The Inevitability of Character Education

by Dr. Kevin Ryan

In recent years, efforts at character formation in public schools have been a matter of concern for both parents and educators. Some parents see a school's efforts to shape the character of their children as an overreach of the schools mandate. Others are anxious for the schools to help them with what they see as a primary responsibility. Educators, on the other hand, are split over a different set of issues. Many teachers see the formation of their students' character as the core reason behind their vocation to teach. At the other end of the spectrum of attitudes are those teachers who insist that character education is simply not in their job-description. Most can claim rightly that they haven't been prepared for a role as character educator and that they are already burdened by the demand of delivering their curriculum. Some insist that character education is just the latest in a long line of educational fads that are distracting them and their students from their essential academic mission.

While there is something to be said for all these positions and points, the last one, that "character education is the latest in a long line of fads, is, however, a profound misreading of history. The formation of a child's character has been a preoccupation of parents and the community from the dawn of civilization. It is integral to our social survival mechanism. We need the next generation of students to be able to live and function in our communities, learning to follow the rules and traditions of our ordered democracy, as well as passing them on to the next generation.

This was clearly the intention of the early settlers in Massachusetts. Having left "civilization," and huddling in small villages like Dorchester, Roxbury and Concord, they worried about what was to happen to their children. They were living in a strange and hostile world, surrounded by dark forests and pagan and often hostile savages. Fully occupied with the demands of sheer survival and struggling to make a living in their new world, they had little time for what we now call "home schooling." In the current parlance, they decided to "outsource" the education of their children and establish state-supported schools. Massachusetts citizens were the first to establish tax-supported schools. In 1642, the colony's

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Center for
School Reform

June
2016

governing body passed a law that each village of over 50 families must tax it selves, hire a teacher and establish a school for its children.

The name of the legislation is the key to the colonists' motivation: The Olde Deluder Satan Act. Their concern was that their children were growing up with no moral core, no check on their selfishness and their passions. In particular, the children's illiteracy kept them ignorant of the Bible and without access to the Bible, they were vulnerable to the snares of Satan. The primary raison d'être for the establishment of state-supported [public] education was the formation of positive, self-governing character, albeit using religion as the primary means.

This same concern for the morality of future citizens was very much on the minds of the Founding Fathers who were launching their new nation on a radical and dangerous path: democracy. A government that gave equal power to the dim and the bright, the skilled and unskilled, property owner and the poor had been (and in some quarters still is) considered by political philosophers as doomed. While the Constitution is silent about education, the leading Founders Fathers were convinced that schools where necessary to raise the masses up to the demands of self-government. If common men were to vote on laws, elect the right individuals to governing positions and in the courts to pass judgments of one another, they needed education. They needed schools, not just for literacy and numeracy, but to acquire the moral virtues necessary for a democratic citizenry: among them self-control, consideration of others, perseverance, and a sense of right and wrong.

Schools flourished in our new nation. Educators had a clear mandate to teach biblical and democratic virtues, many of which are overlapping. The community wanted children who were truth-tellers, kind and considerate of others and personably responsible for their actions. However, as the country has evolved from being overwhelmingly Protestant to our current state of a mix of many religions with a solid core of non-religious citizens, religion has been all but removed from public education. Still, however, the virtues supporting a democratic republic are needed

and the traditional vehicle to transmit those virtues, the public schools, has been confused and tepid in its response.

While some public schools have given the merest lip-service to character education, many have made an effort, in some cases a major effort, to teach and promote character education.

Character Education in the 21st Century

For over thirty years, educators and program developers have tried various methods to infuse positive character education in public schools. Recently, the Institute of Education Sciences, the research arm of U.S. Department of Education, issued a long-awaited report on the effectiveness of seven of the nation's most popular and widely used character education programs. The study involved over 6,000 elementary school students and followed them from the time they entered the 3rd grade until exiting the 5th grade. The researchers tested for twenty possible outcomes focused on academic and behavioral outcomes. The bottom line is that none of the programs did what they said they would do.

To say that the programs' sponsors and the nation's advocates for character education are disappointed would be a major understatement. The so-called "Character Education Movement," which began over a quarter of a century ago with high hopes, appears to be grinding to a slow trot. However, it is fair to say that before the alarming results of the aforementioned study were released, the attention and energies of front-line educators was forced elsewhere. Specifically, to improving academic achievement scores in mathematics, science, and English language arts. Politicians and power brokers, worried by the embarrassing academic achievement scores of American students compared to those of our trading parents, sent a strong signal to the education community: "At all costs, get those mathematics, science and reading scores up or else." Teacher training institutions and in-service teacher education focused almost manic attention on "academic achievement." What is seen by many as the strong

link between academic achievement and the virtues of perseverance and responsibility was ignored. The fledgling character education movement was pushed back into the shadows.

Another reason for the disappointing results from this research reports on the effectiveness of various character education programs can be traced to confusion about the very central focus of the effort: character. Once upon a time in the United States when someone spoke of another's character, the listener had a rather clear understanding of what was meant. In recent decades that situation may still be true, but not in the academy, particularly within the psychological subgroup. The social science discipline of psychology is relatively new as a field of study, but it has had a profound influence on culture, popular and otherwise. It came to prominence around the turn of the 20th century with the work of Freud and Adler, who were replaced in prominence by a succession of psychologists, including Thorndike, Stack Sullivan, Piaget, B.F. Skinner, Maslow, Carl Rogers, Jerome Bruner and a multiplicity of others. Whether articulated or not, each had an understanding of what a human person is and what is the internal mechanism by which he should guide his life.

Regrettably, these various theories of what it means to be a human, each of which was popular for a time, have little in common. And since the discipline of psychology has had such a huge impact on educational theory, teacher education and classroom practice, the field of education is imbued to a larger or lesser degree with bits and pieces from this spectrum of views. Thus, when it comes to the practical question of how a school system or an individual teacher should intervene in the life of a student (if he or she should at all!) there is no clarity about how to proceed. Nor usually is there serious discussion about the question "who and what is a person?" The possible results of this multiplicity of conceptions and lack of addressing such fundamental metaphysical questions are the following: Withdrawal and rejection of engaging in character education, and/or embracing and implementing character educations programs and materials with no real understanding of their psychological and philosophical foundations

Over the last 30 years, my research has witnessed the rise and fall of character education programs based on these often competing theories and their promises of real-world results, programs such as values clarification, behavior modification, cognitive moral education, positive psychology, social and emotion education and several others. Rarely, if ever, do the advocates reveal up front the conception of character upon which their theories rest. The result, therefore, of trying to provide a solid, empirically robust evaluation of these programs has proved, as the study referred to above confirms, elusive. Someone once described the problem of evaluating change in character as trying to nail Jell-o to a wall.

Could it be that the entire character education movement has been dominated by a flawed understanding of what human nature is and is not? Could it be that what is being taught in the name of character education in U.S. schools has little to do with human character as it is known "on the street" and has been with us since the time of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle? And, could it be that the army of psychologists and measurement specialists who have been testing for "character" are like hunters armed with elephant guns stalking the tsetse fly?

The experimental method, which is at the heart of contemporary educational testing and evaluation, is a marvelous tool. And, it clearly works well in many educational settings. It can be quite useful in measuring which students learned how much from an arithmetic method or a particular reading program. It can show the results of a school district's anti-obesity program in a quite concrete manner: pounds and ounces. But human character is different, and there's the rub.

A third grade girl may read a story of the courageous exploits of Harriet Tubman, the 19th Century, run-away slave, and experience a profound change in mind and heart. She may even forget the story, but maintain an understanding of what personal nobility consists, an understanding that may not be actualized until she is an adult and is confronted with an opportunity for heroic action. Or, a fifth grade boy, who has been unaffected by three years of the

character education program, may be touched by the compassion of his teacher who goes out of her way to help him catch up with the other students. Later as a college sophomore, he unexpectedly thinks of her kindness and decides to devote his life to teaching. Or, a pair of fourth graders energetically responds to Character Education Program "X" and they start competing hammer and tongs for the gold stars, and hook themselves on a diet of competitive rewards that leads them straight to the executive suite at Hedge Fund USA. The point being labored here is that human character is not mathematics or reading. It rarely can be attributed to a particular program or measured by a test. The beauty of the study described in this volume is its modesty and care in the face of the complexity of helping students to acquire good character.

A Meaning of Character

There are many competing definitions of "character." My dictionary offers, "The complex of mental and ethical traits and markings often individualizing a person, group or nation." Another definition states that our character is the sum total of our unique cluster of virtues and vices. In the 6th Century B.C., Confucius is said to have captured both the meaning and the process of character education in a short poem:

> Sow a thought. Reap an action.
>
> Sow an action. Reap a habit.
>
> Sow a habit. Reap a character.
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> Sow a character. Reap a destiny.

The key word in this poem is "habit." Classically understood, character, then, is about habits, our dispositions to act in certain ways and our actual behavior. Our characters consist of our habits, that is, our virtues and our vices. A focus on students' virtues and vices, once a staple of American schools, has given way in recent years to more trendy terms and the plethora of social science constructs referred to above. As suggested by the Institute of Education Science's report, it does not appear that this new initiative has improved the character of America's youth.

Another useful way to capture the meaning of "character" is to inspect the word's root meaning: to engrave. Think of engraving on a wax tablet or a gemstone or on a metal surface. Acquiring good character, then, is a matter of engraving certain habits, certain regular and consistent ways of behaving. A person who is honest has acquired the habit of responding to life's situations in a consistent matter. For instance, if a person with the habit of honesty comes across a fat wallet in the aisle of a department store, it is not a matter of going through a long process of weighing alternatives: "Should I go into the lavatory, take the money and credit cards and get rid of the wallet, or pick it up and take it to the Service Desk, or walk right by it and avoid the hassle?" No. The honest person knows what to do and acts. He has a habitual response. He has the virtue of honesty.

The poem contains an implicit call to each of us to act, to direct our heads, hearts and hands in a particular direction: to sow. And this is followed by a promise, a promise echoed by wise observers of human nature for centuries: "If you work hard to develop virtuous habits, there will be a payout. There will be results."

The 'How" of Character Education

Human beings have free will. Ultimately, people do what they want. The folk wisdom "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink," is as true in the Age of the Internet as it was in Colonial America. Every parent knows this, as does every teacher. Their essential job as educators, especially as educators of character, is to intervene in the lives of children to make a positive difference. In particular, six activities or actions appear to be effective in bringing about that positive difference. The actions are represented by six words—six "E-words."

Example: The great Anglo-Irish parliamentarian, Edmund Burke, once wrote, "Example is the school of mankind, and they will learn at no other." "No other" was a bite of an overstatement, but as a species, the primary way we learn is by example, by imitation of others. As opposed to the other animals on our planet, human being come into existence with very few habits. Humans watch and we imitate.

One of the built-in burdens of being a teacher is that they are always on display to students. If teachers are harsh in responding to a student, they learn from that. If teachers gossip about one another, it is noted. If teachers do our work conscientiously or carelessly, they take that in. In essence, that is why school officials and principals carefully scrutinize new teachers because they know teachers, *de facto*, are models for their students.

However, the entire burden of exemplifying good character does not fall on teachers. One of the major motivations behind the English language arts and history curricula is to present models of good and bad example, to see virtue and vice in action and see the consequences. It starts with stories like the *Three Little Pigs* and ends with the tortured and complex decision making of President Harry Truman about whether to drop the first atom bomb. The task of the teacher is not to merely "cover the material," but to engage the students with the moral or immoral activities that reside in the text: "How did they behave and what were the consequences on them and those around them."

Explanation: Example is powerful, but it is rarely sufficient. To enhance students' understanding of the human condition and our history, teachers need to offer explanations. They need to understand virtues and vices. Teachers need to explain them and teach students how to acquire them. For instance, for many students, the failure to make friends is enormously painful. There are skills involved with making a friend and teachers should be ready to explain them. Teachers need to explain these virtues and how those virtues advance human happiness. Teachers also need to explain the rules of civilized life, from simple rules like why students aren't allowed to run in the school halls to why sexting is so destructive. This can often be the most exhausting part of teaching: explaining one more time why students need to raise their hands to be called on to speak, instead of all talking at once. Learning such seemingly simple rules is, in fact, the necessary social glue of a good society.

Exhortation: Good character is not only achieved by example and explanation but also by inspiration. As someone once said, "A mediocre teacher tells, a good teacher explains, a superior teacher demonstrates; but a great teacher inspires." Inspiration--moving students to want to become better—is key to moral growth. Although students have human reason, often it functions poorly. An unruly and disorganized student is unmoved by a teacher's careful explanation of how he can pull himself together and get back on track. However, the exhortation of a teacher who truly cares for him can move him out of his rut. Particularly with the young, inspiration wins where "sweet reason" is all-too-often a total failure.

Ethos: Schools vary enormously in their ethical environment or ethos. Some schools radiate warmth and caring. Others are permeated with antagonism. In some, students are busy and task oriented, and in others, the opposite is true, wherein students demonstrate their creativity in work avoidance. In some, cheating is the norm. In others, it is a rare and scandalous event. These environments don't just happen by accident. Schools with a positive ethos affect the characters of their students. For instance, a program where older students help younger students, can go a long way towards instilling good habits in students. For good or ill, the moral climate of a school is created. These environments are typically the result of the conscious decisions and long and hard efforts of the school's professionals, from administrators to kitchen help. They set standards and then assiduously monitor them and aid students in their efforts to live by them.

Expectations of Excellence: Studies by the Public Agenda Foundation and others report that many students, particularly high school students, find their schools "unchallenging," noting, "how little work they have to do to gain good grades," and, "how boring and meaningless their classes are." While this may be shocking news to teachers who find their students inattentive and unresponsive to even their best lessons, the fact remains. Nevertheless, most students can do more, and they *want* to be challenged. Socrates refers to this latent "power to learn…present in everyone's soul." It is a common experience to

hear college students and adults talking about their experiences in elementary and high school and praising the teachers who refuse to accept work that doesn't represent their best effort. At the time, they may not have liked or loved that teacher, but now they cherish his or her memory. They contributed to their characters by trying to establish the habit of doing their best work, the habit of reaching for excellence.

Engagement: Throughout this list of factors that contribute to a teacher and a school community's ability to enrich the character of students, there has been one crucial ingredient. That is the engagement, the embracing, of the student in his own transformation. The student who does not engage in his or her improvement is, again, like that stubborn horse refusing water.

To make a sustaining and positive change, students needs to fall in love with a different version of themselves. It is the initial and necessary step in forming their own character. Teachers, of course, should support them in their efforts. But engaging that new person, that new self, and accepting the fact that only they are capable of making the necessary change is fundamental. Real character education, then, is convincing students that virtues and the acquisition of good habits, are the true road to human happiness and a flourishing life.

But whether a teacher or a school chooses to embrace their historical mission and responsibility as educators of character, the fact remains: their students are at a critical time in their lives. They will form good and bad habits, virtues and vice, that will affect their futures in profound ways. For educators, character formation, again, for good or ill, is built into the fabric of the school experience. It is not a matter of choice. It is inevitable.