

What's Right and Wrong in Character Education Today Why Three Advocates Are Worried About the Character Education Movement

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We are advocates for character education. We believe that character education (CE) is essential to students' future success and also to a healthy, humane society. And so we are heartened that CE is now getting its due after decades of being slighted.

But we are concerned about, and critical of, what many are doing in the name of character education. Well-intentioned as these efforts may be, we believe that they will make little difference for students, and thus may soon discredit the entire field. Moreover, they can easily distract us from what really matters in helping students to become caring, principled, and responsible.

Character development is not a simple matter. One's character develops over time and is formed in many ways. One way is through exposure to the actions and attitudes of others, particularly those whom we have come to care about and trust. Another is through engaging in moral action such as service to others. A third way is through open, considered dialogue about the complexities of moral situations and about alternative responses to those situations. On the other hand, there is little evidence that moralizing to children or giving them direct instruction in moral principles has much effect.

The essential challenge for educators is to help students *want* to grow as moral beings, and to equip them with the internal resources to act effectively on that desire. It's not enough to ask students to become polite and law abiding. Educators also need to help them develop a deep regard for themselves *and* for others. To develop an abiding commitment to the core values of justice and caring. And to commit to living by and speaking up for what they believe, but also to hearing, understanding, and accommodating the beliefs of others.

Unfortunately, too many programs that say they are developing character and call themselves "character education" are aimed mostly at promoting good manners and compliance with rules, not at

developing students of strong, independent character. What are these problematic CE programs? They are generally of four varieties: "cheerleading," "praise-and-reward," "define-and-drill," and "forced formality." Often these approaches are used in combination with one another.

The cheerleading variety of CE is easy to spot. It involves multi-colored posters, banners, and bulletin boards featuring a value or virtue of the month; lively morning public address announcements; occasional motivational assemblies; and possibly a high-profile event such as a fundraiser for a good cause. The underlying thinking seems to be that if exposed to a steady diet of upbeat character messages, students will become committed to doing right and doing good.

The praise-and-reward approach seeks to make virtue into habit in the same way that B.F. Skinner used food pellets to shape the behavior of rats and pigeons. "Positive reinforcement" is its mainstay, often in the form of "catching students being good" and praising them or giving them chits that can be exchanged for privileges or prizes. Another hallmark is awards assemblies, during which a few selected students are publicly extolled for being, say, particularly helpful or courteous. In this approach, all too often, the real significance of the students' actions is lost as the reward or award becomes the primary focus.

In the define-and-drill approach, students are called on to memorize a list of values and the definition of each. Teachers quiz students: "Class, what do we mean by honesty? Respect? Integrity?" in the same manner that they ask, "What's eight times seven? Four times nine?" Here students' simple memorization of definitions seems to be equated with their development of the far more complex capacity and disposition to do the good.

In the forced formality approach, a school focuses its CE efforts on strict, uniform compliance with specific rules of conduct. It may emphasize, for example, certain kinds of hall behavior (e.g., walking in lines, arms at one's sides), or formal forms of address (e.g., "yes sir," "no ma'am"), or other procedures deemed to promote order or respect (e.g., standing when any adult enters the room).

These four approaches may well produce certain limited benefits, such as calling attention to matters of character or bringing some order to a chaotic environment. But they will not yield deep and enduring effects on character. They aim for quick behavioral results rather than helping students to better understand and commit to the values that are core to our society, or helping them to develop the

skills for putting those values into action in life's complex situations.

So what does “work”? Most fundamentally, schools must engage and inspire students' hearts as well as their minds, and this requires that schools get better at meeting students' basic, legitimate needs—their needs for safety, belonging, competence, and autonomy. A solid body of research shows that human beings are disposed to affiliate with those who meet these basic needs, and students will bond to a school in the same way, and for the same reasons, that infants bond to mothers who capably provide for them. In other words, students will care about a school's goals and values when that school effectively cares for them. Moreover, when they feel connected to a school and the people in it, they learn better.

And so the best forms of character education are those that enlist students as active, influential participants in creating a caring and just environment in the classroom and in the school at large. The challenge is for the school to become a microcosm in which students practice age-appropriate versions of the roles—and face the related challenges—they must face in later life. The goal is a total school culture in which all people in the school, including teachers, administrators, and support staff as well as students, treat one another with kindness and respect.

The best forms of character education also involve students in honest, thoughtful discussion and reflection regarding the moral implications of what they see around them, what they are told, and what they personally do and experience. When guided by a trusted adult, these opportunities to talk and think about social and ethical matters enable every student to come to a clearer, stronger sense of “what really matters” and “who do I want to be.”

Finally, a school must work to see that the goals and values it professes are embodied in what it does—that its policies and procedures reflect the values it wants its students to embrace. Its discipline policies must be fair and humane. It must deploy its resources equitably. It must ensure that accomplishments of many kinds are honored, so that it is not just the most academically and athletically gifted students who are recognized.

More specifically, we suggest several concrete approaches that have considerable potential for creating "caring communities of learners" in schools and classrooms, and thereby fostering all aspects of students' growth:

- Class meetings in which students, with the teacher's help, get

opportunities to set class goals and ground rules, plan activities, assess their progress, and solve common problems.

- Ethics-rich academic classes in which students go beyond facts and skills to consider the moral and social implications of what they are learning, most obviously in social studies and literature but also in the sciences and the arts.
- Cooperative learning groups in which students collaborate on academic tasks and have regular opportunities to plan and reflect on the ways they work together.
- Buddies programs that regularly bring together whole classes of younger and older students to work one-on-one on academic, service, and recreational activities.
- Inclusive whole-school events involving students and their families at school in ways that capitalize on their diverse backgrounds and personal experiences, such as “family heritage week” or a “family hobbies fair.”
- Service learning opportunities inside and outside the school that enable students to contribute to the welfare of others and to reflect on their experiences doing so.

When implemented well, these community-building approaches to character education become an integral part of a school’s overall improvement efforts. They intentionally and seamlessly are woven into the school’s pedagogy and its daily routines. They are *not* regarded as add-ons, as in “Now it’s time for our character education activity of the day.”

We urge the adoption of these and other community-building approaches. Done well, these approaches can yield a broad set of desirable outcomes, ranging from enhanced interpersonal competence to improved academic motivation and performance to reduced drug abuse and school violence. But we caution that, like any educational activity, these approaches can be done badly, even so badly as to be no more effective than the approaches we criticized earlier. In summary, the path to improved character education must be marked by more discerning choices regarding type of approach, coupled with an unrelenting focus on quality implementation.

Character education ought not to be seen as a threat to the nation’s current emphasis on academics. In fact, CE can help to achieve

academic goals. Educators report that literature, social studies, and even science become more interesting to students when they can focus on social and ethical issues embedded in subject matter. And they report that focusing on such issues leads students to a deeper level of engagement and understanding of the curricular content we want them to master.

Citizens need academic knowledge to function and prosper in this society. But a society that prepares its citizenry by emphasizing academics at the expense of ethical, social, and emotional development will not be healthy for long. As the founding constitution of the Phillips Exeter Academy had it in 1781:

"...(T)hough goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous; both united form the noblest character, and lay the surest foundation of usefulness to mankind."

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