



# **SHARED VISION:**

## **A Philosophy Paper on the Character Education Movement for Teacher Education Programs**

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**CHARACTER  
EDUCATION  
PARTNERSHIP**

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### *A Diverse Field*

*There is a pressing need in our nation's schools to not only foster the intellectual and academic growth of our children, but also to renew our commitment to helping them develop into citizens of good character- individuals that will positively contribute to the democracy in which we live. This is important work and requires teachers to be well prepared for this comprehensive type of education. Character development must be an integral part of the undergraduate and graduate training of teachers and educators, but there are significant differences in philosophical approaches, making it difficult for institutions to know where to begin. The purpose of this paper is to highlight and focus on the common ground of these approaches while acknowledging their differences. In addition, this paper seeks to clarify the meaning of key terms as the Character Education Partnership defines them.*

## WHAT IS CHARACTER EDUCATION?

### *Multiple Perspectives*

One conception of character education involves the transmission of a culture's core ethical values and moral wisdom while inspiring the young to commit to leading a virtuous life. It is about "developing virtues (good habits and dispositions that lead students to responsible and mature adulthood" (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999). Other approaches to character education focus on the building of just or moral communities that support the development of students' moral reasoning and their commitment to the virtues that hold a community together, such as trust, care, and responsibility (DeVries & Zahn, 1994; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Some approaches emphasize the role of caring relationships, the importance of developing moral sentiments, and strengthening the capacity for empathy (Noddings, 2002; Watson, 2003). Others in various ways stress democratic values and civility, and focus on creating democratic or moral communities (Battistich, Solomon, Watson & Schaps 1997; Etzioni, 1993; Sodor, Goodlad, & McMannon, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1994). Still others focus on the hidden curriculum, arguing that good character in youth is primarily acquired through a kind of moral apprenticeship with teachers of good character (Fenstermacher, 1999; Hansen, 1995).

### *Common Ground*

Character education and moral education are two different terms used to describe a variety of school-based approaches to helping young people develop their capacity to be good people and good citizens. For decades, many

educators have made a clear distinction between moral education and character education, viewing them as mutually exclusive or even conflicting approaches to helping young people grow up to be good citizens and principled, caring, and virtuous adults [See for example, *Moral Education and Character Education: A Dialogue* (Nucci, 1989).] From the perspective of the Character Education Partnership, the term “character education” applies to a wide set of educational approaches variously labeled “moral education” or “character education,” and will be used to reflect the multiple approaches. It should be considered an inclusive term rather than an exclusive one.

While different approaches to character education hold divergent views of the origins of good character and the key conditions needed to support its growth and expression, they also overlap in important ways. Even though they may emphasize different aspects of the educational program as central to helping students develop into good people, there is substantial consensus about the necessary conditions for effective character education. These areas of consensus relate to the goals, the pedagogical techniques and the general background conditions needed for schools to be a positive force in their students’ character development.

### ***The Goals of Character Education***

All the major approaches to character education see moral development as a central component to the educational mission of schools. They also agree that character education in schools should be implemented, in so far as possible, in partnership with parents. Each approach asserts that all aspects of the school (the curriculum, the organizational structure,

the discipline system, the norms for interpersonal interactions, and the moral character of teachers and other school personnel (have the potential to affect for good or for ill students’ moral development.

Different approaches emphasize the importance of different values, virtues or dispositions. Some, for example Lickona (1989) and Ryan and Bohlin (2000), stress, self control, responsibility, and hard work; others focus on justice and fairness (Kohlberg, 1963) and still others focus on caring, empathy, and cooperation (Battistich et al, 1997, Noddings (1992, 2002). CEP uses the term “core values” to incorporate the important attributes listed by these different approaches. For all approaches, developing good character is not about building a commitment to following rules or doing what one is told, it is about building a moral identity (a deep internal commitment to core values). This commitment, ultimately, reflects a strong sense of responsibility to community and to a greater good than simply concern for oneself, as well as a strong desire to act on that commitment.

### ***The Pedagogical Techniques***

While different approaches to character education place greater emphasis on one pedagogical approach or another, most agree that a variety of major pedagogical techniques have a place in character education. These include:

- modeling and exposure to moral exemplars
- conversation, dialogue, and reflection
- practice with opportunities to role play as well as act in caring, virtuous or principled ways

- adult guidance and scaffolding
- direct instruction or explanation about the role of core values in the classroom and in life.

Some approaches include rewards and awards to encourage desirable behavior, accentuate core values, or celebrate growth and success in character development. Others, out of a strong conviction that children must take ethical or moral actions because they believe it is the right thing to do, do not advocate rewards. They believe in tapping students' intrinsic motivations so that their actions stem from moral conviction and identity. Yet, all approaches accentuate the importance of confirmation or affirmation of the moral or virtuous achievements of students.

All pedagogical approaches agree that effective character education in schools must be intentionally integrated into every aspect of school life and into all subject areas, particularly language arts and social studies. For example, some approaches focus on the use of literature to foster critical thinking and to build student understanding of moral situations and moral principles, some focus on the use of literature to provide moral exemplars, and others focus on the power of narrative to build students' capacity for empathy and role-taking. However, there is general consensus that literature is valuable for all these reasons and that teachers should use the language arts curriculum not just to teach reading, literature comprehension, and analysis, but also to help students build their character. Likewise, from the perspective of all approaches, exploring with students the moral issues involved in the study of history, geography, civic education, and science is likely to more deeply engage students in these curriculum areas as well as further the development of their character.

There is also general agreement that students need guided opportunities to interact with one another and to form friendships. For example, sports, playground games, and cooperative learning groups are abundant with opportunities to support or undermine students' character development, and there is general agreement that teachers should intentionally and actively use these situations to help students develop awareness of the moral dimensions of their social behavior.

### *Discipline and Classroom Management*

Classroom and school discipline represents the way teachers respond to misbehavior and redirect students' interests and energy toward worthy goals. Classroom management involves the structures and organization teachers establish to support students' learning and good behavior. How one manages the classroom and disciplines students has significant impact on their character development. While proponents of all approaches to character education concur that students need to learn to be responsible, to appreciate the need for the school and classroom rules, and to treat others with kindness and respect, there is less agreement about what to do when students fail to do so. Some approaches focus on having high expectations and on holding students responsible for their actions, and others on helping students understand why their actions are incompatible with their best selves or with the good of the community. In short, some approaches favor the use of consequences or punishments to help students understand the seriousness of their misbehaviors and assume responsibility for themselves. Other approaches avoid or limit the use of punishment, focusing instead on building empathy, helping students understand the

effects of their actions on others and working with students to prevent future harmful behaviors.

Still, all approaches favor allowing students sufficient autonomy to grow in their ability to govern themselves and all advocate helping students understand the reasons, moral or practical, behind classroom and school rules or procedures. All emphasize the importance of treating each person with respect and care, and all concur that students need structure in the form of guidance, support or limits. From the perspective of character education, classroom discipline and management should be focused on helping students understand the moral and practical reasons why they should treat others with care and respect and refrain from doing harm. Depending on the perspective, student misbehaviors provide contextualized opportunities to assist students in learning the importance of core values in their own development as well as for the good of their immediate community. There is general consensus within the different approaches to character education that discipline, while often focused on controlling student behavior to prevent chaos or harm, is more important, an opportunity for teachers' to support their students' character development.

### ***The Overall Classroom Environment and The Hidden Curriculum***

Perhaps the strongest consensus among different approaches to character education is a belief in the power of the school and classroom environment to foster students' character development. Whether these environments are described as communities of virtue, moral classrooms, just communities, or caring communities, there is general agreement that

careful attention to building the school and classroom community is essential to building an effective character education initiative. For character education to be effective, it is essential that the everyday practices of the school and classroom be consistent with the core values advocated by the character education initiative. Students will not learn to value equity if only the academically high-performing students receive special privileges. They will not learn to care for their fellow students if they are constantly forced into competition with them for awards or teacher acknowledgment, and they will not learn respect in classrooms where teachers ridicule or embarrass them with sarcastic remarks.

Similarly, from the perspective of all major approaches to character education, teachers, at least while they are in the classroom, must themselves exhibit good character. Different approaches may express this differently. For some, it is essential to care for every student (e.g., Noddings, 1992, 2002). For others, it is essential to "take all students seriously as persons" (e.g., Tigner, 1999). For those, like Noddings, who approach character education from an ethic of care, establishing caring relationships in the classroom is at the very core, for it is from the experience of care that the desire to care for others emerges. For some character educators, the motivation to act with virtue springs from a love of virtue, and for others from the imperative of a universal moral principle, but for all it is essential that teachers, if they are to be effective, must work hard at their jobs, take responsibility for their actions, exercise moral authority, and treat all students in caring and respectful ways.

## *Implications for Schools of Education*

There is considerable support from parents, the general community and from leading educators that schools should intentionally foster students' character development (e.g., see Character Education Partnership, 1999; Comer, 1995; Dewey, 1916; J. Gardner, 1999; Goodlad, Sodor, & Sirotnik, 1990; Goodman & Lesnick, 2001; Noddings, 1992, 2002; Oakes, Quartz, Ryan & Lipton, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1994). There is also evidence that schools are more successful in achieving their academic mission if they also attend to building community and fostering students' social, emotional, and moral development (e.g., see Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Howes & Ritchey, 2002; Goleman, 1997; Osterman, 2000). While most teacher education programs address social development in one course or another, few purposefully design a comprehensive and consistent focus on character education throughout their teacher preparation program. Very few help their students view curriculum, pedagogy, classroom environment, discipline, and classroom management practices through the lens of children's social and moral development as well as their academic development. Yet, more than ever, prospective teachers need to understand their broader role in children's development and effective ways to address this development in the way they run their classroom, their academic instruction, and their own character. In these times of zero tolerance, high academic standards, and high-stakes testing, teachers will need to clearly understand the moral dimensions of their profession if they are to be able to withstand the outside pressures to focus narrowly on academic development.

As noted above, there are a variety of promising ways to help K-12 schools broaden their educational focus to include students' moral

and social development. This will only happen if schools of education focus more purposefully and comprehensively on the moral dimension of teaching. The Character Education Partnership would like to support teacher education programs in their efforts to initiate new or improve existing efforts to prepare students to be character educators, to assess the effectiveness of their efforts, and to share their experiences with other teacher education programs. In CEP's Request For Proposals, we are seeking applications from teacher preparation programs that are interested in creating or expanding programs with a comprehensive and consistent effort on character education that will enable their graduates to integrate character education in their work with students.

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