

The Many Faces of Character Education

Before beginning, I want readers to understand my purpose in addressing this issue. Those of you who have read *Teaching in Mind*, my article on the [dangers of dichotomous thinking](#), or the article from the June newsletter on "[right and wrong](#)," already know that I support multiple perspectives—multiple alternatives rather than rigid "stances." In writing this article, I have provided a number of different viewpoints on character education. The only "position" I am taking is that each parent, each teacher, each person involved in the development of young people, has a personal responsibility for what they teach by reason of who they are and what they believe and value. Those lessons remain hidden unless we reflect on our own behavior and what motivates that behavior. The lessons remain "mindless"—and potentially detrimental to the development of "good" character—until they are brought into the light of day.

A second reason for writing the article is to point out the dangers of accepting "glittering generalities"—truth, justice, and the American Way! Many arguments both for and against character education are filled with such language. Because it appeals to our highest ideals, such language sometimes lulls people into unquestioned acceptance. *Virtue, good character, respect, and responsibility* are

part of that language. But so are the compelling anecdotes used by opponents—stories that tug at the heartstrings and move us to deplore the practices that produce such evils.

There is truth in each of these "positions." Becoming aware of the ways in which we can be manipulated by language is the first step in training ourselves to seek out alternative points of view, to tease the relevant information from each perspective, and to assemble the information into a workable whole. If character education interests you, I urge you to read the articles and visit the websites listed in the reference section. Gather your own information and draw your own conclusions. Although the examples mentioned in the story are about the United States, please transfer them to your own experience.

Character Education...Why Now?

"What is happening to our young people? They disrespect their elders, they disobey their parents. They ignore the law. They riot in the streets inflamed with wild notions. Their morals are decaying. What is to become of them?" ~Plato, 4th Century BC

Concerns about declining moral values, moral crises, and cultural degeneration have, as the quote indicates, existed since the earliest societies. Today, those concerns are fed by a media that chooses to focus the bulk of their attention on the worst that humanity has to offer—terrorism, pedophilia in those once perceived as models of morality,

corporate greed, and political scandal. It's easy to believe that the moral fiber that was once a hallmark of this and other nations has all but disappeared—that the damage is irreparable unless we undertake a major reweaving of the values and virtues that once characterized (at least in some history texts) this nation.

Having lived for many years in a "major media market" (Chicago), my initial reaction to the daily newspaper and nightly network news in the town of Missoula, Montana was "Huh???" Where are the sound bites from politicians? Where are the floods, famines, muggings, car bombings, and terrorist attacks that were the mainstay of the major market newspapers and nightly television news? Over time, I grew accustomed to stories about the work of Habitat for Humanity, the local shelter for homeless people, and the outpouring of help for families whose homes had burned or whose loved ones required more medical care than they could afford. I welcomed stories about local students who were doing significant research on local environmental issues, and organizing "proms" for senior citizens and neighborhood volunteer programs.

Certainly, there are daily stories of drug busts, deaths caused by drunk drivers, and spousal abuse. But the media in many small communities have chosen to focus the bulk of their attention on what's good about humanity, rather than what's bad. While you may fault them for their failure to report on the world's disasters, they seem content to leave those stories to media outlets that can afford to have correspondents around the world.

What is the real America? Are we morally bankrupt? Has our push for more individual rights and greater personal freedoms taught our children that their wants and needs are the only things that are important? Or are we in yet another period of moral and social upheaval similar to those in the 20s, 60s, and other decades? In hindsight, those periods resulted in huge advances in the rights of "minorities" such as women and African Americans. They also produced a populace that is more likely to question the decisions of their governmental representatives.

Some have suggested that, just as repeated violence on television and computer games may desensitize us to violence, the media focus on terrorist acts, corporate greed, and ethically reprehensible behavior may cause our young people to believe that "everyone" is doing it. What will convince them otherwise?

Whatever your sentiments, the present push toward character education gained momentum with the 1997 State of the Union address by President Clinton, in which he elevated character education to a national priority for public education. Many believed that, in addition to parents, public education was responsible for the moral and ethical development of society's young people. Despite the irony of the source, they now had a powerful ally. Although President Clinton's only direct recommendation at that time was requiring students to wear uniforms, governmental focus now gave credence to character education programs. Typing "character education" into a search engine

today rewards one with numerous sites containing everything from definitions of character education to programs and lesson plans. It should not come as a surprise there are as many different approaches and "definitions" as there are groups producing them!

One problem is that the basic issues surrounding moral/ethical development have not disappeared. Many people associate the term "moral" with religion. They are unwilling to even discuss the possibility of schools 'teaching' morals. So groups shift their vocabulary to *values*, *ethics*, or *virtues*. Sociologists have described the socialization of children as one of public education's primary purposes. It is difficult to understand how socialization into a particular society can be separated from the morals and ethical values of that society. Yet there are those who insist that schools have no place "imposing values" on students. More on that later.

Some "character education" programs insist that there are certain "virtues," such as wisdom, honesty, justice, respect, responsibility, and courage, that are universal—that cut across religious and cultural lines. Others question whether such virtues can exist in a country founded on ideas of religious and personal freedom—a society that has grown steadily more pluralistic in its values and beliefs.

There are those who fear that "The current fascination with character education will serve as political cover for the imposition of a particular cultural agenda, and return to narrow

indoctrinative pedagogy, rather than a flourishing of education practices and contexts likely to lead to genuine moral growth."¹ In fact, one character education program describes their work as follows: "Character education involves making our students knowledgeable about democratic principles, reflecting on what those principles mean to our country and its citizens, and developing and practicing traits necessary for leading humane and civilized lives. In its simplest form, character education is about instilling caring, civic virtue and citizenship, honesty, justice and fairness, respect, responsibility, and trustworthiness in our children."

On the surface that sounds very noble. But in practice, whose definition of "democratic principles" will be used? What does it mean to "instill" civic virtue and citizenship? Does it mean being obedient, patriotic, unquestionably supportive of our government? Or something entirely different?

What is Good Character?

In *Teaching in Mind*, I've written about how people often assume that words "mean" the same thing to everyone. Failure to begin by defining the terms with which a problem is stated often results in hopeless disagreement about solutions. For example, Betty Achinstein recently published a study in which she examined community-building efforts at two schools. She found that the teachers at one school saw education as the transmission of knowledge to increase participation in the status quo. Teachers at the other school believed education is a

means for transforming and improving society. To read a review of her book, visit [Teachers College Record](#) (free registration required).

In terms of character education, the "values" that each of these schools might adopt would be very different. Would the first school encourage students to question authority or to think creatively about how issues might be solved? Would the second school place the same emphasis on "civic virtue and obedience"? If public education focuses on "virtues" that maintain the status quo, where will the leaders of our social movements come from?

In his book, *How Children Fail*, John Holt said,

"Teachers and schools tend to mistake good behavior for good character. What they prize is docility, suggestibility; the child who will do what he is told; or even better, the child who will do what is wanted without even having to be told. They value in most children what children least value in themselves. Small wonder that their effort to build character is such a failure; they don't know it when they see it."

Whether you agree with Holt or not, his statement raises a valid question. How do we recognize "good character" when we see it? Doesn't it depend on our personal or cultural beliefs and values? For those of you who are fans of *Star Trek*, Worf and the Klingons equate *honor* with dying in battle. The Ferengi would see anyone who could successfully turn a profit,

regardless of their method, as having sterling character. Apparently, many of our corporate leaders share that perception. But we needn't look to aliens for our examples.

Courage is often mentioned as a virtue. Doesn't it take *courage* to rob a bank? Or is that something else? In some of our military academies, students are encouraged to exercise *loyalty* to their schools by reporting other students who cheat. Yet gang members use *loyalty* as their reason for not "squealing" on their friends. Some cultures perceive filial piety and honor as primary virtues. In others, chastity is prized. In the West, that word might "mean" sexual abstinence. What would it mean to a culture where multiple marriages are not only accepted, but necessary for survival?

Are there any "virtues" that all members of society would agree are unchanging, unambiguous, and universally required for "good" character? Are there any behaviors that are always in the best interest of the greater good? I suggest that what we call *respect, responsibility, honesty, justice, wisdom*, or any of those words we call virtues, do not exist "out there." They exist as constructs in human minds—individual humans minds. They are human "labels for complex gestalts of experience"² and are therefore, influenced by subjective interpretation.

I realize that I risk being accused of situational ethics when I say that. Obviously, members of a culture share a "sense" of what it means to be *honest, courageous, wise, and respectful*. However, we cannot ignore the

differences because they don't suit our personal definitions. By attempting to "teach" or "instill" virtues, encapsulate them into easily digested pills to cure socially unacceptable behaviors, we remain at risk of adopting a cure that is too simplistic to allow for all eventualities. How will students know when it is appropriate to question authority if we demand complete obedience to authority? How will they recognize injustice if it isn't one of the examples in the program and they are given no criteria or opportunity for judgment?

Should we forget about character education until the 'experts' sort out what it means to be a person of "good" character? Shall we go on our merry way until they decide whether character is a matter of values, morals, or ethics? Whether there are any "universal" qualities, such as *respect, responsibility, cooperation, fairness, justice, caring, or integrity* that schools have the responsibility to "teach" students?

How Teachers Teach Values

The truth is that teachers are already teaching values. They are already (largely unconsciously) modeling their own personal values, the values of the school culture, and the values of the larger society in which they live. Some character education programs insist that it is wrong to "impose one's values on students." They suggest helping students to identify and clarify their own values and insist that values can be good, bad, or neutral.

Can educators avoid "imposing their values on students"? The issue seems a

matter of semantics at best. When a school selects a textbook that focuses on the scientific discoveries of Darwin, Newton, and Galileo, with no mention of equally important discoveries from Egypt, Babylonia, China, or Africa, aren't they "imposing their values" on students? When teachers don't have time to "cover" everything in the textbook, they generally choose those concepts *they* consider more important or with which *they* feel more comfortable—in other words, subject that they *value* more highly for some reason.

Elliot Eisner suggests that what curriculum designers and/or teachers choose to leave out of the curriculum—the *null* curriculum—sends a covert message about what is to be valued. Sound bites and easily testable facts push big ideas to the background. Big ideas are too complex and have too many different perspectives to allow for efficient testing. Proven facts are to be valued. Big ideas are not.

The prevailing Western worldview—that the only valid way of solving problems of nature and man is science—is so much a part of Western thought that other options are not even considered. What is worse, the *product* of scientific discovery (easily testable again) is stressed, while the human *process* of scientific thought and discovery is reduced to the Scientific Method—a series of "steps" that can be memorized and for which check lists can be produced. Learning about the external world of objects and events is to be valued. Learning about the inner world of meaning and purpose is not.

Parker Palmer tells the story of a young man in one of his classes. Palmer had assigned a series of autobiographical essays related to themes in the text. The student asked if it would be alright for him to use the word "I" in his themes. "I'm a history major," he said, "and each time I use 'I' in a paper, they knock off half a grade."

Palmer goes on to say,

"In this culture, objective facts are regarded as pure while subjective feelings are suspect and sullied. In this culture, the self is not a source to be tapped but a danger to be suppressed, not a potential to be fulfilled but an obstacle to be overcome. In this culture, the pathology of speech disconnected from self is regarded, and rewarded, as a virtue. ...In a single stroke, we delude our students into believing that bad prose ['It is thought...' rather than 'I think...'] turns opinions into facts and we alienate ourselves from our inner life."³

Elliot Eisner argues that the "kind of place school is"—the environment itself—"may be among the most important lessons a child learns." Eisner explains that the design of schools, their sterile furnishings, and antiseptic quality "speak of efficiency more than they do of comfort...they express the values we cherish and...reinforce those values. Schools are educational churches, and our gods, judging from the altars we build, are economy and efficiency. Hardly a nod is given to the spirit."⁴

"The kind of place school is" heavily influences the behavior of both teachers and students. In too many schools, students learn that their interest in a subject is less important than keeping to a schedule or lesson plan, and that a consistent and unbending set of rules is more important than helping an individual student understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Fundamentally, students learn that they, as individuals, are relatively unimportant in the scheme of things. These are the values that are "imposed on students" in the implicit curriculum.

Can Character be Taught?

Values—ethical behavior—character—are not qualities that can be applied to students like a shiny new coat of paint. They cannot be "given" to students. They are complex internal processes that develop through feedback with the world. Some have even suggested that the only cardinal virtues are those that involve others. While ethical behavior can undoubtedly be "learned," I think it is worth asking ourselves whether it can be "taught."

Certainly, there are times when defining, describing, or discussing ethical behavior is valuable in helping children clarify their actions and understand more about themselves and their responsibility to others. But if you select one virtue you possess that you believe indicates your good character, how did you learn it? How did that virtue become incorporated into your behavior? How can we recreate those conditions for students?

In a 1997 article entitled "How Not to Teach Values," Alfie Kohn⁵ points out that that much of people's behavior reflects the situations in which they find themselves—their social environments. Competitive events foster aggression among competitors and, in some circumstances, riots among spectators. People who refuse to make eye contact with others in the big city will go to the aid of strangers after living for a time in a small town. Otherwise "moral" adults lose their unwillingness to inflict pain on others—or even to kill—when placed in a situation where that action appears to have positive consequences for themselves or others.

If we hope to influence and aid in the ethical development of students, what better way than to work toward creating an environment in which ethical behaviors are the norm, rather than the flavor of the week. Yes, there can be concerted efforts within a school to work toward that goal, but it requires more than wearing buttons saying "I Care," or posting "The Ten Commandments of Acceptable Behavior" on the cafeteria wall. What it comes down to is a commitment from every individual to live the virtues they purport to value in an ongoing way. And that begins with "Know thyself—and don't leave out the warts!"

The ability to peacefully resolve conflicts is often mentioned as a mark of good character. Yes, you can take students through the stages of conflict resolution—make them aware of alternatives to arguing, anger, name-calling, or violence—teach them to find an adult to help them. But the rubber hits the road

when you yourself must resolve some conflict within the classroom. How you do that is a much more profound lesson than any planned curricular offering.

Think of a virtue that you expect your students to exhibit. Do you possess that virtue? In what ways do you model that virtue for your students? Which of your behaviors demonstrates how a person who possesses that virtue acts? Many teachers "demand" respect from their students. The dictionary definition of *respect* includes *consideration for* and *courtesy to* others. Are there circumstances where you model disrespect rather than respect for your students? Is your definition of respect a one-way street?

Please don't take my words to an extreme that I do not intend. Yes, there will be times when punishment, reprimands, or overt discipline may be appropriate—but even then, students learn from the way the teacher responds. Maintaining respect for the *student* while responding appropriately to the *behavior* requires that teachers recognize the difference. Also keep in mind there are probably students for whom no amount of "right" behavior will change who and what they are.

Walking the Talk— Modeling Good Character

Character education programs deemed "successful" succeeded because the individual teachers lived the lessons they taught—they walked their talk. Teachers who urged children to care for one another consistently

demonstrated caring in their interactions with the children and other adults. It was more than an example—it was the way those teachers lived. It was part of who they were as human beings. We teach who we are.

We are all—students, teachers, administrators, and parents—human. We are all prone to human emotion and the need to maintain our own psychological equilibrium—sometimes acting in ways that are counter to our own self-image. Hopefully, each stumble gives us feedback that helps us make more effective choices the next time around. Students are no different. However, they are less experienced and often require even more feedback to "tune" their behavior.

Good character is not a state. It is an ongoing process in which each of us is engaged. Our students are just beginning their journey to self-knowledge. Let's immerse them in an environment in which they *experience* virtue in action in an ongoing way.

Character education is already going on daily in every school. As long as it remains an unconscious process, as long as we are unaware of the lessons we teach through our every action, we have little right to criticize students for failing to live up to some mythical ideal. To mindfully engage in helping students develop ethical behavior and good character, each of us must recognize the difference between the values we outwardly espouse and those that we live.

If we expect the same behavior of ourselves that we expect of students, we

create the environment in which that behavior becomes the norm. If we expect students to "stand" for something, on what issues are we willing to take a stand? If we expect students to exhibit courage, in what ways are we courageous? If we expect students to act justly, how just are our demands and decisions? Sounds a bit like the Golden Rule, doesn't it?

Character for What?

Educators presently expend tremendous amounts of time and energy on the execution of external mandates and government policies. There are those who go so far as to suggest that "big brother" has manipulated public education solely to maintain the status quo—to educate obedient citizens who will do what they are told without question, support whatever actions their leaders take, and provide a productive workforce to keep the nation's economy strong. They suggest that standards and the emphasis on tests are designed, not to improve the educational opportunities for all children, but to maintain a stable, but unthreatening, level of competence. Paraphrasing John Holt, if we keep them busy enough, they won't have time to think!

In this view, working to help students develop their unique potential—a goal that might be assessed by measuring individual progress rather than by comparing students to a standardized norm—is a threat to the status quo. If young people believed that they had the ability and power to change society, some insist it would lead to anarchy. Because it would be politically unpopular to say that

in so many words, those in power offer more benevolent reasons for practices that effectively eliminate opportunities for a true learner-centered education. And they support "virtues" that increase the likelihood of maintaining the status quo.

While this view may seem to smack of paranoia and conspiracy theory, there are some points that appear valid. Only recently, we've seen heated debates about what it means to be 'patriotic.' People who refuse to support government policy without question are branded 'unpatriotic' by those who insist we must support our government or risk appearing weak. In their own minds, the questioners are exhibiting the highest form of patriotism and fully engaging in the democratic process. On the one hand, we praise those who took a stand against a tyrannical rule in 1776, while at the same time condemning those who take a similar stand today.

"Fixing" kids? "Fixing" society? Or Both?

There are no easy answers to the moral/ethical issues that face our society. But solutions based on unexamined assumptions may be less valuable than time spent asking the hard questions. One of those assumptions is that by "fixing the kids," we will return to what many remember as being a saner time. But wouldn't we also have to return to every other factor that influenced those times? Back to the future? The efforts to "fix kids" does, however, divert attention from fixing the problems of the society—the environment in which those children learn their most basic lessons.

If it's true that our behavior depends largely on the social environment in which we live, how do we explain the behavior of corporate executives whose "values" include lining their own pockets at the expense of stockholders? What do we value more highly that keeps us from labeling that behavior as grand theft and prosecuting these people to the limit of the law? What values supersede the virtue of honesty? And what lessons do our children learn about exceptions to so-called virtuous behavior?

Is this truly moral decay or is it a cycle that must reach it's most repugnant before the "virtuous" people in society have had enough and there is a rising tide of dissent that eventually leads to new definitions and demands for ethical behavior among our economic, political, and religious leaders. Keep in mind that it was once considered virtuous for rich white plantation owners to provide housing, clothing, food, and work for poor, ignorant members of humanity who could never have aspired to such lives on their own. It was once considered virtuous (and in some quarters still is) to convert "heathen savages" and put them on the "right" path—by force if necessary! What happened to change those virtues into evils?

As I stated at the beginning, I've raised these issues, not to point anyone to a particular point of view, but to warn against unquestioned acceptance of "glittering generalities." Policies couched in "truth, justice, and the American way" rhetoric discourage dissenters because

they sound so inherently "good." However, I would encourage everyone involved in the education of our young people—everyone who is concerned about the kind of world those young people will create—to open a dialogue, not about what we *should* be teaching, but about what we *are* teaching. It would be wonderful if everyone would agree to such a dialogue. But their failure to do so is no excuse for inaction on the part of each individual. Teachers never know how a single word, a single action, will play out in the future. One person can and does make a difference.

References

- 1 Helwig, C, Turiel, E, and Nucci, L. (1997). Character Education After the Bandwagon Has Gone. <http://www.tigger.uic.edu/~lnucci/MoralEd/articles/helwig.html>
- 2 Lawley, J. and Tompkins, P. (2001) *Metaphors in Mind: Transformation Through Symbolic Modeling*. London: The Developing Company.
- 3 Palmer, Parker J. (Nov./Dec. 1997). The Heart of a Teacher; Identity and Integrity in Teaching. *Change*
- 4 Eisner, Elliot (1994). *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*, 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan College Publishing, 96-97
- 5 Kohn, Alfie (Feb, 1997) How Not To Teach Values, *Phi Delta Kappan*, p 429-439

Web Resources: Character Education

These are links to articles that raise questions about the present state of "Character Education." To prepare you to study the other sites more carefully, it is suggested that you read these articles first.

[Character Education After the Bandwagon Has Gone](#)

[How Not to Teach Values: A Critical Look at Character Education](#)

The following links lead to websites that offer various information and programs in character education.

[The Character Education Partnership](#)

[Good Character.com](#)

[Center for the Fourth and Fifth Rs \(SUNY Cortland, NY\)](#)

And from the same site, links to programs that are deemed "successful" in Character Education. You may wish to read these with the question, "At what were they successful?" And if you believe they were "successful" in their stated goal, what was responsible for that success?

<http://www.cortland.edu/character/successhome.html>

[Institute for Global Ethics](#)

[The Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character \(CAEC\) at Boston University](#)