

Caring: At the Heart of an Educator's Role

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Although I have been out of junior high and high school classrooms for almost a dozen years, I found myself sharpening pencils and buying notebooks for no particular reason this past September. The poignancy of the season was particularly heightened for me as both of my daughters, just two years out of their masters' programs in business and communication, decided to make life-changing career moves and become teachers. I began sifting through dozens of teaching resources, articles, lesson plans, and curricula, hoping to extract for them what had mattered most from my thirty-three years of education experience (and knowing full well that they had to discover it for themselves).

When I arrived for my first day of work in my junior high classroom at the tender age of twenty-one, I was ill-prepared for what it meant to be a teacher. Oh yes, I had taken all of the teacher certification courses and knew how to put together a good lesson plan, complete with behavioral objectives and anticipatory sets. I knew fifty ways to teach literature, and had collected more than one hundred coasters from a local coffee shop for my school bulletin board that said, "We're Glad You're Here!"

I remember going home physically exhausted my entire first year of teaching, and that I eventually had an epiphany: teaching was not about lesson plans or bulletin boards—it was about the quality of my character and the moral ethos of my classroom. What mattered were the caring relationships and sense of community that both my students and I were experiencing.

Slowly, as the days unfolded, I realized that caring was so integral to the work that no other goal could be accomplished

until those trusting relationships developed. Indeed, my students' development, their sense of safety and community, depended on the climate we established together. As I learned to work effectively with parents, I also recognized their critical role in fostering their children's character development. I learned, too, that I needed to involve my students in a variety of activities with the greater community. Learning to teach became for me a series of epiphanies.

Gordon Vessels, an Atlanta psychologist and outstanding character educator, said:

The moral growth of children... occurs when adults strive to be the type of people that children need for them to be, when children have many sustained relationships with socially responsible adults, and when children are provided with a network of supportive relationships or community.

I was discovering that my students needed competent, caring adults around them, and they also needed moral exemplars throughout the curriculum to inspire them with the ways in which people have contributed to a caring community. In short, they needed clear examples of the kinds of people they might aspire to become. I discovered that children want caring adults to help guide them and teach them how to negotiate life's challenges, and to help them discover their own unique potential and purpose. A few years ago, I came across a Father's Day card that reminded me of this. The card said: "Dad, you tried to teach me patience... I constantly tried yours. You set limits... I pushed you to yours. You made the rules... I made every effort to

break them." The inside of the card read: "Are we a great team or what?"

I found myself exploring biography in a variety of ways in both my theatre and English classes, asking students to comb through stories and distill great individuals' most outstanding accomplishments and contributions, and the core values they embodied that supported their contributions. When I taught Shakespeare I was discovering that my students wanted to discuss his insights into moral character and how they shaped people's lives. I remember one performance in which my ninth-grade acting company staged a dramatic presentation for our yearly awards ceremony intended to celebrate the importance of striving for excellence and accomplishment. Their presentation consisted of meaningful quotations from among hundreds they had sifted through, in the form of a choral reading set to music.

My 1957 New Jersey kindergarten report card, which I found a few years ago in a tucked-away box, included not only "Growth in Skills and Information," but categories such as "Growth in Habits of Work" and "Growth in Habits of Living with Others." Indicators such as "refrains from laughing at others' mistakes," "works independently," and "takes turns cheerfully" also reveal that we have long known that the development of good character is integral to one's positive human development. Character development is an age-old goal of education, identified as core across all times and cultures.

Albert Einstein said that "the most important human endeavor is striving for morality." It is hopeful to know that character education is currently embedded in virtually every state's learning standards. Most have woven it into their state's core curricula, considering attitudes, disposi-

tions, and “character principles” integral to subjects and learning. The important point is that when broad groups of people get together to talk about what is critical for students to know, be able to do, and “be like” (to use a term by Ivor Pritchard, senior researcher at the U.S. Department of Education), character development is very likely to be part of the conversation. Research is converging today to suggest that a comprehensive, high-quality character education initiative may not only help students’ overall positive development, but may be a highly effective approach to the prevention of a variety of negative behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, bullying, school failure, and teen pregnancy. (Go to www.character.org to see the Character Education Partnership’s position paper by Dr. Victor Battistich on “Character Education, Prevention, and Positive Youth Development.”)

This idea of caring and character development has even greater reach—it includes schools caring about and nurturing their civic mission. Last fall I attended a U.S. Department of Education conference at which Lee Hamilton, the

co-chair of the 9-11 Commission, gave a presentation. The topic of the conference was: “What Do We Owe Our Children?”. As Mr. Hamilton explored that topic, he said we owe our children three things: first, we owe them safe schools—the horrific school shootings we have experienced speak volumes about how right he is; second, we owe them civic education, so that they will understand our nation’s principles, values, and ideals; and third, we owe them character education, so that they can become the best kinds of people they can possibly become, and contribute to their communities, their nation, and their world.

Here, then, is another kind of caring. Our country’s founders realized that the health and future of the nation depended on cultivating citizens committed to service and the common good. Public schools were to be charged with fostering in our children an understanding of our nation’s important civic mission and democratic vision.

And so, as I revisited my own teaching career and tried to convey to my daughters what matters most as they begin their

own teaching journeys, it came down to this: Tracy and Brittany, you are engaged in the world’s most important work—that of inspiring young people to discover meaning and purpose, and work that is about passing on the best of civilization. Think deeply about your roles as teachers, and about the personal qualities and caring you bring to the classroom. Diligently plan for how you will develop caring relationships and a sense of community in your classrooms—how you will make certain every single student feels that their worth and dignity is valued and affirmed. Include in your array of best practices effective strategies for weaving character development across your curriculum—perhaps by highlighting values in your daily lessons or by planning service-learning activities to give students opportunities for civic engagement. And, perhaps most important, involve students in setting up a caring classroom, rooted in excellence, respect, and responsibility. ❖

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providing more deliberate and focused methods, and encourage greater consistency within and across grade levels.

Of course, every field of study needs to refine and even redefine itself periodically, develop new approaches, and question, address, and advance its theoretical underpinnings. But the challenge of the twenty-first century is to take what we have typically found to be workable and successful ways to teach character education and expand them into every school in the nation. Although this may seem grandiose and impossible to achieve, successful formal character education pro-

grams have already been implemented in school systems around the country with minimal cost and no additional time slots, in diverse locations and grade levels, with varying amounts of teacher training and types of assessment, and so on.

Formal character education programs are especially important in geographical areas where the schools themselves represent the best hope for those children to learn the virtues and practice the habits that develop good character over time. When every teacher and every student is an active participant in character training and development, the desired result of the educational process is much closer to being achieved: a better life for everyone. ❖

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children the chance to experience “genuine service.”

The program will be continued in our school with plans to expand. Field trips, science projects, and nursing home visits are some of the ways that the two grades will work together next year. I think that through this process we have all become better teachers and learners. Character education was an added bonus. ❖