Tuana, N. (2007). Conceptualizing moral literacy. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *45*(4),

364-378.

**Synopsis**

Our youth confront more ethical dilemmas by the time they graduate high school then many adults will have faced in their entire lifetime. Nancy Tuana (2007) contends that “moral literacy” is a fundamental issue that has been neglected in the public education arena. Educators and communities should value moral literacy as an important part of a well-rounded education as much as we support reading, math, and other core competencies. Tuana reasons that educating students for a global and just society requires providing students with the skills necessary to make sound, ethical decisions.

Tuana (2007) provides an “overview of the fundamental elements of moral literacy. These involve three basic components: ethics sensitivity, ethical reasoning skills, and moral imagination…” (p. 364). Tuana is a Professor of Philosophy at Pennsylvania State University and well-versed on the subject of ethics and ethical frameworks that guide decision making.

**Impact for Educators**

Our local communities set the moral tone and define ethical guidelines that frequently determine how we make good decisions. Many of us view our local educational establishments as an important part of our communities. Tuana (2007) implies that although parents are the most critical in terms of helping children establish their value set, she states that “education is seen as reinforcing and enhancing the skills begun at home…” (p. 365-366).

Tuana refers to three important components as part of teaching moral literacy to students. The first component is **ethics sensitivity** and involves teaching students the skills necessary to identify an ethical dilemma and understand the moral intensity of the situation. Many students lack the skill to recognize an ethical issue primarily because society condones so many ethical wrongdoings. Tuana refers to illegally downloading music from the Internet and cheating to get a better grade as examples of these infringements. Additionally, the shift to a global economy will require students to become cross-culturally aware of other’s values and understand they are not like there own. Ethical conflicts often arise because people have different values and values are strongly held beliefs that typically don’t change throughout one’s lifetime. Ethics sensitivity will be necessary as students learn to function in a global society personally and professionally.

The second component of moral literacy is establishing **ethical reasoning skills**. One aspect of this is learning to examine all the facts of a situation before making a decision and considering ethical issues in their social context. Understanding as much of the story and uncovering the facts before passing judgment strengthens student’s character. Another component is for students to understand the different ethical frameworks that distinguish between intentions, behaviors, values and character. Tuana refers to numerous teachable moments in education and explains through examples how to connect moral literacy to our core subjects. She strongly suggests that moral literacy helps reinforce critical reasoning skills learned in other core subjects because it teaches student’s to assess and understand the entire situation before making decisions. Fully assessing a situation is an important element in developing critical thinking and reasoning skills.

The final component of moral literacy is developing a **moral imagination**. “The moral imagination refers to the blend of affective and rational processes that contribute to the imagination” (Tuana, 2007, p. 374-375). Development in this area allows students to imagine themselves in an ethical dilemma and evaluate what they might do if faced with a similar situation in the future. Students must have the opportunity to practice identifying these situations in order to be better prepared when making tough choices. Case studies help develop this aptitude and utilize the skills learned previously in the first two components of moral literacy. Developing this skill also helps students recognize the consequences of their decisions and the impact their decisions have on others. This is critical given that many students are focused on themselves and not the effects on others during this time of their lives.

Moral literacy is hard to measure and even more difficult to assess. Tuana makes a case for integrating teaching morality and ethics as part of our public education curricula. Teaching morality and helping our youth develop good character traits has largely been viewed as a parental responsibility however a shift is occurring and society is viewing character development as a community issue. Moral literacy is developmental and public schools can help students build a foundation that will carry with them the rest of their lives. The important message to students is regardless of our intelligence, our wealth or our stature in this world, it is everyone’s first job to be a good person.