-force level, Power is more desirable than Not in Control and therefore is the basis of the choice. Children are more than twice as likely to make a poor choice if they do not focus on making a trade-off between the two positive poles (in this case, at the driving-force level, but this also holds true at the goal level).

This last finding is monumental because a cognitive flaw in the decision process is identified. If it is corrected, teachers could greatly improve the decision-making skills of children. To emphasize this key point, the primary cause of children’s poor decision making is the contrasting of a positive with a negative, which results in the positive winning a great majority of the time. When students work through and then contrast the positives, they must think about what is in their long-term best interest, and they are much more likely to select the choice option that was classified as a better decision. This enlightened self-interest is brought about by working through the longer-term implications and combining this with the understanding that contrasting positives leads to better decision making. On the basis of this finding, new teaching methods were developed and evaluated over the course of the next year.⁴

Elementary Pilots: Phase 2

To assess the effectiveness of basing a decision on contrasting only the positive poles, a methodology was developed and implemented for a random set of classes in two schools,

³For a complete description of the research instrument and the coding specifics, see the “Assessment” section at www.lifegoals.net.

⁴See the “Specific ‘Trade-off’ Teaching Techniques” and “Trade-Off Discussion ‘Focus’” sections at www.lifegoals.net. In brief, the trade-off process the students are now taught focuses on contrasting the positive poles of both options and recognizing why this contrast is the most appropriate one to make.

one in Colorado and one in California. After the choice scenario was read and the choice options were developed in the class, students were asked to select and record which option they would choose (Time 1). Then, a lesson was taught with careful focus on the trade-off rationale to contrast the two positive poles. Students were then asked to select and record the choice they would make after the discussion (Time 2). The choices made in Time 1 and Time 2 for the entire class for a given lesson was then summarized in a 2×2 matrix; the main diagonal reflected the number of students who did not change their choice from Time 1 to Time 2. The off-diagonal cells reflect the “switchers.”

For the classes that taught a minimum of eight lessons, two findings emerged:

- Approximately half of the students who initially selected the “not-so-good” choice option “switched” their choice after the class discussion that focused on the two positive poles. This result suggests that framing the trade-off in this way, combined with working through the GOOD decision model to the higher-order implications, has the potential to change the decisions that children make.
- After eight lessons, more than 80% of the students did not base their decisions on a contrast of the negative poles in their trade-off. In the initial assessments, approximately half of the students used the negative poles to determine their choice. This indicates that half of the elementary students who originally based their decision making on the negative pole no longer operated under that bias. Learning what to contrast in the trade-off process, thereby avoiding the cognitive flaw discovered in the prior pilot, seems to be readily accomplished in a short time.

Elementary Pilots: Phase 3

For the teachers who participated, the curriculum proved effective in teaching decision making, but the question arose as to why some teachers who were trained chose not to teach it. The public policy implication regarding this issue is central to any implementation plan. For without teacher commitment to teaching “another” program, there is virtually no chance of success. Two pilots (in Indiana and Illinois) were conducted in 2002–2003 to investigate this key issue. The Indiana pilot involved the training of one school counselor and having the counselor teach one class in each of the elementary grades for the entire school year, with the classroom teacher observing. The Chicago pilot involved the offering of a financial incentive to any teacher who trained after school to teach decision making.

- *The Indiana pilot resulted in a majority of the teachers in the school volunteering to be trained in the LifeGoals curriculum.* Apparently, when teachers observed the positive effect of the curriculum on their students, they wanted to participate in the development of decision-making skills in their students. This was even more remarkable in that these teachers volunteered to be trained on their own time.
- *The Chicago pilot resulted in fewer than 10% of the teachers teaching eight classes in one entire semester.*⁵ The conclusion

⁵Some of the classes in one Chicago school were tracked with respect to both academic and discipline issues. The school counselor who tracked these measures indicated that academic performance increased in the selected classes that were taught decision-making skills and the discipline problems declined significantly and that these improvements continued on into the following school year.

is that teachers must be motivated to learn how to teach decision making beyond mere financial incentives.

These results suggest that a wholesale adoption of the decision-making curriculum into a school system is not the most efficacious option. It seems reasonable to consider a slower process. For example, a better option may be to train all new teachers along with the motivated teachers who are willing to develop the Socratic teaching skills and adopt the decision-making curriculum into their classes.

Today, the goal of developing a decision model for elementary students has been accomplished. The fabric of the United States can be changed if the decision model can be effectively taught to future generations. What do I consider a generation? I believe that an educational generation is exactly one year. Every year, another group of seniors graduates from high school and another group drops because they do not know how to make good decisions (approximately 50% of Hispanics and African American students drop out of high school). By not teaching these students decision-making skills, another generation may be lost. I believe that the public policy debate about the adoption of this decision-making curriculum should take the highest priority.

Extending the Applications: The Benefits to Those Teaching

Although the initial development work was with elementary schoolchildren, there are many teens and young adults who would prescriptively benefit from the mode of decision making as well. However, lecturing young adults, in particular those that would be labeled “at risk,” about a decision-making model and how to use it in their own lives did not initially seem to offer a high probability of success, primarily because of the likelihood of source derogation. A high-visibility group that I had some previous involvement with was student athletes, particularly those from economically disadvantaged circumstances. Universities have tried programs that dictate to student athletes what to do and when to do it, but according to Lawrence Cunningham, then associate athletic director at the University of Notre Dame, such programs have not proved successful.⁶

The Student Athlete Application

Associate Athletic Director Cunningham had the novel idea that rather than explaining the GOOD decision model to his students, it may be more effective to have student athletes teach decision making to elementary schoolchildren. The underlying premise is that to be able to teach the GOOD decision model, it must be learned and internalized, and there would be no counterargument to learning a decision-making model if the apparent goal was to teach it. It was also believed that a secondary benefit of this approach would likely emerge when the athletes realized what an important role model they are to the children.

⁶Lawrence Cunningham is now the athletic director at Ball State University and is scheduled to teach the decision-making course in the 2004–2005 school year.

Student Athlete Pilot

In the summer of 2002, I taught the decision-making class at St. Mary's College in South Bend, Ind. Half of the class was Notre Dame student athletes, and the other half comprised other Notre Dame and St. Mary's undergraduates. The course was a combination of decision theory, teaching methods, and techniques for classroom management. After 45 hours of classroom instruction, the students paired up to teach local elementary students at an inner-city school a total of eight lessons per group.

Lawrence Cunningham, who also attended the class, notes that the student athletes not only attended all classes but also came early to prepare.⁷ They showed significant forethought in planning their classes and even showed up on days that they were not scheduled to teach just to help. In summary, they were involved. Interviews of all class members following the teaching practicum revealed that the students indeed realized the universal importance of the role model. Subsequent discussions with the head football coach at Notre Dame, Ty Willingham, provided anecdotal comments from some athletes, suggesting that the course had changed their lives. They had internalized the decision model they taught.⁸ (The reactions of both the teachers and the principal at the inner-city South Bend school were positive, noting that the behavior-moderating language of choice had found its way beyond the classroom to the hallways and the playground.)

Given the large investment in student athletes and the high visibility of their actions, this approach to learn decision-making skills by teaching them to elementary schoolchildren appears to have substantial merit. In addition, Cunningham notes that a further by-product of this teaching experience is that student athletes gained a general respect for the role of teachers and coaches and of the educational process in general. With the recent focus on student athlete graduation rates, which reflects a series of decisions about education that range from going to class to studying, it can be concluded that this approach to learning decision-making skills can significantly improve this high-profile problem.

The MBA Program Application

The success with the student athletes led some academics at Mendoza College of Business at Notre Dame (where I took a position as a visiting professor) to speculate about the impact that a similar teaching exercise would have on MBA students. Joel Urbany, then associate dean of the business school, suggested that good leaders are a combination of good teachers and good decision makers. Under this "leadership and ethics" positioning, I had 16 MBA students for the first half of the course teach the GOOD decision model to local elementary students. For the second half of the course, the application of the model was extended to a set of more involved business decision scenarios.

Several conclusions emerged as a result of this new course design. First, the MBA students unanimously supported the assumption that the best way to internalize the decision model was to teach it. Second, the students asserted that the posturing of decisions without a right and wrong orientation permitted them to delve more deeply into their own decision making without undue concern for what the instructor wants to hear. Third, the decision framework, which enabled focused dialogue in which students questioned one another and learned through pointed discussion, was perceived by the entire class to be a highly productive instructional method.

There were five foundational premises on which all decision ethics exercises and subsequent class discussion were grounded.⁹ Note that there were no lectures. Individual assignments that focused on mapping decision problems were presented to and then discussed by the class.

In summary, the simple premise of the course was that a general decision-based perspective, after it has been learned (which is guaranteed by teaching it), can be extended to business leadership problems.¹⁰ The result of the class was overwhelmingly positive, and 16 of 16 students indicated that this approach was far superior to any of the other ethics courses (ranging from one to three prior ethics classes) they

⁹The bridge between teaching the GOOD decision model and the business leadership component of the class was made by recognition of the following points:

- People are all the sum of the decisions they make in life.
- All choice options can be linked to personal values for both the positive and the negative poles. The realization that values drive decision making is key.
- When understanding the concept that values drive decision making becomes second nature, students realize that all personal values must be identified and defined if they are to be effectively used in decision making. (This defining of personal values became the source of ongoing discussion throughout the second half of the course as each student sought to understand his or her own personal values.)
- Values define a person as if they were a badge, because they drive all decisions.

When the class reached consensus on the first four postulates, the focus moved to a discussion of the mechanics of making the trade-off between values, which determines the course of action they would take. Students came to "discover" that their values are organized in an internal hierarchy that determines the decisions they make. Following recognition of the hierarchy concept, students developed and discussed ethical problems. A majority, but not all, of the students came to realize that, like the elementary lessons they taught,

- If the negative pole identifies the value a person uses as the basis for a decision, he or she may be on a slippery slope of ethics.

Students indicated that the GOOD decision model framework enabled an examination of those gray areas of ethical discussion that other ethics courses they had taken had not readily considered. Although not as definitive as the prior premises, the final premise represents the reason that, according to the entire class, teaching ethics in this way is more effective than any other method:

- The recognition that the ordering of values defines decision making, which in turn defines a person, causes continuous introspection and reflection about all decisions a person makes for the rest of his or her life.

¹⁰Reynolds and Urbany (2003) suggest a strong disconnection between the perception of business faculty and that of graduate students with respect to the effectiveness and overall viability of traditional ethics instruction.

⁷See Cunningham (2002).

⁸According to Coach Willingham, one player in particular who was having problems appreciably improved his behavior patterns and later became an all-American and was subsequently a high draft choice in the National Football League.

had taken in their program.¹¹ The conclusion is that learning a generalizable decision model has applicability across many domains of interest, from elementary schoolchildren, to at-risk young adults, to businesspeople who wish to gain a better understanding of alternative courses of action.

A Call for a Public Policy Orientation for Teaching Decision Making in Schools

The fundamental belief that motivated my academic effort is that people who know how to think critically are better participants in public affairs, better at identifying and solving important life problems, and are more likely to become productive citizens and less likely to be a financial drain on society than are people without such skills. I also believe that children who are trained in the skills of decision making are less likely to behave in ways that are injurious to themselves and society. Why? If goals are the compass to guide decision making, enlightened self-interest should lead to more constructive decision making. With good decision skills, children will become better parents and better citizens. After my journey into education, my conclusion is that a primary objective of schools at all levels should be the development of critical decision-making skills. The research that has been undertaken in the building of this model suggests that it can make a difference in the lives not only of children but also of people of all ages and backgrounds. This is a public policy issue that requires immediate discussion among government policymakers and educational administrators at all levels—national, state, and local.

In conjunction with the policy discussion, educational researchers should become involved with the design of a

¹¹A video that summarizes both the MBA comments on this new approach to decision ethics and the other two pilots (i.e., elementary schoolchildren and student-athletes) is available from the author (treynolds@lifegoals.net).

longitudinal program evaluation and research plan regarding the study of the relationship between the acquisition of decision skills and behavioral outcomes. If the learning effects are as significant as I believe they can be, economists should begin to model the long-term financial implications of teaching decision-making skills to children, with special attention to key cost centers, such as social programs and criminal justice. If this program can successfully affect 20% of the students (and empower them to teach their children as well), what is that worth? I think quite a lot.

To summarize this argument, consider the educational insight of Martin Luther King Jr. (1947), who said, “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.... Intelligence plus character,... that is the goal of true education.” The government is focusing on “no child left behind” from an academic perspective, but where is the critical decision-making component? Again, for the sake of the children and of society, this is a public policy issue that must be brought to the forefront of the educational public policy debate.

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