

FACING THE CHALLENGE OF CHARACTER EDUCATION

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Following every unfortunate and tragic school shooting is an accompanying cry for moral/character/values education, in the belief that such teaching could have prevented the tragedy. We decry the rising statistical evidence of the apparent lack of values and character demonstrated by youth as evidenced by soaring crime rates among very young age groups, rampant abuse of drugs, open displays of cruelty, and a generalized display of disrespect. Various social institutions, namely parents and schools, are pointing the finger of blame at each other instead of jointly assuming responsibility for the task of character education.

The need for character education is certainly not being denied, but the public—and indeed many current educators—is seemingly unaware that such education has a long and definitive history. Lost in the midst of that history is not the attempt to reach consensus on whether the family, or the school or both should teach it, but rather the meaning of character education itself, the initiatives for doing so, and the ultimate evaluation of those initiatives.

Defining the Issue

Historically, theologians, philosophers, politicians, and educators have long concerned themselves with character, morality, and values—such as honesty, compassion, loyalty, respect, trust, responsibility, and others. Herbert Walberg and Edward Wynne differentiated the unnecessary paradox between values and character by defining the former as dispositions, and the latter as observable actions that reflect values.¹ Thomas Lickona perhaps best defined the concept of character as being a matter of values in action.²

In our own time, the teaching of values has been considered the foundation for effective citizenship and the perpetuation of the democratic society. Perhaps the most important revelation on values is that they are not innate, but must be taught, learned, and honed through practice and a conducive environment.³ The various social institutions that transmit culture must naturally assume this responsibility, with some being more influential than others. Following this line of thinking, the family and school are at the forefront, based upon the principle of most frequent contact, though arguably the media are very influential in this mission as well. To begin, Marvin Berkowitz helps clarify the issue by offering the following working definition of character education, to assist educators who are considering the endeavor: “The long term process of helping young people develop good character, i.e., knowing, caring about, and acting upon core ethical values such as fairness, honesty, compassion, responsibility, and respect for self and others.”⁴ Few would dispute the social importance of such values; however, this does not infer that the school has only recently considered this endeavor. Indeed, quite the opposite is true.

William Huitt noted that within the last three hundred years, the primary function of the American and non-American educational institution has been in the realm of character education.⁵ Over a two-hundred-year span, English philosophers John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Herbert Spencer advocated character education as the objective of schooling and the resultant solution to social ills.⁶ John Dewey highlighted the focus on character education in American school’s from the republic’s inception, viewing

it as a central mission in the development of youth.⁷ In point of fact, character education was a central figure in American education in the pre–World War II era.

But, the American school began to turn away from this mission as World War II commenced, in spite of both educators and the public fervently believing that it was still a salient aspect of schooling.⁸ As the post–World War II era unfolded, America had seemingly “lost her innocence” and society turned away from the historical/philosophical/sacred principles that had once governed her, turning instead to the principles of behaviorism and Dr. Spock.⁹ Character education became a matter of allowing youth to choose, or not choose, a values path instead of directly being taught as before. Beginning in the 1960s, academic competence became the predominant issue in America and has intensified in this era of international competition. As a result of this and numerous legal rulings that highlighted the separation of church and state, character education seemingly lost favor in schools, despite the fact that surveys and polls continued to reveal public concern and approval of the same.¹⁰ Educators abandoned character education out of fear of violating legal concerns and a massive revision of the curriculum, further believing that a full-scale focus on values would necessarily require a sacrifice in academic achievement.

The Challenge

Led by Lickona, there has been a renewed interest in character education that has been steadily building in the past two decades.¹¹ He steadfastly asserts that “schools [are] making a clearheaded and wholehearted commitment to teaching moral values and developing good character,” primarily because the need is so apparent.¹² His assertion is supported by a number of compelling reasons. First, character education is necessary in order for us to be fully human. The qualities and strengths of good character define the hallmarks of human maturity and development, a notion that has for too long been ignored. Second, schools are better places “when they are civil and caring communities that promulgate, teach, celebrate, and enforce the values on which good character is based.”¹³ Such an environment would be far more conducive to teaching and learning. Third, and most importantly, it is paramount to the task of building a moral society and perpetuating the democratic system. Our society is suffering from severe social and moral problems which are most visibly reflected by youth. Such circumstances cannot be neglected in hopes that they will correct themselves.

What Can Work

During the latter part of the twentieth century, conventional perspectives of education were combined and muddled with a barrage of emerging theories and psychological models designed to clarify the issue of character education but instead resulted in disillusion toward it. Craig Cunningham notes that the result has been “a continuously changing series of aims, understandings, methods, and agents for character education...lacking an adequate model of personal development that cannot provide stable support for an effective consensus.”¹⁴ In short, the patchwork of strategies for integrating character education which lack coherence is due in no small measure to a severe disagreement over whose values should be taught and how to teach them.

Most telling in this regard is the aforementioned educators’ fear of crossing that fine legal line separating church and state along with the misperceived right to actually teach values. Fear is a poor environment to teach anything, except perhaps fear and uncertainty. While schools cannot and should not advocate religion, they are free to teach about those values that are erroneously confined within the realm of sectarian beliefs. Contrary to popular belief, a core of values or “natural virtues” do exist and can be identified as nonsectarian and vital to our citizenry; such values need to be known, modeled, and practiced.¹⁵ Given the public’s unwavering concern for and schools’ obligation to educating the entire person, there is little doubt that a consensus can be reached on such a set of values that will not subjugate the efforts of one social institution over another. Such a consensus “must be reached to develop the shared vision of what character traits should be fostered.”¹⁶

As mentioned previously, confusion has been compounded by the paradox between values and character, a battle that is virtually futile when one considers that character deals with the same values as

reflected by behavior. We can no longer allow such attitudes to serve as excuses. There are a variety of approaches to teaching character, but each has its own particular track record and when used exclusively has not produced the significant desired outcomes we seek: inculcation, indoctrination (a very misunderstood term), values education/clarification, analysis, and moral development.¹⁷ Newer approaches purport to incorporate student thoughts and feelings as suggested in action learning, an endeavor that is more likely to have a significant impact. It is in the best interests of all concerned that character educators be sensitive to students' moral reasoning by listening to student perspectives, drawing them out, and challenging them in order to promote moral/character development.¹⁸

Many structured models and initiatives based upon values education are currently in operation. They can serve as adoptable models and will be major players in the twenty-first century's focus on character education. But they will also require a grand measure of agreement, effort, partnership, and evaluation. Several such programs provide proof that the goal can be achieved. The D.A.R.E. Program, Mt. Lebanon Program, Pennsylvania Program, Child Development Project, Hyde School Program, City Montessori School Project, and Character Counts are but a few of the programs in operation for at least the past decade in which the development of character has been successfully integrated into a supportive curriculum that strives for excellence in both academics and character.¹⁹ These programs and models are being implemented at every level. They appear initially to be more successful on the pre-high school level, which indicates that efforts on the secondary level must be intensified.²⁰ It is especially encouraging to note that specific character education programs are achieving success without sacrificing academic achievement.²¹ This is crucial to critics who retort that the inclusion of character education into the curriculum must exact a price in terms of academic test scores.

A successful venture into character education need not necessitate the adoption of a prescribed model used on a school-wide basis, though that approach offers the greatest chance for success. The individual educator can integrate such a program at the classroom level. Among the most promising vehicles for integrating character education is historical storytelling.²² The goal of citizenship education is about the promotion of moral/ethical standards that symbolize and perpetuate our democratic society. These standards are embodied and demonstrated in the endeavors and values of authentic personal models—of the past and present—who inspire emulation of specific character traits, such as honesty, courage, respect, responsibility, and compassion.²³ Educators must identify from among the myriad historical figures those individuals whose stories exemplify these qualities and give us direction. We must encourage reflection on those values that project the best of what our culture offers. In this way we can demonstrate to students that values defining good character and effective citizenship are not bound by time but rather transcend it. Examining and understanding those values is the first step in helping students analyze the implications for their own lives; and against this information, allow them to embrace and practice them. In any case, the school cannot be an ethical bystander in hopes that other institutions will do a more efficacious job of character education.²⁴

What to Do

Character education is neither an easy nor a noncontroversial endeavor. Huffman aptly summarizes the bottom line—character education will require an all-encompassing approach that focuses upon the moral impact of the school community.²⁵ The school board, administration, teachers, parents, and students must all play pivotal roles in the support of the values that form the foundation of character education. These values must be modeled, taught, and advocated. Any incongruence will seriously undermine the integrity and effectiveness of the approach. At its heart is a working partnership among teachers, parents, and community in a cooperative effort to coordinate the in-school and out-of-school environments, such that one does not work against the other.²⁶ It will require parents to assume leadership roles along with teachers, perhaps through parenting workshops, cooperative discipline, and establishing a cohesive network. Lickona further asserts that government must also provide social policy support that will not subvert the relationship between home and school.²⁷ A partnership is crucial to initiate a program with a

consensus on a core for character, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and educating and informing all participants.

As the renaissance of character education indicates, though, the school is obligated to be at the forefront of this mission. In an era that is witnessing a decline in the influence of the family, the apparent apathy of the government, and the rise in power and influence of the media, the school must reestablish itself as a seedbed for the teaching of values and take the initiative.

An Overlooked Step

An often overlooked aspect of the character education endeavor is its evaluation; specifically, both the program and the behaviors to be measured. James Leming stated that “if research is to inform the practice of character education, more and better evaluation of existing programs is needed.”²⁸ Although the rather scant research in this area is positive and promising, further research is necessary to properly put into perspective the evaluation of character education programs. To achieve this objective, more than commitment is necessary. Defining character and its reflected values is only one step; community partnerships must be established as well. But, the crucial aspect is the complexity of assessing the program. Berkowitz states that “whatever is assessed needs to reflect the aim of your initiative. Once there is agreement about the primary objectives...then evaluation [of the program] can be planned.”²⁹ He further offers three types of evaluation: process, outcome, and action.

Process evaluation considers the actual implementation of the initiative; specifically asking, “are you doing what you thought you were doing”? Outcome evaluation involves measuring the expected effects of a successful initiative. The critical aspect of this approach, however, is specifically knowing the intended and likely results of the precise components to be measured and utilizing the most effective instrument in the process. Such instruments are not plentiful and their construction and utilization will require much effort on the part of the academic community. This may very well prove to be the most problematic part of the evaluation process. Action evaluation is a variant of process evaluation, but is concerned with an initiative’s practical understanding of how it unfolds and its ensuing effects. In each of these cases, the evaluation process will require time, patience, and accuracy. It will also require collaboration in order to reduce bias and provide for a clear interpretation of the results.

Conclusion

We cannot expect our students to develop good character through wishful thinking or the hope that someone else will do it (though if we foolishly rely on the latter, the media will continue to step forward as the most influential institution). There are several influential spheres in this regard, each capable of making a positive or negative impact. An effective character education program will require an active partnership among those spheres. Each offers the potential for the outcome we seek and together they offer a nurturing environment toward full character development.

NOTES

1. H. Walberg and E. Wynne, “Character Education: Toward A Preliminary Consensus,” in Larry Nucci, ed., *Moral Development and Character Education* (Berkeley, Calif.: McCutchan Publishing, 1989), 27-47.
2. In this article, the terms character, morals, and values are used interchangeably; Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 51.
3. Ibid.; Thomas Lickona, *Character Matters: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).
4. M. Berkowitz, *A Primer for Evaluating Character Education Initiative* (Washington, D.C.: CEP, 1999), 4.
5. W. Huitt, “Moral and Character Development,” <http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/morchr/morchr.html>.
6. D. Purpel and K. Ryan, eds., *Moral Education: It Comes With The Territory* (Berkeley, Calif.: McCutchan, 1976); P. Miller and K. Kim, “Human Nature and the Development of Character: The Clash of Descriptive and Normative Elements in John Stuart Mill’s Educational Theory,” *Journal of Educational Thought* 22, no. 2 (1989): 133-44; Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character*, 37; B. David Brooks and Frank G. Goble, *The Case for Character Education* (Northridge, Calif.: Studio 4 Productions, 1997).

7. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1934).
8. C. Power, A. Higgins, and L. Kohlberg, "The Habit of Common Life: Building Character Through Democratic Community Schools," in Larry Nucci, ed., *Moral Development and Character Education* (Berkeley, Calif.: McCutchan, 1989), 177.
9. B. David Brooks and Frank G. Goble, *The Case for Character Education*.
10. Lowell Rose and Alec Gallup, "The Thirty-Third Annual Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Education," *Phi Delta Kappan* 83, no. 1 (September 2001): 41-58.
11. Thomas Lickona, *Character Matters*.
12. *Ibid.*, 20.
13. *Ibid.*, v.
14. C. Cunningham, "A Certain and Reasoned Art: The Rise and Fall of Character Education," <http://www.neiv.ecu/cunning/riseandfall.html>.
15. Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character*.
16. C. Haynes, "Character Education in the Public Schools," in C. Haynes, ed., *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, 1994), 3.
17. W. Huit, "Moral and Character Development."
18. Thomas Lickona, "A More Complex Analysis Is Needed," *Phi Delta Kappan* 79, no. 6 (1998): 449-54.
19. Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character*; B. David Brooks and Frank G. Goble, *The Case for Character Education*; Evelyn Holt, "Character Education," *ERIC Digest ED444932* (Bloomington, Ind.: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2000).
20. B. David Brooks and Frank G. Goble, *The Case for Character Education*.
21. Thomas Lickona, *Character Matters*.
22. Tony Sanchez and Randy Mills, "'Telling Tales:' The Teaching of American History Through Story-Telling," Manuscript submitted for publication (2004).
23. Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character*; Tony Sanchez, "It's Time Again for Heroes," *The Social Studies* 91, no. 2 (2000), 58-61.
24. Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character*.
25. H. Huffman, *Developing A Character Education Program* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1994).
26. Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character*; B. David Brooks and Frank G. Goble, *The Case for Character Education*.
27. Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character*.
28. James Leming, "Teaching Values in Social Studies: Best Practices and Trends," in B. Massialis and R. Allen, eds., *Crucial Issues in Teaching Social Studies* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1996).
29. M. Berkowitz, *A Primer for Evaluating Character Education Initiative*, 8.