



THE ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DISCERNMENT

WHAT IS WORTH WANTING?

The Missing Moral Question in Education

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

Every education forms not only what children know, but what they learn to want.

At the end of the morning, a practitioner holds up a sheet of gold stars.

"Who has been kind today?"

Hands rise around the room.

"I shared the red pen."

"I put the bricks away."

"I helped him with his zip."

Then one child asks the question that has quietly been growing beneath the whole conversation:

"How many stars do we need to get the prize?"

The child has understood the system perfectly.

The room meant to teach kindness. It may also have taught that kindness is a way of obtaining something else.

This is the moral question education rarely asks.



Not simply: How do we get children to behave well?

But: What are we teaching them to want?

EVERY EDUCATION TEACHES DESIRE

Education does more than pass on knowledge and skills. It shapes attention, admiration and desire.

Children learn what earns warmth, what brings status, what creates belonging, what adults celebrate and what should be hidden. They notice whose work goes on the wall, whose voice is heard, whose body is corrected and which qualities are described as mature.

This happens whether or not it appears in the curriculum.

A setting may say that creativity matters while rewarding only neat outcomes. It may speak about confidence while praising the children who cause adults the least difficulty. It may teach honesty while making disagreement unsafe. It may value inclusion while organising prestige around being first, best or most advanced.

The child learns from the structure beneath the words.

They begin to want the things that seem to secure love, safety and recognition.

This is not evidence that children are shallow. It is evidence that they are relational. Before they can examine value for themselves, they borrow the adult world of value.

They do not only borrow our discernment about what is true. They borrow our sense of what is desirable.

The question is therefore unavoidable. What kind of wanting are our homes, classrooms and settings cultivating?

THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM OF ADMIRATION

Children listen closely to what adults admire.

They notice the excitement around reading early, winning a race, sitting still, being chosen, producing something beautiful or receiving public praise.

They also notice quieter forms of admiration.



THE ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DISCERNMENT

The relief in an adult voice when a demanding child becomes compliant. The special warmth given to the child who helps without being asked. The laughter that rewards a clever joke. The pride attached to independence. The approval surrounding the child who never complains.

None of these qualities is wrong. Achievement, cooperation, humour, helpfulness and independence are genuine goods.

The difficulty begins when the child concludes that one of these goods is the price of belonging.

The capable child may learn to hide confusion. The Helper may become unable to receive. The Friend may abandon truth to preserve harmony. The Joker may believe their place in the group depends upon keeping everyone entertained. The Planner may experience mistakes as a loss of worth.

What adults repeatedly admire becomes a map of value.

And children often follow that map long before they can ask where it leads.

Children learn what is worth wanting by watching what the adults around them celebrate, fear and reward.

WHEN REWARD MOVES THE CENTRE

Rewards are attractive because they work.

A sticker, point, certificate or promise can focus attention and bring a quick change in behaviour. Sometimes that may be useful. Young children often need concrete signs, clear routines and visible encouragement.

The deeper question is not whether a reward changes the action. It is what the reward teaches the action to mean.

A child may first tidy because the room belongs to everyone. With repeated external reward, the centre can move. Tidying becomes what earns a token. Helping becomes what receives praise. Reading becomes what proves cleverness. Kindness becomes what adults notice.

The original good has not vanished, but it has been displaced.

This is why a strategy can succeed behaviourally while weakening discernment.



THE ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DISCERNMENT

The child becomes increasingly skilled at reading the system: What will I get? Who is watching? Which answer is wanted? What appearance will be rewarded?

Praise can do the same when it becomes a form of control.

"Good girl" may sound warm, but it can join goodness to adult approval and identity. The child is left to wonder what happens to goodness when they refuse, fail, become angry or disappoint us.

There is a difference between using appreciation to illuminate a good and using approval to make the adult the source of the good.

"You noticed he was struggling and stayed beside him" draws attention to perception, care and effect.

"You are such a good helper" can quietly turn care into a role the child must continue performing.

The aim is not to remove delight, celebration or encouragement from childhood. It is to keep pointing beyond the reward towards the reality that makes the action worthwhile.

EVERY ARCHETYPE SEEKS A REAL GOOD

The Archetype Approach begins from the understanding that every archetypal power reaches towards something genuinely valuable.

The Rebel wants freedom, justice and truth.

The Friend wants belonging and harmony.

The Helper wants contribution and care.

The Joker wants joy, release and flexibility.

The Watcher wants perception.

The Mover wants embodied vitality.

The Imagineer wants meaning and possibility.

The Planner wants order and dependability.

Energy wants intensity and full participation.

The Thinker wants understanding.



THE ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DISCERNMENT

The Builder wants form, mastery and completion.

The Explorer wants discovery and an open horizon.

These desires are not problems to eliminate. They are living directions within the child.

Discernment does not ask which archetype is good and which is bad. It asks whether the good being sought remains in relationship with other goods, other people and reality itself.

Freedom matters, but so does responsibility. Belonging matters, but not at the cost of truth. Order matters, but not when it suffocates life. Joy matters, but not when another person becomes the object of the joke.

Wholeness does not require the child to want less.

It asks them to want more completely.

WHEN A GOOD BECOMES THE WHOLE GOOD

Shadow often appears when one genuine good is asked to become the whole good.

Belonging becomes conformity.

Freedom becomes refusal of all dependence.

Care becomes self-erasure or control.

Order becomes rigidity.

Joy becomes avoidance.

Understanding becomes distance from feeling.

Achievement becomes proof of worth.

Exploration becomes an inability to remain.

The original desire is still visible, but it has lost proportion.

This gives us a different moral language for childhood.

Instead of treating desire as selfishness, we can ask what good the child is reaching for.

Instead of simply granting or denying the desire, we can help the child see what else belongs in the picture.



THE ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DISCERNMENT

The child who must win may be reaching for competence, recognition or a secure place in the group. The child who controls the game may be protecting order or belonging. The child who refuses to help may be guarding a self that has been overused by others.

Understanding the good beneath the desire does not mean allowing every action.

It means that the adult can hold a boundary without declaring the child's wanting corrupt.

Shadow is often a genuine good that has lost relationship with the whole.

WHAT MAKES A DESIRE WORTHY?

There is no simple list that can settle every moral question for a child.

A desire that is good in one moment may need to yield in another. The wish to speak may be courageous, or it may interrupt somebody whose voice has not yet been heard. The wish to belong may support community, or it may pull the child into cruelty. The wish to succeed may deepen commitment, or make failure unbearable.

Discernment needs a compass rather than a script.

Within the wider ecology of human discernment, four questions help orient us.

Is this desire truthful? Does it remain answerable to what is actually happening, or does it require denial, pretence or distortion?

Is it loving? Does it preserve the reality and dignity of other people as well as the self?

Is it free? Can the child choose, revise and release it, or are they being driven by fear, status, shame or the need for approval?

Can it live with conscience? Does the action leave the child more able to remain in honest relationship with themselves and the world?

These questions do not produce perfect certainty. They create orientation.

A worthy desire is not simply one that feels strong or earns approval. It is one that can be brought into truthful, loving and free relationship with the whole.



THE MORAL ENVIRONMENT OF A SETTING

A setting teaches desire through more than its reward systems.

It teaches through time, space, language, displays, routines and the emotional life of its adults.

What receives the most time?

Which achievements become visible?

Who is treated as an example?

Can a child admit a mistake without losing belonging?

Can they question an adult without being humiliated?

Do practitioners repair openly when they are wrong?

Is care expected from some children more than others?

Does the room make space for movement, solitude, disorder, imagination, intensity and unfinished work, or does one adult preference quietly define maturity?

These are not decorative questions. Together they form the moral ecology in which the child's desires take root.

The adult is not neutral within that ecology. Children feel what we want from them.

They feel when we want quiet more than understanding, progress more than relationship, gratitude more than honesty or compliance more than conscience.

They also feel when an adult genuinely delights in truth, repair, courage, beauty, kindness, effort and living thought.

We teach what is worth wanting partly by showing what we ourselves are willing to serve.

WHAT THIS SOUNDS LIKE

Instead of "Good girl for sharing," the adult might say: "You saw that she had nothing to use and made some room. What changed when you did that?"

Instead of "You get a sticker for finishing," the adult might say: "You stayed with something difficult. What helped you keep going?"



THE ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DISCERNMENT

Instead of praising only the winner, the adult might notice courage, practice, fairness, recovery, imagination or the way children made room for one another.

When a child says, "Did you see me?" we do not need to shame the wish for recognition. We can answer it and widen it: "I did see you. What did you notice in yourself?"

When a child asks, "What do I get?" we can remain warm and honest: "You may enjoy the reward. Let us also remember why this mattered before the reward arrived."

The aim is not to force children to pretend that praise, winning or prizes mean nothing.

It is to prevent them from becoming the only language of value.

LEARNING TO EXAMINE WANTING

Young children cannot begin with abstract moral philosophy.

They begin with lived relationship.

The adult protects what is good, names what matters and makes the consequences of actions visible. The child experiences fairness before defining it, repair before explaining it and love before reasoning about it.

Gradually, the adult can help the child notice that several desires may be present at once.

"You want to win, and you want the game to be fair."

"You want your friends to laugh, and you do not want him to feel small."

"You want to help, and part of you needs to rest."

"You want to say no, and we still need to leave safely."

This is not indecision. It is the beginning of moral depth.

The child discovers that a strong desire is real without being the whole truth. One archetypal power may speak loudly while another carries something the moment also needs.

At first, the adult holds this wider field for the child.

Later, the child begins to ask: What do I want? Why do I want it? What else matters? Which power should lead?

That movement prepares the next turn of development.



The child begins not only to live the archetypes, but to watch them.

WHEN NO ONE IS WATCHING

Return to the sheet of gold stars.

The practitioner does not need to tear it up in disgust. The children are enjoying the ritual, and celebration can belong in a warm human community.

But the adult can move the centre of the conversation.

"You helped him with his zip," she says. "What made you notice that he needed you?"

The child thinks for a moment.

"He was getting upset."

"And what happened after you helped?"

"He could go outside."

The star is still there. But it no longer carries the whole meaning of the act.

The child is being returned to perception, relationship and effect.

This is the work beneath moral education.

We are not trying to produce children who perform goodness convincingly while authority is present. We are helping them recognise goods that remain worth serving when applause disappears.

Kindness that still matters when nobody notices.

Truth that still matters when it costs status.

Freedom that remains responsible to others.

Belonging that does not require the abandonment of conscience.

Achievement that does not become proof of human worth.

Education becomes moral when it helps children love what remains good beyond reward.

Before children can decide which desire should lead, they must become able to watch desire moving within them.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oliver Riddett is the founder of the Archetype Approach, a developmental and relational model of childhood built around twelve universal archetypes. Developed through practice at Children of Towan in Porthtowan, Cornwall, the approach helps parents and practitioners look beneath behaviour and respond through balance rather than correction.

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