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Character Education in American Schools

By Nicholas Taylor Jewell



American public education in the 21st century is experiencing a movement toward character education. A more accurate way to describe this current move might be to say public education in the United States is experiencing a move back to character education. Character education has long been an issue in education. The teaching of values is an age-old debate. Today, this debate takes on new life because of the radical changes American society has undergone during the

last thirty years.

From the earliest days of our nation and continuing well into this century, schools not only taught math, history, literature, and geography; they also freely used the Bible and many maxims and proverbs to teach students how to live exemplary lives and to emphasize virtues such as fair play, achievement, respect for authority and service to others.

To truly understand the debate on character education, one must become familiar with the use of terminology and their meanings in relation to this topic. “Values are the crucial questions we put to life, not only explicitly by philosophic probing but implicitly by the way we live” (Lerner, 1976, p.14). Character education cannot be thought of as a subject course to be taught as part of the curriculum. It is rather a goal for each individual student to achieve. “...it's a whole-school effort to create a community of virtue where moral behaviors such as respect, honesty, and kindness are modeled, taught, expected, celebrated, and continuously practiced in everyday interactions” (Lickona, 1996, p. 299).

Starting in the 1960's,,, as American society became increasing pluralistic and secular, moral education came almost to a standstill. Many educators, psychologists, and politicians have come to believe that schools must identify and teach students the common values that society holds.

The ethical morals that are core to man's being because of their value for the good of all mankind are taught. These morals are unquestionable in their objective morality—respect, responsibility, honesty, caring, kindness, fairness, and self-control (Lickona, 1996). The successful character education program is one that truly implements these morals into the entire school community for the students, faculty, and staff to experience in their daily interactions. Man has, from the beginning of written history, been concerned with educating himself for the purpose of improving society. The ancient Greeks were concerned with shaping their character as well as training their minds in academia. Aristotle spoke of man's political nature and his inherent need for culture, language, and values. “Culture is the set of social arrangements we have chosen to organize our lives. Language is culture's quintessential tool, for it permits us to communicate with one another and across time and space. It permits culture to come into existence and to remain over time. And values are the engine that defines and drives culture” (Doyle, 1997, p. 440). John Dewey addressed the need of man to educate himself with respect to morals: “These two facts, that moral judgment and moral responsibility are the work wrought in us by the social environment, signify that all morality

is social....Our conduct is socially conditioned whether we perceive the fact or not” (Dewey, 1981, p.714-715).

Dewey went on to explain the moral conscious that exists in all men: “We have a moral nature, a conscious, call it what you will. And this nature responds directly in acknowledgement of the supreme authority of the Right over all claims of inclination and habit. We may not act in accordance with this acknowledgement, but we still know that the authority of the moral law, although not its power, is unquestionable. Men may differ indefinitely according to what their experience has been as to just what is right, what its contents are. But they all spontaneously agree in recognizing the Supremacy of the claims of whatever is thought of as Right. Otherwise there would be no such thing as morality, but merely calculations of how to satisfy desire” (Dewey, 1981, p. 719-720).

John Dewey goes on to recommend that students learn to think seriously and responsibly about their daily lives including values, choices, and morality. The character education model takes this a step further and promotes “not only training students’ intellectual faculties but also training their hearts and minds in good and correct behavior” (Romanowski, 1996, p. 48).



American schools from the earliest onset have been attempting to instill in all students a moral and democratic character. The early common schools, the first public system of education, were charged with the mission of providing moral and civic training. These schools were governed by local boards of citizens who were adamant that the schools uphold the standards of morality and civic virtues. These standards and virtues were readily agreed upon by the officials, thus constituting a curriculum of shared values (Bennett, 1988).

These values were shared with the students through their daily lessons, as exhibited in the McGuffey Readers. This early American tool was filled with references to God and society's values of that time. By infusing values in the curriculum of the schools, it was expected that the child would learn self-discipline and values along with the traditional subject areas.

American public schools continued to teach values in this modality until well into the 1900s. At this time, the changes taking place in American society, the various ‘liberation’ and ‘revolution’ movements did not leave American schools unscathed. As a result of the changes in the attitudes of American society during the 1960s, character education in the traditional sense gave way to a method known as values clarification. Under this system, the child was allowed the freedom of experiencing a decision-making process in which he was to choose the acceptable behavior for himself. Educators were cautioned against presenting morals to the child because this would unduly influence him toward the adult’s own value system. Rather than teachers, educators became leaders of moral discussions with a definitive barrier drawn as to the ‘incorrectness’ of referring in any way to the teacher’s own or any other moral code.

The child was expected to glean the necessary information from these discussions and, through the values clarification process, find his own moral identity by analyzing his feelings, ideas,

and beliefs. Then, in theory, the child would be equipped with the ability to make moral choices and decisions that were from his own unique identity, without any influence from other people.

Educators were trained to be morally neutral in the classroom. They were released from the responsibility of instilling a belief system into their students, because of the fear of their influence on a child's value system. This fear also became an issue when many schools were enmeshed in court battles over permitting certain forms of worship such as prayer or teachings such as 'Creationism' to become a part of the school's routine or curriculum. Many educators became 'gun-shy' at the thought of a lengthy court battle.



The basic flaw with the values clarification system did not become apparent until Americans realized that children were being given the opportunity to choose lifestyle behaviors without proper instruction on the choices and their consequences. The development of maturity levels was overlooked as well in the mistaken concern for the student's opinion being all that mattered. Ethics and morals were considered a matter of personal taste. Children were expected to be mature enough to assimilate a values system, which would allow them to make proper choices when many adults of that time were not as capable.

An entire segment of America's society were allowed to follow the credo 'If it feels good--do it!' They, in turn, raised their children in the 1980s with the absence of traditional character education. For the first time in United States history the term 'moral illiteracy' was used to describe major segments of the American student population.

Perhaps at no time in all history have the threats for youth have been more evident than today. The physical, social, and emotional health crises among and for young people are evident. In response to these moral danger signs, interest in character education is growing quickly in the United States.

The 1980s also brought major changes to the American family as a unit. Divorce rates increased and more and more students were being raised without the benefit of a traditional family unit. Drug use and violence rose rapidly. All of these criteria point to statistics that show a definite decrease in the morality of people in the United States. "Starting as 3 percent in 1920..., the illegitimacy ratio rose gradually to slightly over 5 percent in 1970, over 18 percent in 1980, and 30 percent by 1991--a tenfold increase from 1920, and a sixfold increase from 1960..." (Himmelfarb, 1994, p. 223). These changes in our values system have taken their toll on American society. "In teenage illegitimacy the United States has earned the dubious distinction of ranking first among all industrialized nations" (Himmelfarb, 1994, p. 224). According to former Secretary of Education William J. Bennett: "In 1990, one in ten teenage girls got pregnant, half of them giving birth and the other half having abortions" (Himmelfarb, 1994, p. 224).

Illegitimacy is certainly not the only problem in America that points to a decline in morals and values surrounding youth. "An estimated 525,000 attacks, shakedowns, and robberies occur in public high schools each month. Each year nearly three million crimes are committed on or near school property, approximately 16,000 per school day. About 135,000 students carry guns to school daily; one fifth of all students report carrying a weapon of some type. Twenty-one percent of all secondary school students avoid using the restrooms out of fear of being harmed or intimidated.

Surveys of school children reveal that their chief school-related concern is the disruptive behavior of their classmates. Almost one-third of public school teachers indicate that they have seriously considered leaving teaching because of student behavior” (Kilpatrick, 1992, p. 14).

The rise in violent behaviors and questionable moral decisions leads Americans to question what went wrong with educating the youth of America in competent moral behaviors. The 26th Annual Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup education poll showed that 57 percent of public school parents favored ethics being taught in public schools as opposed to being left to parents and religious institutions. The poll in 1987 presented a list of nine virtues that should or should not be included. The vote was almost unanimous for eight of the virtues. The exception was the virtue of ‘thrift’, which received 74 percent in favor of including it. The list of virtues included respect for others, hard work, persistence, fairness, compassion, politeness or civility, self-esteem, and high expectations of oneself (Elam, 1994).

The 1993 poll listed character traits or attitudes with the following results: “honesty, 97%; democracy, 93%; acceptance of people of different races and ethnic backgrounds, 93%; patriotism or love of country, 91%; caring for friends and family members, 91%; moral courage, 91%; the golden rule, 90%; acceptance of people who hold different religious beliefs, 87%; acceptance of people who hold unpopular or controversial political or social views, 73%; sexual abstinence outside of marriage, 66%; acceptance of the right of a woman to choose abortion, 56%; acceptance of people with different sexual orientations (i.e., homosexuals or bisexuals), 51%” (Elam, 1994, p. 50). The third question asked whether parents would favor or oppose non-devotional instruction on world religions in public schools. The vote by parents was 66 percent in favor of this instruction. (Elam, 1994).



Clearly, the American public recognizes the need for public instruction in values and virtues. Indeed, American parents want basically the same ideals for their children today as parents did in the past. “Every civilization has a distinctive set of moral and ethical imperatives it seeks to pass on to its children” (Honig, 1985, p. 101). Americans want their children to become good people, i.e. people who share common ideals of all moral, democratic people in America. Honig (1985) lists common traits shared by ‘good’ people: “generosity, self-assured, faithful, prudent, reverent to elderly, optimistic, forgiving, hospitable, discreet, loving, patient” (p. 101).

It is left for the educators of America to establish their role in character education. In fact, character education of some form takes place in schools across America every day. The hidden curriculum of the social interactions a child experiences at school play a large part in influencing character. Educators must learn to recognize character educational opportunities in order to maximize the potential of both the hidden and the formal curriculum.

Educators must become aware of what character education is and what is included in implementing it in their school. They must make a commitment, not just as an individual educator, but as a part of the school community, to give each individual the maximum potential for growth in character. The entire school must be a part of character education. It must be a thoroughly planned commitment that is given its due priority.

Michael H. Romanowski puts forth a three-step plan to prepare a school for character education. “schools must first correct their bias against religion and morals and add to the curriculum moral values such as justice, equality, hope, caring, compassion and self-control. Second, schools should teach the skills students need to transfer moral values from the classroom into their

daily lives. Finally, teacher education programs should expand their emphasis beyond pedagogical methods to include social and cultural analysis” (Romanowski, 1996, p. 49).

When schools are willing to commit to the entire scope of character education, then a change in the moral climate of a school should be evident. According to William Kilpatrick, “The primary way to bring ethics and character back into schools is to create a positive moral environment in schools. The ethos of a school, not its course offerings, is the decisive factor informing character” (Kilpatrick, 1992, p. 226).

It is not enough for the educators to simply adopt a character education program and place the ‘Word of the Week’ in a prominent position. Neither should ethics be taught as a separate subject where children get out their Character Education book and prepare to spend the next forty-five minutes on a morals lesson. Teachers can meld character lessons into the academic curriculum. The ideal opportunities arise especially during literature and history lessons.

Most of the literature already used in today’s classrooms can create opportunities for character enhancement. When kindergarten children read or listen to fairy tales such as “Snow White,” “Sleeping Beauty,” or “Cinderella,” the opportunity for helping a child learn to recognize good and evil and right from wrong is obvious. History lessons about the early patriots of America such as Nathan Hale and Patrick Henry present prime opportunities to teach loyalty and courage.

In using the academic curriculum, the teacher must ensure that she/he is not just focusing on that particular story or history lesson for the purpose of character education alone. “If the movement implies that the primary focus of teaching history is all of a piece with the making of moral judgments, then historical and moral criteria of truth become very confused. The emphasis has to be on helping children come to understand that difference, so that we prevent them from lapsing into a view of historical events and agents from a moral perspective alone” (Sockett, 1996, p. 128).

One of society’s demands for the education of children today is that the individual be educated as a complete and unique whole. Teddy Roosevelt said, “To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.” Indeed, many mission statements of schools and teachers express the goal of educating the child to become a viable member of society, able to function in today’s demanding and ever-changing world. In order to achieve this goal, educational institutions must overcome their fear of and bias against character education and place it back in the formal curriculum without apology. The schools must create a place of moral example and guidance in order to ensure the consistency of educating the moral intellect of the student.

Teaching values to children starts with taking into account how children think and their language base. Learning to be a person of character requires very specific concepts and skills. If those skills are missing, the students will react to the strong pressure from peers rather than becoming inherently ethical.



The future depends on our willingness to openly discuss moral problems. Schools have been truly noted for their reactive leadership. Character education represents an opportunity for school leaders to provide *proactive* leadership. Careful attention to process, and content consideration can produce an effective implementation of a character education program. The first step is always the hardest, but given the times, a *critical* one for our future.



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Taylor Jewell is a School Counselor in Arkansas. Working in schools has given Taylor a passion for promoting Character Education in schools. Taylor wants to acknowledge college professor, Dr. Penny Ferguson, Associate Professor, Henderson State University, Arkadelphia, Arkansas as a highly respected mentor.