

## Moral Literacy Through Two Lenses: Pre-service Teachers' Preparation for Character Education

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In this paper, we explored how well prepared pre-service teacher candidates are to develop moral literacy. With the mandate in Ontario schools to deliver character education, we were intrigued by the question: How well prepared are teacher candidates to deliver on this requirement based on pre-service preparation and the realities of classroom practice in public education? The issue of teacher preparation has been raised as a concern in moral and character education literature (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Nucci, Drill, Larson, & Browne, 2005). Based on this inquiry we have concluded that pre-service teachers are not well prepared to fulfill the moral literacy requirement of character education because they lack theoretical background knowledge in moral development. Further, we recognize that the in-service training of practicing teachers is of equal importance to ensure a receptive environment exists for pre-service teachers. The implication of this finding is that for pre-service teachers to be equipped to meet Ministry character education expectations in practice, pre-service programs will need to be improved, and practicing teachers will require ongoing professional learning opportunities that value moral literacy development as complimentary and equal to academic development.

Character education has existed for over a century as either a formal or not so formal component of public school systems in North America (McClellan, 1992). Lickona (1991) posits that "good character consists of knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good" (p. 51) and defines character education as the deliberate effort to develop good character based on core virtues that are good for the individual and good for society. Educators have long been seen as influential in the development of society's young through the advancement of moral understanding and aligning action with these understandings. This expectation is currently formalized as character education within North American school systems, including that of Ontario, Canada. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that teacher candidates attending pre-service programs across Canada would be receiving training in preparation for this expectation. In reality, it is not always the case. In fact, the lack of preparation of pre-service teachers to deliver moral/character education has been raised in the literature as a concern (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Nucci, Drill, Larson, & Browne, 2005).

Character formation is intrinsic to classroom practices, and the daily life in a classroom is saturated with moral values (Campbell, 2003; Lapsley, 2008). According to Bereiter (2002), there is no value-free knowledge; values are deeply embedded in every aspect of school life. If teachers are to take seriously their responsibility of implementing moral/character education, they first have to gain some theoretical knowledge about moral development through the teacher preparation program and then ground their teaching practice in that knowledge and understanding.

Further, the realities of school environments, presented from the perspective of a practicing

administrator, may impede or support any such efforts made by pre-service educators completing their practical teaching experience. Beyond the classroom environment is the school environment, the climate of which is set in large part by the direction of the administration. The pedagogy of administrators reflects their knowledge and understanding of best practices for students' overall development, moral and academic. Administrators who possess knowledge of moral development theory and subscribe to constructivist and developmental type approaches to educational pedagogy may establish routines and expectations for the operation of their school that are consistent with these beliefs. Such administrators are likely to create opportunities for collaboration, attending to the perspectives of the many, allowing for greater autonomy in decision making, and building connections among members of the learning community to create feelings of belonging. Such practices could facilitate development of student moral reasoning and increase the abilities of students to apply their knowledge independently.

In 2007, The Ontario Ministry of Education promulgated the document *Finding Common Ground: Development in Ontario Schools K-12*, which provides guidelines for character education with the expectation that it needs to be fully implemented in practice throughout Ontario schools. Although the document stresses the utmost significance of developing positive character in students, and some implementation has taken place in schools, the questions that we believe deserve our utmost attention are, how well are pre-service teachers prepared to fit character education into an already demanding curriculum and include moral literacy in their everyday teaching practices, and how

effective are practicing teachers in delivering character education presently in our classrooms?

In this paper, we attempt to explore these questions given the present conditions in schools and contemporary character education practices. The implications of these realities are explored and discussed from two different perspectives: pre-service university teacher and the practicing administrator. The recommendations for improving the learning and teaching conditions in faculties of education and public schools are outlined.

### **Character Education: An Expression of Society's Priorities**

The effects of time and events on the form and function of character/moral education in public schools cannot be ignored. The events and priorities of society influence the nature of educational pedagogy, including the approach to character education. Beginning with the 1920s and 1930s, the early work of Edward Thorndike was highly influential in establishing a "behaviorist" approach to schooling and, perhaps not surprisingly, character education. At this time, prevailing educational pedagogy advocated the transmission of knowledge and skills through exposure, practice, and reinforcement. Similarly, character education was best accomplished by establishing a controlled environment exposing students to the "right" experiences and the "right" habits, and this has become known as a traditional approach (McClellan, 1992).

During the 1960's some members of North American society were advocating a peaceful existence for nations in conflict. At the same time the messaging of society was that hard work and persistence would pay off with the *American Dream* of wealth and accomplishment. This shift in society also influenced character education models, which briefly moved away from the direct instruction methods associated with behaviorist (traditional) approaches. Instead, character education became more about youth finding their own way through values clarification (Simon, 1971), such that one learned how to identify their own values without being influenced by the values of another. This approach, in limited ways, paralleled the educational pedagogy of the day, which advocated a transactional model of exchanges between master and pupil in which the pupil would develop their knowledge and skill necessary for advancement enabling them to achieve the highest levels of success possible.

In the early 1980s pre-service teacher education programs began to shift, moving away from ideas and more toward behavior, focusing more on the skills and strategies of being effective educators (Ryan, 1988). This time period is of particular interest given that a significant proportion of practicing educators today

would have been students in such schools during this time. In the 1990's character education once again surfaced as a means to improve the conditions of a society in apparent moral decay. The version of character education proposed was not dissimilar from the direct instruction methods of the 1920s with supporters such as Lickona (1991) and Wynne (1991) advocating the inculcation of the right habits of mind, heart, and body.

In today's society, our youth are exposed to a host of technological advances which make instant and almost constant communication with others (virtually anywhere in the world) a way of life and existence. It is becoming clear that as a result of this environmental exposure today's students interact and develop social norms fundamentally differently from their predecessors. These and other changes in society (e.g., the greater awareness of equity and social justice issues, greater diversity, and the interconnected nature of the economies of multiple nations) call for changes in how we educate and understand those differently wired young minds. This also implies that character education in public schools cannot return to a form that existed previously. That is, whatever preparation is given to pre-service teachers, it needs to reflect the conditions of current classrooms and greater society.

### **Pre-service Instructor's Perspective on Teachers' Preparation**

As an instructor in an Ontario based teacher preparation program I have often been involved in many interesting discussions with students about the importance of character education and about different approaches to teaching moral values. In these discussions, many students express concern about their level of theoretical knowledge about moral development and often worry about their level of understanding of the required skills to teach character education effectively. Many fear that by the time they fulfill the demanding curriculum requirements, they will not have enough time to include character education in their program. Clearly they are seeing these two entities, cognitive and moral development, as separate bodies.

According to Chang (1994) teaching is "moral by nature" but the question, how to teach children to make sound moral judgments, still causes confusion for many educators. Beyer (1997) argues that teachers must have an ability to consider the moral dimensions of classroom practice in order to develop democratic citizenry in their students. Considering teaching from a moral point of view, many researchers in education agree that teachers' personal values and personal traits, and the ways they express those values in their teaching practices are very much a cornerstone for their students'

character formation (Campbell, 2003; Damon, 2007; Socket, 2006; Sullivan, 2004).

Character formation is intrinsic to classroom practices and the daily life in a classroom is saturated with moral values (Campbell, 2003; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009). We believe that, in order to better understand their students' potentials or potential limitations in understanding every day morality, they should be equipped with better understanding of the theories of moral development. We also argue that if teachers are to take seriously their responsibility of implementing moral or character education, they first have to gain theoretical knowledge about moral development and then ground their teaching practice in that knowledge.

Many teacher education programs have not yet incorporated the moral aspects of teaching in their curriculum (Cummings, Harlow & Maddux, 2007). In some teacher education programs there is only one session in an Educational Psychology course dedicated to theories in moral development; as a single course it would hardly cover enough ground for understanding of such an important matter in human development, let alone a single session. When and if greater attention will be paid to moral development theory as part of pre-service human development study is hard to say. Due to an overwhelming teacher education curriculum saturated with teaching methods in major subjects, very little space is left for moral education inclusion. As Narvaez and Lapsley (2008) point out:

The dilemma that teacher education faces, then, is whether it is acceptable to allow character education to remain part of a school's hidden curriculum or whether advocacy for the value commitments immanent to education and teaching should be transparent, intentional, and public (p. 157).

The hidden curriculum is defined as the unwritten social rules and expectations of behavior that we all seem to know, but were never taught (Anyon, 1980). We may expect the students know that arguing with the teacher might not be a good idea, even if the teacher has made an obvious error, and that teacher's prior established rules are to be accepted and followed without questioning. Such rules are rarely explained with a rationale, yet students readily adjust their behavior to avoid negative consequences.

Lickona (1991) states that teachers must help children to understand core values, adapt to them, and act upon them. In the above example, students are very much aware of the consequences of acting against a teacher's decision; what they are not encouraged to do is to consciously reason and act based on their own values or discern whether in fact the issue is a matter of

morality or social convention. We argue that teachers who believe they are solely in charge of setting rules for the classroom, expecting students to obey those rules without questioning, find hidden curriculum a place where they literally can hide. Thus, the need for character and moral education becomes necessary not only to build students' understanding about core moral values, but also to help teachers develop sound moral judgments, which involve "defining what the moral issues are, how conflicts among parties are to be settled, and the rationales for deciding on a course of action" (Rest, Thoma, & Edwards, 1997, p. 5).

According to Osguthorpe (2008), good teaching requires a teacher to be content knowledgeable, method skilled and "virtuous in disposition and character" (p. 289). We agree in part with this statement, but argue that teachers also need to have a solid theoretical knowledge not only in the subjects they teach, but also in moral theories and processes associated with character development. If we want teachers to take a serious role as moral agents, they must be able to understand the developmental changes in moral reasoning (e.g., Kohlberg's moral development theory; Piaget's theory of morality) and develop awareness about moral issues their students face in and out of school. They should be able to discern a moral matter from something other, such as a social convention, as suggested by Nucci (2009) with social cognitive domain theory. Further, any discipline must be domain concordant (moral issues treated as such, and social convention issues treated as rules to maintain order) to be most effective and meaningful to students (Thornberg, 2010). This will not happen unless teacher education programs take seriously present character education demands and start emphasizing the moral dimension of teaching. If teaching is to be seen as reflective moral action (Beyer, 1997), then teacher education programs need to provide solid theoretical ground in moral literacy. Beyond the pre-service setting, the classroom context where teacher candidates perform their practice teaching must also keep pace, to ensure a receptive environment exists for these pre-service teachers to experience.

### **The Realities of Classroom Practice: An Administrator's Perspective**

Character education in public school systems needs to mirror current educational pedagogy which today is a model of transformation. It should also reflect advances in psychological theory, which now recognize the interrelatedness of cognition, emotion, and behavior. The difficulty in accomplishing this is in ensuring the educators who deliver character education have an adequate understanding of moral development theory, and known efficacious character education practices.

From the character education literature it is apparent that such understanding is not common among educators (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Nucci, Drill, Larson, & Browne, 2005; Revell & Arthur, 2007). Add to this the challenges of trying to complete a demanding academic curriculum, achieve adequate levels of success on provincial tests, and manage more challenging and prevalent social emotional issues (i.e., mental health issues) than ever before, and the task is daunting to say the least.

To begin, practicing educators must have a consistent understanding of what it means to be morally literate in a pluralistic society (something of a challenge, as the research community is not in agreement about this definition), they must have some theoretical framework upon which to base their practical strategies, and these strategies should be known to be effective in raising moral literacy levels in youth.

At the foundation is the meaning of moral literacy: moral literacy is not merely a collection of facts, but rather a level of competence in both moral judgment (interpretation of facts) and action (behavior) (Vogt, 2008). For these purposes the accepted definition of moral literacy comes from Tuana (2007), and involves complex skills and actions cultivated and strengthened through purposeful efforts of educators within the school environment. These skills and actions are thought to be necessary for youth to develop into responsible contributing members of greater society.

An example of a theoretical framework would be a moral development theory, such as the social cognitive perspective offered in domain theory (Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Nucci & Turiel, 2009; Turiel, 1974). Social domain theory distinguishes between social conventions (rules which facilitate societal operations), moral concerns (principles of justice and human welfare), and personal (personal preferences) domains. Making the distinction between these domains as a practicing educator would seem important in the operation of a classroom. Modeling a thought process to illustrate how adults distinguish between a moral issue (e.g., willfully causing harm to another) and a social convention (e.g., referring to adults with titles) may be part of an educator's practice in facilitating conflict resolution with students. Thornberg (2010) has argued all discipline must be domain concordant and that students will judge an educator as more or less effective according to their practice of meting out discipline aligned with the transgression (e.g., a teacher who refers to a rule when addressing a moral transgression is viewed as less effective than one who identifies the problem as a moral issue).

Within the public school system there exist relations between faculties of education and schools.

This relationship is the basis for pre-service teachers to train and practice their skills in a classroom setting under the guidance of an experienced educator. Pre-service teachers are expected to collaborate with associate educators (their host teachers) in the initial planning of lessons and subsequently receive feedback from their associate teachers in their preparation, delivery, and assessment of lessons for the duration of their practicums. Pre-service teachers are in a relationship where most often the associate teachers are viewed as the authorities and are in a position of providing an evaluation of the pre-service teachers. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that decisions (at least for the duration of the practicum) will be based on the practices of the teacher. This reality makes it especially important that practicing educators receive professional learning opportunities necessary to raise their awareness and understanding of moral development theory and character education practices known to raise moral literacy levels of students. Historically this type of professional development has not taken place (Jones, Ryan & Bohlin, 1998; Nucci et al., 2005; Revell & Arthur, 2007) and, according to Lapsley (2008), is of paramount importance for educators to deliver character education effectively.

Based on research conducted by Milson and Mehlig (2002), most elementary school educators feel they are effective in the delivery of character education, but are also concerned with some disconnect between research findings and practicing educator self-perception. However, within this study, it was revealed that 37.9% of the 270 teacher respondents doubted their ability to positively affect the character of *some* students, suggesting that at least some students seem unreachable. Despite high levels of motivation and persistence with the task of character education, such educators may feel ill equipped to support some students. This study was a self-report from practicing educators and lacked any supporting objective data. What remains to be examined is whether educators who believe they are effective in positively affecting the character development of youth by elevating their moral literacy are in fact effective.

With greater emphasis on achievement in Ontario schools, it is possible that educators are consumed with only one task: that of developing the intellect of students. The mandate to develop student literacy and numeracy levels to Ministry standards preoccupies virtually every educator in the province of Ontario. This reality may lead educators to use moral texts to accomplish the dual task of developing literacy and character simultaneously. To do so, educators must have adequate understanding of the limitations of such texts. First, not all students will comprehend the same message from a text; second, the message of the author is not necessarily what the reader interprets; and third,

not all themes of “moral message literature” are accessible to all students based on their schema for interpretation (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008). Educators who believe they can impact the moral literacy level of students, and thus impact character by reading and discussing stories with moral components, need first to ensure that students are able to read and comprehend the text suitably.

High yield strategies described by the Ontario Ministry of Education in their recent *School Effectiveness Framework and Guides to Effective Instruction* do provide educators with strategies for assisting students in making meaning from what they read or have read to them. A process of connecting to the text as an individual, or relating material in the text to other texts or the greater world is considered a high yield practice when teaching children how to read for meaning. The process is not about acquiring the “correct interpretation”, as some traditional character educator proponents might argue; it is instead to engage readers in actively making their own meaning from what they read. The reality is that every student comes to school with unique life experiences from which their schema is established, and therefore the interpretations of text may vary greatly. Students are able to interpret moral messages as themes of texts; however, the degree to which this is possible is limited by both the reading skills and moral reasoning abilities of the student (Narvaez, 2010). Educators must understand and be prepared to work with these limitations.

When success is measured with curriculum-based tests across the province, educators are forced to prioritize what is taught in the day. This reality may impact the climate of a classroom and the methods used by the educator to manage this environment effectively. An educator who subscribes to methods consistent with a developmental authoritative approach rather than an authoritarian approach will likely have very different classroom climates. The former places greater emphasis on building and sustaining relationships and is borne out of a pedagogy that includes a belief that children need to feel connected and supported where they are suitably challenged and can demonstrate competence and practice autonomy. This constructivist type approach includes a positive view of children and a belief that they are predisposed to cooperate and learn at developmentally appropriate levels. The more authoritarian environment is focused on controlling student behavior to maximize academic learning opportunities (Watson, 2008) and may be viewed as more efficient by an educator who feels pressured to deliver the academic scores expected by the Ministry of Education.

In the authoritarian environment it is reasonable to expect the approach to teaching moral literacy to

parallel the pedagogy of classroom management, which would be more consistent with traditional character education. This approach involves direct teaching: opportunities to practice taught values with rewards and punishments to help guide student behavior in the *right* direction (Watson, 2008). “Whether transmitting values or math skills, the educational processes of telling, modeling, explaining, practice and correction would be the same” (p. 178, Watson, 2008). Pre-service teachers who find themselves in such an environment, even if they subscribe to the developmental discipline and constructivist moral education approach, may find such methods difficult to execute. Conversely, administrators who maintain a more authoritarian perspective will have different expectations of staff and students. Likely, there would be more frequent rules to be obeyed, with punishments and rewards for non/compliance and directed tasks for all to follow. The administrator would be the primary decision maker, following a hierarchical structure of authority and creating a more heteronymous environment for members of the learning community.

According to Vitton and Wasonga (2009) the decision-making of administrators has become increasingly complex, matching the nature of school environments, and yet the preparation of administrators to manage such decisions in ethical or moral ways is limited. Increasing operational matters including policies and protocols have taken precedence. Administrators are responsible for setting the tone or direction of a school community; to ensure this environment is conducive to the advancement of moral literacy and development of moral character in students, supportive structures must be in place.

Pre-service teachers, in my experience as a practicing administrator, often feel they must “fit in” with the school structures, particularly those structures in the classroom of their associate, and are already keenly aware of the pressures of the “achievement agenda.” Such dynamics may create inner conflict within a pre-service teacher who finds they must subvert their own instincts in order to operate within a school or classroom environment that doesn’t match their pedagogy. It would also seem counterproductive, as the instincts of the pre-service teacher might actually be more conducive to moral literacy development and thus have greater positive impact for character formation of students.

As a school administrator it is my expectation that pre-service teachers share their expertise and knowledge, and become involved by contributing positively to the school culture in general and the classroom culture specifically. In terms of moral literacy development in the form of character education, I expect pre-service teachers to be familiar with the Ministry mandate (know that it exists), and endeavor to

structure lessons and classroom management techniques in ways that are conducive to the development of moral literacy skills. This pre-supposes that they have an understanding of moral literacy and how best to advance it. I do not expect pre-service teachers to simply parrot the style or skills of their associate unless, in their estimation, these practices are in the best interests of our students, academically, socially, and emotionally.

### Implications for Practice and Concluding Remarks

After identifying the possible flaws in present teacher education practices and acknowledging the challenges of today's classrooms, the questions that remain pertaining to the teaching of character education are: What is the body of knowledge in moral literacy that we desire in pre-service teachers, and how can it be implemented through teacher education programs? We propose that efforts to enhance pre-service students' knowledge of moral development and different theoretical approaches to morality should permeate the pre-service curriculum. This could be accomplished by establishing a moral literacy course in which students would focus on examining different theoretical principles in moral development. In this course, teacher candidates should be able to develop proficiency in understanding children's moral development, to choose which theoretical principles to apply in their teaching practices, and to extend their understanding of character education practices. The class should be structured to allow discussions about different moral issues such as equity, justice, and wellbeing of others, and it should enable examination of various case studies or sharing of personal experiences. Such an approach would give teacher candidates a greater perspective and may help them navigate some of the challenges they will face as practicing educators more successfully.

A strong knowledge base in character formation enhances teaching practices. Pre-service and practicing teachers need to be aware that their teaching practices shape not only students' academic learning, but also their character development. According to Narvaez and Lapsley (2008), character formation begins as a caring relationship first in the family and then extends to school. Caring schools and classrooms prove to be beneficial for students on many levels. When students are cared for and also care about others, they have a better chance to develop democratic citizenry traits; they show social and emotional maturity and consequently show a commitment to mastery learning. Schools who emphasize a strong sense of community experience less discipline problems and bullying, and they report improvements in overall academic performance (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009; Power & Higgins-Alessandro, 2008). A caring community is an

important variable in students' learning. Therefore, pre-service teacher candidates should be taught what a caring community is, as well as what kinds of strategies should be used in building a caring community in their classroom and school. On-going training for practicing educators would also be beneficial in this regard.

According to Noddings (2013), caring is a jointly rewarding relationship between caregivers and cared-for individuals. Noddings proposes four components of character education based on the caring perspective: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation, which we believe should be introduced in a moral literacy course. Each of these components of caring are enacted by the teacher, "the one caring," with the students, "the ones cared for," but are also reciprocal, where students in turn learn to care. Modeling refers to more experienced teachers (pre-service instructors) demonstrating the skills and attitudes that new teachers should be developing, such as "meticulous preparation, lively presentation, critical thinking, appreciative listening, constructive evaluation, [and] genuine curiosity" (p. 503).

Modeling caring should also be expected from the experienced associate teacher working with teacher candidates during placements in schools. It is here where dialogue and practice occur. Where *dialogue* involves treating ideas about "material to be analyzed, discussed, critiqued, and considered" (p. 503), *practice* means that new teachers have opportunities to practice caring in the company of master teachers who are models of caring. Field placements are opportunities for teacher candidates to master the skill of caring. Confirmation calls for community members to understand one another's goals and to support each person's progress toward "the ethical ideals that each strives toward" (p. 505). By modeling, dialogue, and practice, novice teachers will develop a sense for the needs of the wider community and will be able to transfer their sense of care to future students.

Based on this inquiry, the following implications pertaining specifically to practicing educators in public schools have been identified for further consideration. First, to help our youth to develop as morally literate and functional in society requires a re-thinking of how decisions are made, whose voices are heard, and what filter is used to determine what is given priority in schools. Next, youth today need to develop the ability to critically question circumstances presented by society and envision better alternatives (Watts & Guessous, 2006). To do this they must be supported by educators in schools, and greater society through the daily interactions they experience in their classrooms and schools. Youth must see themselves as having worth and power to act responsibly. Third, in present-day education, where what gets measured is what is often focused upon, it seems appropriate that beyond

the changes to day-to-day interactions and a culture/climate of the school setting, what is needed is some form of assessment of moral literacy. Fourth, none of this is possible without educating the educators; pre-service programs and in-service for practicing educators are of paramount importance. Educators need a basic understanding of the principles of moral development theory and a familiarity with research supported practices/outcomes in order to align their classroom practices to develop moral literacy levels, facilitating opportunities for students to develop their thinking skills without telling them what to think. Finally, and by extension, training programs for leaders (future administrators) must also provide some exposure to, and understanding of, moral development theory; the relation to moral literacy; and efficacious means for developing student character at a school level. We believe that understanding the importance of developing autonomy, feelings of belonging, and competence among students is paramount to their socio-moral development.

While there is certainly more emphasis in popular literature and school board mandates on the instruction of the whole child, we are not necessarily supporting our educators to deliver on this promise. We teach our teachers how to deliver a literacy program so that children learn to read and write, and we do not deny the importance of these fundamental skills. We are simply arguing that future teachers need to be taught moral theories and the effective character education implementation to enhance students' sociomoral reasoning necessary for developing the whole child. This approach to educational practice in return will help true transformation in education to be achieved.

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