The Return of Character Education

THOMAS LICKONA

To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.

—Theodore Roosevelt

Increasing numbers of people across the ideological spectrum believe that our society is in deep moral trouble. The disheartening signs are everywhere: the breakdown of the family; the deterioration of civility in everyday life; rampant greed at a time when one in five children is poor; an omnipresent sexual culture that fills our television and movie screens with sleaze, beckoning the young toward sexual activity at ever earlier ages; the enormous betrayal of children through sexual abuse; and the 1992 report of the National Research Council that says the United States is now the most violent of all industrialized nations.

As we become more aware of this societal crisis, the feeling grows that schools cannot be ethical bystanders. As a result, character education is making a comeback in American schools.

Early Character Education

Character education is as old as education itself. Down through history, education has had two great goals: to help people become smart and to help them become good.

Acting on that belief, schools in the earliest days of our republic tackled character education head on—through discipline, the teacher’s example, and the daily school curriculum. The Bible was the public school’s sourcebook for both moral and religious instruction. When struggles eventually arose over whose Bible to use and which doctrines to teach, William McGuffey stepped onto the stage in 1836 to offer his McGuffey Readers, ultimately to sell more than 100 million copies.

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McGuffey retained many favorite Biblical stories but added poems, exhortations, and heroic tales. While children practiced their reading or arithmetic, they also learned lessons about honesty, love of neighbor, kindness to animals, hard work, thriftiness, patriotism, and courage.

**Why Character Education Declined**

In the 20th century, the consensus supporting character education began to crumble under the blows of several powerful forces.

Darwinism introduced a new metaphor—evolution—that led people to see all things, including morality, as being in flux.

The philosophy of logical positivism, arriving at American universities from Europe, asserted a radical distinction between facts (which could be scientifically proven) and values (which positivism held were mere expressions of feeling, not objective truth). As a result of positivism, morality was relativized and privatized—made to seem a matter of personal “value judgment,” not a subject for public debate and transmission through the schools.

In the 1960s, a worldwide rise in personalism celebrated the worth, autonomy, and subjectivity of the person, emphasizing individual rights and freedom over responsibility. Personalism rightly protested societal oppression and injustice, but it also delegitimized moral authority, eroded belief in objective moral norms, turned people inward toward self-fulfillment, weakened social commitments (for example, to marriage and parenting), and fueled the socially destabilizing sexual revolution.

Finally, the rapidly intensifying pluralism of American society (Whose values should we teach?) and the increasing secularization of the public arena (Won’t moral education violate the separation of church and state?) became two more barriers to achieving the moral consensus indispensable for character education in the public schools. Public schools retreated from their once central role as moral and character educators.

The 1970s saw a return of values education, but in new forms: values clarification and Kohlberg’s moral dilemma discussions. In different ways, both expressed the individualist spirit of the age. Values clarification said, don’t impose values; help students choose their values freely. Kohlberg said, develop students’ powers of moral reasoning so they can judge which values are better than others.

Each approach made contributions, but each had problems. Values clarification, though rich in methodology, failed to distinguish between personal preferences (truly a matter of free choice) and moral values (a matter of obligation). Kohlberg focused on moral reasoning, which is necessary but not sufficient for good character, and underestimated the school’s role as a moral socializer.

**The New Character Education**

In the 1990s we are seeing the beginnings of a new character education movement, one which restores “good character” to its historical place as the central desirable outcome of the school’s moral enterprise. No one knows yet how broad or deep this movement is; we have no studies to tell us what percentage of schools are making what kind of effort. But something significant is afoot.

In July 1992, the Josephson Institute of Ethics called together more than 30 educational leaders representing state school boards, teachers’ unions, universities, ethics centers, youth organizations, and religious groups. This diverse assemblage drafted the Aspen Declaration on Character Education, setting forth eight principles of character education.¹

The Character Education Partnership was launched in March 1993, as a national coalition committed to putting character development at the top of the nation’s educational agenda. Members include representatives from business, labor, government, youth, parents, faith communities, and the media.

The last two years have seen the publication of a spate of books—such as Moral, Character, and Civic Education in the Elementary School, Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right from Wrong, and Reclaiming Our Schools: A Handbook on Teaching Character,
Why Character Education Now?

Why this groundswell of interest in character education? There are at least three causes:

1. **The decline of the family.** The family, traditionally a child’s primary moral teacher, is for vast numbers of children today failing to perform that role, thus creating a moral vacuum. In her recent book *When the Bough Breaks: The Cost of Neglecting Our Children*, economist Sylvia Hewlett documents that American children, rich and poor, suffer a level of neglect unique among developed nations (1991). Overall, child wellbeing has declined despite a decrease in the number of children per family, an increase in the educational level of parents, and historically high levels of public spending in education.

In “Dan Quayle Was Right” (April 1993) Barbara Dafoe Whitehead synthesizes the social science research on the decline of the two biological-parent family in America:

> If current trends continue, less than half of children born today will live continuously with their own mother and father throughout childhood. . . . An increasing number of children will experience family break-up two or even three times during childhood.

Children of marriages that end in divorce and children of single mothers are more likely to be poor, have emotional and behavioral problems, fail to achieve academically, get pregnant, abuse drugs and alcohol, get in trouble with the law, and be sexually and physically abused. Children in stepfamilies are generally worse off (more likely to be sexually abused, for example) than children in single-parent homes.

No one has felt the impact of family disruption more than schools. Whitehead writes:

> Across the nation, principals report a dramatic rise in the aggressive, acting-out behavior characteristic of children, especially boys, who are living in single-parent families. Moreover, teachers find that many children are so upset and preoccupied by the explosive drama of their own family lives that they are unable to concentrate on such mundane matters as multiplication tables.

Family disintegration, then, drives the character education movement in two ways: schools have to teach the values kids aren’t learning at home; and schools, in order to conduct teaching and learning, must become caring moral communities that help children from unhappy homes focus on their work, control their anger, feel cared about, and become responsible students.

2. **Troubling trends in youth character.** A second impetus for renewed character education is the sense that young people in general, not just those from fractured families, have been adversely affected by poor parenting (in intact as well as broken families); the wrong kind of adult role models; the sex, violence, and materialism portrayed in the mass media; and the pressures of the peer group. Evidence that this hostile moral environment is taking a toll on youth character can be found in 10 troubling trends: rising youth violence; increasing dishonesty (lying, cheating, and stealing); growing disrespect for authority; peer cruelty; a resurgence of bigotry on school campuses, from preschool through higher education; a decline in the work ethic; sexual precocity; a growing self-centeredness and declining civil responsibility; an increase in self-destructive behavior; and ethical illiteracy.

The statistics supporting these trends are overwhelming. For example, the U.S. homicide rate for 15- to 24-year-old males is 7 times higher than Canada’s and 40 times higher than Japan’s. The U.S. has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates, the highest teen abortion rate, and the highest level of drug use among young people in the developed world. Youth suicide has tripled in the past 25 years, and a survey of more than 2,000 Rhode Island students, grades six through nine, found that two out of three boys and one of two girls thought it “acceptable for a man to force sex on a woman” if they had been dating for six months or more (Kikuchi 1988).
A recovery of shared, objectively important ethical values. Moral decline in society has gotten bad enough to jolt us out of the privatism and relativism dominant in recent decades. We are recovering the wisdom that we do share a basic morality, essential for our survival; that adults must promote this morality by teaching the young, directly and indirectly, such values as respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness, caring, and civil virtue; and that these values are not merely subjective preferences but that they have objective worth and a claim on our collective conscience.

Such values affirm our human dignity, promote the good of the individual and the common good, and protect our human rights. They meet the classic ethical tests of reversibility (Would you want to be treated this way?) and universalizability (Would you want all persons to act this way in a similar situation?). They define our responsibilities in a democracy, and they are recognized by all civilized people and taught by all enlightened creeds. Not to teach children these core ethical values is grave moral failure.

What Character Education Must Do

In the face of a deteriorating social fabric, what must character education do to develop good character in the young?

First, it must have an adequate theory of what good character is, one which gives schools a clear idea of their goals. Character must be broadly conceived to encompass cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of morality. Good character consists of knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good. Schools must help children understand the core values, adopt or commit to them, and then act upon them in their own lives.

The cognitive side of character includes at least six specific moral qualities: awareness of the moral dimensions of the situation at hand, knowing moral values and what they require of us in concrete cases, perspective-taking, moral reasoning, thoughtful decision making, and moral self-knowledge. All these powers of rational moral thought are required for full moral maturity and citizenship in a democratic society.

People can be very smart about matters of right and wrong, however, and still choose the wrong. Moral education that is merely intellectual misses the crucial emotional side of character, which serves as the bridge between judgment and action. The emotional side includes at least the following qualities: conscience (the felt obligation to do what one judges to be right), self-respect, empathy, loving the good, self-control, and humility (a willingness to both recognize and correct our moral failings).

At times, we know what we should do, feel strongly that we should do it, yet still fail to translate moral judgment and feeling into effective moral behavior. Moral action, the third part of character, draws upon three additional moral qualities: competence (skills such as listening, communicating, and cooperating), will (which mobilizes our judgment and energy), and moral habit (a reliable inner disposition to respond to situations in a morally good way).

Developing Character

Once we have a comprehensive concept of character, we need a comprehensive approach to developing it. This approach tells schools to look at themselves through a moral lens and consider how virtually everything that goes on there affects the values and character of students. Then, plan how to use all phases of classroom and school life as deliberate tools of character development.

If schools wish to maximize their moral clout, make a lasting difference in students’ character, and engage and develop all three parts of character (knowing, feeling, and behavior), they need a comprehensive, holistic approach. Having a comprehensive approach includes asking, Do present school practices support, neglect, or contradict the school’s professed values and character education aims?

In classroom practice, a comprehensive approach to character education calls upon the individual teacher to:

- Act as caregiver, model, and mentor, treating students with love and respect, setting a good example, supporting positive social behavior,
and correcting hurtful actions through one-on-one guidance and whole-class discussions;

- Create a moral community, helping students know one another as persons, respect and care about one another, and feel valued membership in, and responsibility to, the group;
- Practice moral discipline, using the creation and enforcement of rules as opportunities to foster moral reasoning, voluntary compliance with rules, and respect for others;
- Create a democratic classroom environment, involving students in decision making and the responsibility for making the classroom a good place to be and learn;
- Teach values through the curriculum, using the ethically rich content of academic subjects (such as literature, history, and science), as well as outstanding programs (such as Facing History and Ourselves and The Heartwood Ethics Curriculum for Children), as vehicles for teaching values and examining moral questions;
- Use cooperative learning to develop students' appreciation of others, perspective taking, and ability to work with others toward common goals;
- Develop the “conscience of craft” by fostering students' appreciation of learning, capacity for hard work, commitment to excellence, and sense of work as affecting the lives of others;
- Encourage moral reflection through reading, research, essay writing, journal keeping, discussion, and debate;
- Teach conflict resolution, so that students acquire the essential moral skills of solving conflicts fairly and without force.

Besides making full use of the moral life of classrooms, a comprehensive approach calls upon the school as a whole to:

- Foster caring beyond the classroom, using positive role models to inspire altruistic behavior and providing opportunities at every grade level to perform school and community service;
- Create a positive moral culture in the school, developing a schoolwide ethos (through the leadership of the principal, discipline, a schoolwide sense of community, meaningful student government, a moral community among adults, and making time for moral concerns) that supports and amplifies the values taught in the classrooms;
- Recruit parents and the community as partners in character education, letting parents know that the school considers them their child's first and most important moral teacher, giving parents specific ways they can reinforce the values the school is trying to teach, and seeking the help of the community, churches, businesses, local government, and the media in promoting the core ethical values.

The Challenges Ahead

Whether character education will take hold in American schools remains to be seen. Among the factors that will determine the movement's long-range success are:

- Support for schools. Can schools recruit the help they need from the other key formative institutions that shape the values of the young—including families, faith communities, and the media? Will public policy act to strengthen and support families, and will parents make the stability of their families and the needs of their children their highest priority?
- The role of religion. Both liberal and conservative groups are asking, How can students be sensitively engaged in considering the role of religion in the origins and moral development of our nation? How can students be encouraged to use their intellectual and moral resources, including their faith traditions, when confronting social issues (for example, what is my obligation to the poor?) and making personal moral decisions (for example, should I have sex before marriage?)?
- Moral leadership. Many schools lack a positive, cohesive moral culture. Especially at the building level, it is absolutely essential to have
moral leadership that sets, models, and consistently enforces high standards of respect and responsibility. Without a positive school-wide ethos, teachers will feel demoralized in their individual efforts to teach good values.

- **Teacher education.** Character education is far more complex than teaching math or reading; it requires personal growth as well as skills development. Yet teachers typically receive almost no preservice or inservice training in the moral aspects of their craft. Many teachers do not feel comfortable or competent in the values domain. How will teacher education colleges and school staff development programs meet this need?

“Character is destiny,” wrote the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. As we confront the causes of our deepest societal problems, whether in our intimate relationships or public institutions, questions of character loom large. As we close out a turbulent century and ready our schools for the next, educating for character is a moral imperative if we care about the future of our society and our children.

**Notes**

1. For a copy of the Aspen Declaration and the issue of *Ethics* magazine reporting on the conference, write the Josephson Institute of Ethics, 310 Washington Blvd., Suite 104, Marina del Rey, CA 90292.


4. *Facing History and Ourselves* is an 8-week Holocaust curriculum for 8th graders. Write Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 25 Kennard Rd., Brookline, MA 02146.

5. *The Heartwood Ethics Curriculum for Children* uses multicultural children’s literature to teach universal values. Write The Heartwood Institute, 12300 Perry Highway, Wexford, PA 15090.

**References**


Kikuchi, J. (Fall 1988). “Rhode Island Develops Successful Intervention Program for Adolescents.” *National Coalition Against Sexual Assault Newsletter*.


**Postnote**

The force and clarity of this article in calling educators to recapture the school's moral mission earn it a place among our Classics. Education for good character is one of our schools' latest fads—and also one of their oldest missions. This article by the nation's leading proponent of character education lays out the case for our schools' involvement in teaching core moral values and helping children acquire good habits, such as respect and responsibility.

But despite the call for character education from our parents, pulpits, and politicians, schools and teachers are often unsure of what to do. Because character education has been absent from the great majority of our schools for fully three decades, few educators know
how to translate their good intentions into practice. Many schools are having one or two in-service days, buying boxes of character-oriented banners to put up on their walls, and purchasing “Character Counts!” coffee cups for the teachers’ lounge.

Developing in our young the strong moral habits that constitute good character needs to be a central priority for a school community. What Lickona calls a “comprehensive approach” will take time, energy, and deep commitment to achieve. But, curiously, schools that take on this mission wholeheartedly find that many of their other goals—academic, athletic, and social—are achieved in the process.

Discussion Questions

1. What is your personal experience with character education in the schools?
2. Do you agree with the thrust of this article, that schools have a major role in the fostering of good character? Why or why not?
3. From your perspective, what are the hard questions that schools must grapple with if they are to engage in character education responsibly?