

Teaching for Character:

Three or Four Strategies for Teacher Education

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The relative neglect of moral character education in the formal preservice teacher curriculum has at least two proximal causes. The first is the daunting surfeit of training objectives that already crowd the academic curriculum of teaching majors. When faced with the reality of finite credit hours available for teacher education, along with the demands of NCATE accreditation and state licensing requirements, many teacher educators assume that the preservice curriculum leaves little room for training in moral character education.

The second cause is that it is not at all clear what it would mean to equip preservice teachers to take up the mission of moral-character education, even if there was an intentional commitment to do so in preservice teacher training programs.

How, then, do teacher educators equip preservice teachers with the skills to take up their task as moral educators? What would training for character and ethical development look like?

Darcia and I once proposed two options what we called a minimalist and maximalist approach, and we did not entirely agree about which of these were the best way forward (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008). In any event these labels were not entirely apt or memorable and we (with Anthony Holter) now want to suggest that there are three options to consider:

- (1) Best Practice Education
- (2) Broad Character Education

- (3) Intentional Curricular

Best Practice

What we called the minimalist approach to CE was an undifferentiated blend of Best Practice and Broad Character Education. Best Practice views character education as immanent to best practice instruction (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). This approach argues that there is little need for specialized instruction in ethics or in the design of distinctly *moral* education curriculum. Rather, character development is an outcome of effective teaching. It is a precipitate of best practice instruction. Hence, in order to be assured that the moral formation of students will be in good hands the teacher educator need only ensure that pre-service teachers are prepared to be outstanding teachers.

In many ways this is already the default stance in schools; and teacher training programs, if they think about these things at all, tend to rely upon it as well. Before it is too readily dismissed I want to say a few words in its defense.

First, there is substantial evidence that building students' connection to caring school communities has the most pervasive and strongest relationship to a range of outcomes of traditional interest to character educators. A caring school community is associated with:

- Attachment to school
- Commitment to education
- Better academic achievement
- Less delinquency
- Better school persistence
- Belief in the legitimacy of rules
- More prosocial behavior

A sense of community is related to:

- Self-reported concern for others
- Conflict resolution skills
- Altruistic behavior
- Intrinsic prosocial motivation

- Trust in and respect for teachers

And what promotes connection and community? According to the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine---it is not anything exotic or even curricular. It involves some of the following strategies:

- Not separating students into vocational and academic tracks
- Setting high academic standards for everyone
- Giving all students the same core curriculum
- Small size learning communities
- Multi-disciplinary education teams
- Providing opportunities for service learning and community service
- And opportunities for experiential learning and “catch-up” learning

Moreover, the Best Practice approach is underscored by several principles of effective character education promoted by the Character Education Partnership. It aligns with principle 4 regarding caring school communities; with Principle 6 on the importance of rigorous academic curriculum; with Principle 7 with respect to fostering intrinsic motivation to do the right thing by building a climate of trust and respect, by encouraging autonomy, by building shared norms by class meetings and democratic decision-making.

In short the Best Practice approach endorses a set of well-attested pedagogical strategies that are considered educational best practice, including cooperative learning, democratic classrooms, and constructivist approaches to teaching and learning. It endorses practices that cultivate autonomy, intrinsic motivation and community engagement (Beland, 2003).

Moreover, this approach has the added virtue of requiring no significant alteration of preservice teacher training. However, the problem with this approach is that while it *foregrounds* best instructional and educational practice it *backgrounds* intentional values education, and so is susceptible to the charge that it is content to remand moral-character education to the hidden curriculum.

Broad Character Education

This is where Broad Character Education steps in. Broad Character Education includes those intentional programs that view character education as anything that brings about desirable *outcomes*. Here best practice is fortified by explicit interventions to reduce risk behavior or promote positive youth development. This is an expansive view of CE that targets a wide range of psychosocial competencies, risk reduction or prevention, health promotion or achievement outcomes. So, lots of things count as examples of CE when you take outcomes as the defining criteria. Moreover, the success of risk reduction interventions and positive youth development are claimed for “what works” in CE because, after all, “they are all school based endeavors designed to help foster the positive development of youth” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004, p. 5).

Yet the difficulty with Broad Character Education is that it is motivated largely by the risk-and-resilience literatures of developmental psychopathology; and is mostly absent the language of morality, virtue and character. This broad conception of CE does not point to anything distinctive by way of *treatment*; and the only reason to treat them as instances of MCE at all is because they reduce or prevent problematic behaviors associated with the “rising tide of youth disorder” so commonly thought to reflect the absence of character education in the schools.

But if character education is all of these things then the singularity of CE as an educational program with a distinctive purpose is lost. Indeed, “there is little reason to appeal to character education, or use the language of moral valuation, to understand the etiology of risk behavior or how best to prevent or ameliorate exposure to risk or promote resilience and adjustment” (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006, p. 259).

Intentional Curricular

The programs that fall under the heading of Broad CE are what allow Marvin Berkowitz and his “What Works in CE” project to claim that CE, in fact, works. When MCE is defined in an expansive, broad way to include programs or interventions that target a wide range of psychosocial competencies, risk reduction or prevention, health promotion or achievement outcomes, then cause for optimism is warranted. Of course,

as we have stated, this latter approach does not insist that the effective program include the language of morality, virtues or character.

And Broad Character Education has another characteristic: It tends to define CE in terms of certain outcomes. But what if CE is defined not in terms of outcome but in terms of *treatment*, that is, as an independent variable?

The Intentional Curricular approach does just this. It includes educational frameworks infused with moral valuation and a transparent theory of action whose objective is to influence the moral formation of children in our classrooms and schools. It aims to influence children's capacity or inclination for moral judgment, behavior or emotion. We engage in MCE to inculcate virtues or to orient the dispositional qualities of youngsters towards morally desirable aims for normatively laudable reasons. Hence, to justify MCE in the Intentional Curricular sense would seem to require facility with ethical theory or require some conception of how practice conduces to the formation of virtuous dispositions

Under this heading are schools that endorse core-values, or have an avowedly religious ethos. It is evident in KIPP Academy schools whose simple motto is "Work Hard, Be Good." Effective schools are those that are infused with a clear moral purpose, and the CEP core values principle (CEP Principle 1) makes this point. Moreover, the most compelling of the CEP principles is Principle 5, which urges schools to give students an opportunity to engage in moral action. This insistence that education include a commitment to moral action makes the CEP principles something more than a mere catalogue of instructional best practice, although it is certainly that as well (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006).

So this third view considers best practice as necessary but not sufficient for effective moral formation of pupils. Maybe at some point in the halcyon past it was sufficient, but in the present cultural milieu children are reared increasingly in toxic environments that pose special challenges for their moral and social development (Garbarino, 2004). This intentional strategy is committed to the view that students are best equipped to take on the challenges of development when they master the skill sets required for responsible membership in a democratic society (Guttman, 1987).

Darcia Narvaez's "Integrative Ethical Education" is one example of skill-building CE curriculum motivated by the Four Component Model of Morality (Narvaez, 2005), but there are many other CE curricular approaches that would fit under this rubric, with varying levels of conceptual complexity, rigor, and effectiveness.

One challenge for Intentional Curricular approaches to CE is that evidence for its effectiveness is thin, if the What Works clearinghouse run by the Institute for Educational Sciences is any guide (Lapsley & Yeager, in press). Moreover, there may be circumstances when more "stealthy" approaches that target, e.g., student attributions about the sort of person they are; or mindsets about the malleability of personality, might prove as effective as wholesale curriculum development (Lapsley & Yeager, in press).

Coda: Fortified Best Practice

So this brings us 'round to the problem of this symposium: What teachers must know to be effective character educators will depend on what one believes about CE: Is it broad or narrow? Is it an outcome or treatment? Is it a specialized curriculum or a precipitate of best practice?

Certainly, we all know that character can be learned. What we are wrestling with is how it can be taught. Our own sympathies align with a point made by Kristjan Kristjannsson. He defends a non-expansive view of CE that commits to two views: (1) there are transcendental moral values that anyone, in any society, time or place could identify, and that these basic moral values should be the target of intentional character education ("moral cosmopolitanism"); and (2) the content of moral truths are more important than the process by how they are taught ("methodological substantivism.")

Put differently: teach a basic set of core moral values by whatever methods are shown to work. We would improve upon Kristjannsson's point by adding that moral values must be embodied in action and understood in terms of skills, capacities and dispositions. This suggests that our way forward for teacher education is a fourth category we might call "fortified best practice", which is a combination of the (category 1) Best Practice and (category 3) Intentional Curricular approaches.

That is, fortify intentional character education as a treatment (“Intentional Curricular) with best practice educational strategies as the intervention (“Best Practice”). What we give up is a broad, expansive view of character education that unnecessarily complicates teacher training; what we gain is framework that starts with best practice as a foundation and builds upon it the “moral cosmopolitanism” required of distinctive character education.

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