The Rebirth and Retooling
of
Character Education in America

By

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Introduction

In the annals of K-12 educational pedagogy and philosophy, the term "character education" has a long and distinguished but, at times, problematic history. While it is no doubt true that the American educational system was originally focused just as much (or more) on the development of student morality, virtue and citizenship as it was on improving student acumen in reading, writing and arithmetic, it is also true that by the middle of the 20th century, schools deliberately chose to back away from the traditional role as character educators. This resulted in what Lapsley and Yeager say caused "disastrous consequences for the well-being of youth and society."

The full story of this shift is still being written, but there is little disagreement that moral deficiencies, destructive youth behavior and wasted potential are real and damage the welfare of our young and society as a whole. And while the character education pendulum has swung back and forth in the past century, a renewed discourse has begun. Schools, parents and community members are grappling with the importance of virtues such as civility, respect, integrity and hard work, and trying to determine how these relate to success in life and in our nation's capacity to flourish in the century ahead.

Historical Context

The word "character" is derived from the Greek word "to mark," (as on an engraving) and therefore refers to an inclined disposition to behave in particular ways. Good character is associated with positive habits, or virtues, and bad character with negative habits, or vices. For ease and consistency with current popular terminology, the term "character" used here will refer simply to positive habits or virtues. Researchers, practitioners and scholars dating back to Aristotle have defined character with varying levels of agreement (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Davis, 2003; Davidson, Lickona, & Khmelkov, 2008). In 2008, the Character Education Partnership (CEP), defined character broadly as "human excellence," comprised of all the virtues that enable us to "be our best and do our best." This concept of character encompasses moral virtues such as honesty, compassion, empathy and trustworthiness. At the same time, character also includes

performance virtues, such as effort, diligence and perseverance. Taken together, they make us morally inclined to do the right thing and to do our best work in all areas of our lives.

The American founders recognized that "educating for character" was essential to the success of a democratic society because a healthy democracy demands civic virtues, such as voluntary compliance with laws, respect for the rights of others, concern for the common good and participation in public life. In the 1800s, schools taught elements of good character and citizenship. Teachers relied on discipline, their own good example and the academic curriculum to instruct children in the virtues of patriotism, hard work, honesty, thriftiness, altruism and courage. When children practiced reading, they typically did so through *McGuffey Reader* tales of heroism and virtue, and by the year 1919, the *McGuffey Reader* had the largest circulation of any book in the world next to the Bible. As Lickona (1991) put it, "Character education is as old as education itself. Down through history, in countries all over the world, education has had two great goals: to help young people become smart, and to help them become good" (p. 6).

By the middle of the 20th century, however, confidence in character education had eroded. Numerous societal trends contributed to the de-emphasis on character education in schools, including the influx of students with different ethnic backgrounds, cultural upheavals that led to resistance of authority and perceived indoctrination of character, and the growth of urban areas and social mobility. Furthermore, Lickona (1991) observed, "When much of society came to think of morality as being in flux, relative to the individual, situationally variable, and essentially private, public schools retreated from their central role as character educators" (p. 2).

Following the upheaval and social change brought on in the 1960s and '70s by the Vietnam War, the civil rights era, and the feminist movement, values education found its way back into schools. But given the tumultuous, individual rights-dominated spirit of the time, these efforts focused more on helping students clarify their personal values than on teaching morality and ethics. Even espousing values as basic as the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you") were viewed in some circles as an inappropriate imposition of values or a prohibited endorsement of religion.

In the early 1970s, a more ethically rigorous and non-relativistic approach to moral education emerged when Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1976) argued that the goal of moral education should be to foster students' development through natural stages of moral reasoning. After classroom studies showed that growth in moral reasoning could, in fact, be stimulated by skillfully led discussion of moral dilemmas (Power et al., 1989), some schools began to integrate such dilemmas into their social studies and literature curricula. Subsequently, Kohlberg and his colleagues went beyond the discussion of moral dilemmas to create "just communities," first in prisons and then in high schools. Simultaneously, scholarly research in the field was becoming a priority, with centers created at Harvard University and Carnegie Mellon University (Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2005).

Although Kohlberg was a pioneer in making the cultivation of moral reasoning part of the school's mission, he questioned the utility of inculcating individual values, and an emphasis on comprehensive character education didn't take shape until the late 1980s and early '90s. During this period, character education advocates recognized that teaching is not a values-free endeavor; schools always did and always will affect student character. Subsequent character education programs emerged that intelligently and intentionally focused on building healthy school communities to increase student empathy and pro-social feelings and behavior. The proliferation of these efforts was fueled by a resurgent belief that America was again experiencing a character crisis, with cultural traditions and community interests being displaced by a focus on individual needs and personal gratification. Public opinion polls reflected the growing perception that American society and its youth were experiencing a decline in moral values, as evidenced by rising drug use, cheating, school vandalism, theft and negative peer interactions, such as harassment and bullying. Scholars and social commentators attributed these issues to multiple factors, including the degradation of the family structure, the failure to attend to family traditions, misguided parenting strategies and culture learned in the '60s, the emphasis on individual rights and a resistance to the idea of directly teaching virtue and morality (Helwig, Turiel, & Nucci, 1997).

Character education efforts gained momentum throughout the 1990s, with advocates such as Marvin Berkowitz, Kevin Ryan, Thomas Lickona and Sanford McDonnell becoming instrumental in raising the nation's consciousness regarding the value of comprehensive, proactive and pervasive school-based character education.

These and other thought leaders recognized the need for national-level character advocacy, direction and unification. In 1992, the Josephson Institute of Ethics hosted a summit conference in Aspen, Colo., where leading experts helped launch the Character Counts! Coalition, dedicated to promoting "six pillars" of character (trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship) in schools and communities. In 1993, the Character Education Partnership (CEP) was established as a nonprofit, nonpartisan national coalition committed to putting character development at the top of the nation's education agenda.

To provide standards for the rapidly growing character education movement, CEP published the *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education* (1995), developed and distributed the *Eleven Principles Sourcebook* (Beland, 2003), which described best educational practices for implementing the 11 Principles, provided national and worldwide teacher training and professional development, and recognized hundreds of National Schools of Character—those that took a broad and comprehensive approach to developing good character in their students. Education policy in the '90s also actively began to promote character education, and the U.S. Department of Education initiated federal funding, providing millions of dollars each year to support this purpose. In his 1997 State of the Union address, President Clinton made specific reference to fostering children's character as a national priority for public education, stating, "Character education must be taught in our schools. We must teach our children to be good citizens."

The character education movement in the '80s and '90s was instrumental in introducing a multitude of positive school reform initiatives. These included a focus on school-community development; didactic, collaborative and experiential teaching; pro-social activities, such as

service learning and anti-bullying campaigns; the tying together of academic goals with character goals; opportunities for students to learn leadership while contributing their voices and choices in school; and an increased emphasis on teacher training. Furthermore, individual schools recognized by CEP as National Schools of Character provided a rich source of real-world case studies—highlighting the many benefits of instituting character education programs, including a positive school environment, increased graduation rates, fewer disciplinary incidences, a decline in negative student interactions and improved academic performance (Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2005).

The Momentum Wanes

Although the National Schools of Character case studies have demonstrated the benefits of comprehensive character education, practitioners and scholars face the reality that concomitant empirical research evidence has not been universally and consistently positive.

However, convincing positive research findings do indeed exist; Berkowitz and Bier (2005) examined over 100 studies and identified 54 reputable character education programs. They also created a system for scoring the research designs in order to identify studies that met federal No Child Left Behind standards and identified 33 programs with scientific evidence supporting their effectiveness. Based on these findings, Berkowitz and his colleagues (2008) concluded that 1) Character education can promote character development with significant evidence of effectiveness; 2) Character education positively influences academic achievement; and 3) Character education has a broad impact on a wide variety of psycho-social outcomes, including sexual behavior, problem-solving skills, relationships and attachment to school.

Marshall, Caldwell, and Foster (2011) also reported significantly positive findings in two, multiyear experimental investigations with students in kindergarten through fifth grade, showing that integrated character education resulted in an improved school environment, increased student pro-social and moral behavior, and increased reading and math test scores. In addition,

schools became more caring communities, discipline referrals dropped significantly—particularly in areas related to bullying behavior—and test scores in moderately achieving schools increased nearly 50%. And in a study of 120 elementary schools, Benninga et al. (2006) found that greater reliance on character education translated to higher state academic test scores. Additional positive results have been found within the closely related field of Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Durlak and his colleagues (2011) performed a meta-analysis of 213 school-based, social and emotional learning programs involving 270,000 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. Compared to control groups, SEL participants demonstrated significant improvement in social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior and academic performance.

However, these positive findings have been countered by other analyses that are far less favorable. For example, The Institute for Educational Services (IES) of the U.S. Department of Education maintains a "What Works Clearinghouse" (WWC) that catalogs empirical evidence on the efficacy of a wide variety of educational curricula and interventions, including character education. The IES defines character education as school-based programs that are designed to positively influence behaviors associated with qualities such as respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. To be included in the WWC, a character education intervention must pass an exacting protocol. According to Lapsley and Yeager, (in press), "The first thing to notice is that after decades of visibility as an educational priority, only 13 character programs make the evidentiary cut to be included in the WWC. The second thing to notice is how thin the evidence is for character education—only five of 13 programs are at least potentially efficacious in influencing knowledge, attitudes and values; only three influence behavior, and just one program influences academic achievement."

Furthermore, a study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (2010) examined seven separate social and character development programs involving students in third grade to fifth grade over three years. Overall results showed: "On average, the programs did not improve students' social and emotional competence, behavior, academic achievement and student and teacher perceptions of school climate" (p. lii).

These inconsistent research results involving character education programs have to do with myriad factors:

- Various interventions may not be extensive enough since problematic student behaviors are often deep-seated and require longer, more intensive and robust treatments;

- Character education is not simply a program but instead involves comprehensive school reform or improvement strategies;

- Success or failure of character education interventions depend as much on the quality of implementation as the quality of the program design;

- Direct character instruction is at times ineffectual with adolescent learners—prompting character education advocates to recommend experiential strategies, such as cooperative learning, class meetings, and service learning;

- Lack of adequate professional development can, at times, result in teachers being ill-equipped to effectively fulfill their roles as character educators; and

- Many excellent initiatives lack the leadership support crucial to making a long-term impact or boosting effectiveness.

Another challenge to character education has been the growing emphasis on standardized testing and, in some places, related teacher pay-for-performance systems. These practices became priorities as a result of The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2002) but have their roots in a 1983 Blue Ribbon Panel commissioned by President Reagan. The panel was formed amid fears that America was losing its cognitive and competitive edge, so their mission was to evaluate the condition of our educational system. After two years of intense study, the outcome was the widely disseminated report titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. The report was extremely critical of America's education system, with strong recommendations that included the need for high schools to assign more homework, the recommendation for standardized achievement tests at "major transition points," and the requirement for teacher salaries to increase based largely on performance (Dept. of Education, 1983).

As Nation at Risk recommendations informed NCLB legislation, classroom teacher priorities shifted, and Lapsley and Yeager (in press) posit the following: "Many educators are reluctant to give up much of the instructional day… given widespread anxiety about producing adequate yearly progress on high stakes academic achievement tests. Moral culture, it seems, has given way to testing culture."

Compounding the above constraints on instructional time allocation and classroom focus are the more recent trends regarding the economic downturn and shrinking per pupil revenue. The end result for many public and private schools has been smaller building budgets, teacher layoffs, school closures and classroom consolidations, and increasing class sizes. All have contributed to a reshuffling of administrator and teacher priorities. Taken together, these realities have forced schools to make difficult choices. Less funding, time, commitment, and resources for character-based programs and dwindling associated professional development and teacher training all have hampered the character education reform movement in this country.

The Changing Tide

Even as school-based character education proponents labor to overcome the roadblocks to successful implementation, teachers, administrators, parents and community members recognize that society's ongoing character-related challenges demand more attention, not less. Harvard's Dr. Jerome Kagan, child psychologist and moral development scholar, has studied family dynamics and practices throughout history and is especially concerned today. "Our culture has become more self-interested than it was in earlier generations. There is not a balance between responsibility for community and the self's desire for enhancement" (Weissbourd, 2009, p. 176).

Kagan is not the only scholar expressing concern. Consider this assessment by Harvard's Howard Gardner in his forward to Scott Seider's 2012 book, *Character Compass: How Powerful School Culture Can Point Students Toward Success*:

> Think for a moment about the major crises that the United States has faced over recent decades, ranging from financial meltdowns to wars waged without adequate preparation or a realistic assessment of what could and could not be achieved. In these and many other cases,

responsibility rests with "the best and brightest," the individuals who received the highest grades, attended the most elite schools, garnered prestigious academic and professional honors, and then descended upon the centers of power in the Capitol and Wall Street. How ironic, then, that policy makers in the United States insist today on an educational focus that has led repeatedly to disasters, rather than rethinking our educational priorities (2012, p. vii).

Needless to say, as the nation struggles with issues of conscience and character, there is growing fear that our K-12 public education system is failing. The recent National Assessment of Educational Progress reports show that no more than one-third of eighth graders are proficient in math, science or reading, and a recent study by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center shows U.S. high school graduation rates hovering at 70%. Furthermore, American College Testing reports that only 76% of high school graduates are adequately prepared academically for first-year college courses, and the World Economic Forum ranks the United States an alarmingly low 48th worldwide in math and science education (Klein, 2011).

And, at the very same time, America's youth are also faced with unprecedented mental health and self-destructive behavior challenges: 25% of our kids experience symptoms of anxiety or depression; 10% are functionally impaired and can't get out of bed; 31% of college students report alcohol abuse; 17% of Ivy League students are self-mutilating; ADHD prescriptions for youth between the ages of 10 and 19 have gone up by 26% since 2007—with many students reporting prescription use simply to stay up late to study, do homework, and focus during tests; 20% of U.S. students in grades 9 through 12 experience being bullied; and students feel isolated, competitive with each other and disconnected with adults they consider to be "wise" (such as rabbis, priests, parents, trusted adults) (CDC, 2011; Mustich, 2012; Schwarz, 2012).

Psychologist, clinician and author Madeline Levine (2012) believes that obsession with achievement among students and parents is the largest contributing factor to today's high rates of emotional problems confronting our youth. She suggests that stress, exhaustion, poor coping skills, an unhealthy reliance on others for support and direction, and a weak sense of self are problems that large numbers of our children are facing. Levine further reiterates that

unprecedented numbers of U.S. children (in all regions, at all income levels) are negatively influenced by stress at home, in the community, and at school. She concludes that two factors repeatedly emerge as the main contributors to high levels of childhood emotional distress for all age groups: 1) Achievement pressure from parents who are overly concerned about how their children perform in academics and other extracurricular pursuits; and 2) Isolation from parents, either from parents who are singularly focused on misplaced extrinsic measures of success like grades, test scores, college preparation and extracurricular activity performance, or from parents who are completely absent (Levine, 2006).

The harmful effects that accompany achievement pressure and isolation from parents often manifest themselves in children who are disconnected, disheartened and confused or misguided regarding their priorities. In his book *The Parents We Mean to Be: How Well Intentioned Adults Undermine Children's Moral and Emotional Development*, Richard Weissbourd says, "The troubling fact is that some parents hold misguided beliefs about raising moral children, and some parents have little investment in their child's character" (2009, p. 4).

Weissbourd cites one particularly disturbing exchange that he had with a parent not long ago that serves as a new and harsh reality for character educators: "Speaking at an evening parent lecture regarding moral development, after about 15 minutes into my talk, a hand shot up and a parent asks this question: 'I agree with you that it's important for kids to be good people, but realistically, you're asking us to focus on our children being good people when it won't help my child get into a place like Harvard'" (p. 61).

A private school survey conducted by Weissbourd found corroborating evidence for the aforementioned parent's troubling belief. Forty percent of the students identified "getting into a good college" as being more important than "being a good person," and nearly 50% said it was more important to their parents as well. Recall that the historical purpose of schooling has been to educate students to be both smart and good. Imagine the ramifications if parents no longer care about the goodness of their children if it gets in the way of their smartness.

As is often the case, popular media can play a pivotal role in raising awareness of issues such as these. The recent film documentaries *Waiting for Superman* (2010), *Race to Nowhere* (2011), and *Bully* (2011) have all received widespread attention, with local screenings sponsored by community groups, parent-teacher organizations and school boards. These films highlight the plight of our nation's students, some of whom are trying to escape poverty and their unfortunate assignment to chronically failing schools; some of whom are born into privilege and have an obsession with high-stakes academic testing and extracurricular performance that is undermining classroom learning while threatening the healthy development of our children; and some of whom are subjected to persistent bullying behavior and torment by their peers.

Fortunately, amid this growing critique of our approach to parenting and our education system, there are scholars, educators, social scientists and practitioners who remind us that character education continues to hold great promise. Re-energized and retooled, many believe that it represents one of our greatest opportunities to recalibrate K-12 education by providing youth with the skills, knowledge and dispositions necessary to be life-long learners, get good jobs, have good friends and healthy relationships and be productive and contributing community members.

Lapsley and Yeager (in press) state, "There IS an argument for designing and implementing formal school-based programs for moral character education, because there's no guarantee that students will experience positive moral formation outside of school given the incidence of disconnected families and discorded communities".

Narvaez (2008) believes that "moral character development has perhaps never been more challenging" and that "extended families are often spread far and wide, and overworked parents are as distracted as children" (p. 322). She laments, "Ideally, the family home provides deep emotional nourishment for the child, but rarely does this happen in a typical U.S. household these days. In a day when children are emotionally malnourished, much rides on the adults they see every day—educators. In fact, the most important protective factors against poor outcomes for a child are caring relationships with adults. First, with an adult in the family, and second, with an adult outside the family" (Ibid, p. 316).

In a similar spirit, Marshall, Caldwell and Foster (2011) point out, "A healthy school provides a supportive, warm, and accepting environment where students are valued, have a sense of safety and belonging, and teachers and students form relationships of genuine trust, respect, caring, and appreciation. Healthy schools incorporate deliberate teaching and learning strategies that develop and maintain strong social conventions and moral integrity" (p. 54).

Weissbourd (2009) adds, "American public schools were originally intended chiefly to cultivate in children a certain degree of character. Today that expectation is again widespread and deep. The American public, deeply concerned about the failure of children to absorb key values from their parents, sees schools as the next best hope. Seventy percent of parents want schools to teach 'strict standards of right and wrong,' and 85% want schools to teach values" (p. 200).

As calls increase for schools to reclaim this role, however, we do well to remember that previous evaluations of "character education programs" have found mixed results. We need to sort out those studies and identify classroom and school-wide strategies that have research support. We also need to recognize that conditions must be created that help schools provide the time and resources needed to implement the best practice components of comprehensive character education: positive teacher-student relationships, a positive peer culture, cooperative learning, appropriate adult role modeling, effective and engaging class meetings, community building, moral discussion, conflict resolution, service learning and democratic student government. This requires effective leadership from school administrators; they, in turn, require the leadership vision and skills to carry out their responsibilities.

Furthermore, we need to consider new and broader practices that may enhance the effectiveness of existing approaches. In his book, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*, Paul Tough (2012) uses current research and successful school exemplars to argue that the qualities that contribute most to success in K-12 and postsecondary education (and in life beyond) have less to do with academic performance and more to do with performance character: skills like grit, curiosity, perseverance, conscientiousness, optimism and self-control.

Similarly, CEP (2008, 2010) and leading researchers (e.g., Lickona & Davidson, 2005) have argued that "performance character" attributes, such as diligence, work ethic and positive attitude, in combination with "moral character" attributes such as integrity, respect, justice, caring and responsibility, are needed to create safe and effective schools, foster student flourishing, and build a caring and productive society. As one character educator recently commented, "If moral character is developed without performance character, we get people with good hearts who can't get the job done. And if we develop performance character without moral character, we get Bernie Madoff."

In short, effective school-based character education promotes the pursuit of excellence and the pursuit of ethical behavior. At a time in which academic and testing success is paramount, and children are in need of moral development, successful schools like those in the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) network have become models for our nation. So, too, are hundreds of current and former National Schools of Character, like Allen Creek Elementary School, which now focuses on performance character as well as moral character to maximize the success of their 21st century learners; Northview High School, with its 180 special needs students who are taught about the value of hard work and becoming a better person; and The Classical Academy, a perennial K-12 state School of Excellence, with standardized test scores that are near the top of the state and nation, close to a 100% graduation rate, and extremely low numbers of disciplinary issues—with the school motto of *Excellence with Honor*.

And even at a time when many U.S. parents are either too connected—with an unrealistic and unhealthy push for high achievement and "helicoptering" to assure their children succeed without hardship—or are too disconnected—by being physically or emotionally absent—there may be a positive trend emerging. Says Madeline Levine, "When I first began to travel around the country, many parents found it difficult to take a clear-eyed look at the cost of too much involvement, too much 'enrichment', too much stress, and too little recognition of the real needs of children. Thankfully, I no longer encounter such skepticism; the toll of a narrow version of success has become painfully obvious to most parents. What parents are clamoring for now are solutions. 'What should I do?' has become the collective mantra of my audiences around the country" (Levine, 2012, pg. 5).

Joining In A Common Cause

We wish to issue a clarion call to respond to the question, "What should I do?" There are numerous organizations that are committed to instilling good character in young people , and our website (www.character.org) provides contact information and descriptions of many that are involved in character education, social-emotional learning, civic education and service-learning, as well as several organizations that advocate for character education policy at the state and national level. We invite these and other character-minded entities, families, community groups, educators, health professionals, scholars and others who touch the lives of the young to acknowledge the pressures on youth and the character-related problems of our society and more importantly, to work together to develop comprehensive strategies that will help our children and our citizens build good character, a positive future, and a better world.

CEP, which has been working on this goal for nearly two decades, recognizes the nature of this challenge. We realize more than ever the need to reach young people everywhere, expanding beyond the classroom to make a significant impact on children through their families and communities. Schools must remain a focal point for these efforts, but renewed vision must include all arenas that impact youth education and development: homes, faith communities, youth organizations, sports fields, concert halls and dance studios, summer camps, and places of employment.

Tough (2012) has framed the challenge this way:

> The character strengths that matter so much to young people's success are not innate; they don't appear in us magically, as a result of good luck or good genes. And they are not simply a choice. They are rooted in brain chemistry, and they are molded in measurable and predictable ways, by the environment in which children grow up. That means the rest of us – society as a whole – can do an enormous amount to influence their development in children. We now know a great deal about what kind of interventions will help children develop those strengths and skills, starting at birth and going all the way to college. Parents are an excellent vehicle for these interventions, but they aren't the only vehicle. Transformative help also comes regularly from social workers, teachers, clergy members,

pediatricians and neighbors. We can argue about whether these interventions should be provided by government or nonprofit organizations or religious institutions or a combination of all three. But what we can't argue anymore is that there's nothing we can do (p. 196).

CEP is committed to providing leadership in reaching not only our children, but also their parents, role models and community members who are critically important to this mission. The challenges and opportunities that lie before us are both exciting and daunting, and the stakes are high. We must all share in this work, for our collective humanity is riding on the outcome.

About the Author

Dr. Russ Sojourner has a BS in behavioral science, an MS in industrial engineering and a PhD in psychology. Russ served in the Air Force for 20 years, having completed tours of duty at the Air Force Academy as an instructor, assistant professor and associate professor in the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership, where he taught courses in behavioral science, human factors, aviation psychology, and marriage and family. Russ also served in the Academy's Center for Character Development, where he was in charge of character and leadership development for the 4,400-member cadet wing. On his retirement from the Air Force, Russ became an assistant principal and the director of character education and development at The Classical Academy (TCA), a National School of Character and the largest charter school in the state of Colorado. Russ spent the last seven years as TCA's junior high principal, and now serves as the CEP's director of leadership development.

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