

Teach Academics and Character

At the Same Time

People who see character education as an add-on are totally missing the boat. Traits like responsibility and self-discipline transfer directly to academic performance.

—Ted Haynie, principal of St. Leonard Elementary School, *1999 National School of Character*

Character-based schools show consistent improvement in student achievement and behavior.

—Julea Posey and Matthew Davidson,
Character Education Evaluation Toolkit [1]

What's the connection between character education and academics?

Answer: Done well, each improves the other.

When we build good character—including a *school of character* where adults respect and care about students and where students have positive relationships with adults and peers—we also build better students because there's a better environment for learning.

And when we build better students—by setting high expectations and helping all students do their best work—we build strong character at the same time.

If becoming a person of character means *becoming the best person we can be*, then it logically follows that growing in character means developing *both* our ethical potential and our intellectual potential. Human maturity includes the capacity to love and the capacity to work. Virtues such as empathy, compassion, sacrifice, loyalty, and forgiveness constitute our capacity to love. Virtues such as effort, initiative, diligence, self-discipline, and perseverance constitute our capacity to work and to become competent at the tasks of life. Understood this way, competence isn't something separate from character; it's part of it.

Can you have the competence side of character without the moral side? Sure. We can easily think of people who are competent but not good. A Mafia hit man would be one example. A brilliant but corrupt CEO is another.

Can you have the moral side of character but not the competence side? Obviously, yes. Being a nice person

doesn't guarantee that you know how to work hard or do a job well.

Once schools have this basic understanding—that strong character is needed for both interpersonal relationships *and* personal achievement, for social responsibility *and* academic responsibility—the false dichotomy between character education and academics disappears. To be a school of character, a community of virtue, is to be equally committed to two great goals: intellectual excellence and moral excellence.

When people understand character development in this way, as the foundation for both academic achievement and moral growth, they're less likely to say, "We'd like to do more character education, but with all the pressures from learning standards and testing, there's just not time."

Educators often ask, "If we invest time and energy in developing a character education program, will student learning improve?" We can confidently answer yes, academic learning will improve *if*: (1) the school's character education program improves the quality of human relationships between adults and kids and kids and each other—thereby improving the learning environment; *and* (2) the character education effort includes a strong academic program that teaches students the skills and habits of working well and making the most of their education.

Is there evidence to support this prediction? Yes, from two sources: (1) data from individual schools which often began character education because of low student achievement and frequent discipline problems—and saw test scores rise and discipline problems decline after implementing a quality character education program (the Character Education Partnership's annual *National Schools of Character* publication is the source of many such success stories; www.character.org); and (2) controlled research studies which find that students in a school implementing a quality character education program outperform students in a school that is comparable in make-up but not implementing the character education program. (For the most comprehensive analysis of these studies, see the 2003 report *What Works in Character Education?*, a review of character education research funded by The John Templeton Foundation and conducted by University of Missouri at St. Louis psychologists Marvin Berkowitz and Mindy Bier; report available from the Character Education Partnership, www.character.org)

To cite just one example from the scientific research: A national study by California's Developmental Studies Center compared, over a period of three years, 12 elementary schools implementing *The Child Development Project* (a comprehensive character education program combining values-rich children's literature, collaborative learning, developmental discipline, a caring community in the classroom and school, and strong parental involvement) with 12 matched schools not implementing this program. Students in program schools were significantly superior in classroom behavior, achievement motivation, and reading comprehension. Moreover, when program students went on to middle school (when the character program was no longer in effect), they continued to show superiority on character measures such as conflict resolution and academic superiority as measured by grade-point averages and standardized test

performance.

To cite just one example from the experience of individual schools: Mound Fort Middle School in Ogden, Utah, was among the 10 schools nationwide to be named 1998 *National Schools of Character*. An urban middle school (grades 6-8), it began its character education initiative with two goals: to break the cycle of violence in which many of its students were caught (many lived with violence in their families) and to improve student reading. Its “Community of Caring” character education program focused on five core values: family, respect, responsibility, trust, and caring. The whole student body took a pledge to “give up put downs, right wrongs, and praise other people every day.” Service learning—in which students regularly read to prison inmates, the elderly, and younger children—was a centerpiece of the program.

Following implementation of its character education initiative, Mound Fort Middle School saw student fights drop from one to two a day to one to two *a month* and its 8th-grade scores on the Stanford Achievement Test nearly double. Principal Tim Smith believed that students’ new enthusiasm for literacy stemmed from their involvement in reading to others as a form of face-to-face service. “Scores have skyrocketed,” said Smith, “because students see the point of their hard work.”

Improvements in academic performance, even with a well-designed character program, sometimes don’t show up until after program has had time to get established. A delayed positive effect was the case in Calvert County, Maryland, where Assistant Superintendent Dr. John O’Connell spearheaded a county-wide “3 Rs” character education initiative focused on “Respect, Responsibility, and the Right to Learn.” Discipline referrals began to come down in all schools after year one, but academic gains didn’t kick in until year two.

If intellectual development and moral development are the twin goals of character education, what are the practical strategies by which schools can achieve both of these aims simultaneously?

NAME THE VIRTUES NEEDED

TO BE A GOOD STUDENT

“Academic expectations teach virtues,” says Holly Salls, a 6th-grade English teacher at Chicago’s Willowbrook Academy. “But it’s important to name them in order to bring them into the consciousness of both the teacher and the students.” Here are the character virtues that she believes a strong academic program teaches—and that she challenges her students to work on:

- responsibility for your work
- thoroughness

- organization and neatness
- punctuality
- self-control and will-power
- honesty
- working quietly out of respect for others
- time management
- being prepared
- giving your best effort
- concentration
- perseverance
- accepting disappointments
- enduring things you don't want to do.

“The classroom,” Salls says, “is a place to learn and practice all of these habits.”

Parents of Willowbrook students provide support from the home front. Says a mother of two girls: “When my daughters say they don't ‘feel like’ doing their best work on a particular homework assignment, I say, ‘Anybody can do what they *feel* like doing. But if you can do things you *don't* feel like doing, you can do anything.’”

TEACH AS IF PURPOSE MATTERED

Mose Durst co-founded a small private K-8 school in Oakland, California called The Principled Academy. He wrote a book, *Principled Education*, in which he argues that educators must ask themselves—and engage students in asking—questions about “first things.” Questions such as: What makes life worth living? What is a life that is honorable and virtuous? To what should we give our efforts? What is the purpose of learning?

When Durst teaches writing to 7th- and 8th-graders at The Principled Academy, he begins by talking to them about the purpose of writing:

I explain that first of all, we should have a love of the truth. We should see writing as a way of communicating truth. We should want to be able to express to others, in a beautiful way, the truth about our own lives or about life as we learn about it through a work of literature. I find that if I can get students to connect with the purpose of writing, they are more motivated to take up the challenge.

TEACH AS IF EXCELLENCE MATTERED

Motivated by a sense of purpose, students are more likely to engage in the quest for excellence that is a central part of the quest for character.

The next step is to engage them in the often painstaking effort needed to pursue that quest. In Mose Durst's class, learning to write means learning to re-write. He and his junior high school students work hard on improving their first drafts. He makes a copy of everyone's paper, so that each student gets a full set. Together, for each paper, they identify strengths and areas for improvement. He works with students not only on getting their grammar and punctuation right but also on style—on varying their sentence structure (“not always using simple subject-verb statements”) so as to produce syntactically pleasing sentences.

When we encounter instruction of this quality, we can see why teaching and learning can be considered moral acts. There is a dedication of self to something inherently worthwhile. You learn to be obedient to the demands of the process. You accept that there are no short-cuts to success. All this builds character.

TEACH AS IF ALL STUDENTS CAN LEARN

Low expectations have been called the "soft bigotry" of education. They are often institutionalized as tracking and justified on the basis that some students have "low ability."

It's certainly true that we have to meet students where they are. It's also true that more and more students are coming to school with attitudes and habits that interfere with their ability to follow directions, concentrate on a task, and learn. But a school of character finds a way to challenge all students and help them achieve their potential.

As a reminder that such potential is waiting to be tapped, we can't do better than to consider the story of Jaime Escalante, subject of the book *Escalante: The Best Teacher in America* by *Washington Post* writer Jay Matthews. In 1975 Escalante became a mathematics teacher at East Los Angeles's Garfield High School, where fewer than half the students graduated.. He refused to believe that Latino students whose parents were 6th-grade dropouts could not learn calculus—something no one at the school had ever tried to teach them. In the beginning his students were boldly disrespectful, wisecracked their way through class, and had to count on their fingers to do even the simplest math problems. One day Escalante came to class in a chef's outfit with an apple and a meat cleaver. He slammed the cleaver through the apple. [3] “Let's talk about percentages,” he said. He had his students' attention.

He told them they could do the hardest problems if they worked hard enough. In 1978, he started Garfield's Advanced Placement program in calculus. He worked after school or in Saturday sessions with students who needed the extra time. Only five students took the course the first year, but four of the five passed the Advanced Placement Test.

(Only 2% of U. S. seniors even attempt it.) By the late 1980s, he was producing more successful AP calculus students than in all but four other high schools in the country. Escalante's story is also told in the film *Stand and Deliver*, worth showing to both students and teachers as a character education lesson in the virtues of love, determination, and unswerving faith in the potential of every human being.

TEACH AS IF STUDENTS CAN TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR LEARNING

Columbine Elementary School in Woodland Park, Colorado, is a 2000 *National School of Character*. Its mission statement commits the school to helping “every child become competent in academic skills, responsible for their actions, confident in their abilities, and enthusiastic, lifelong learners.” To make these goals a reality, Columbine has seven “Personal and Responsibility Standards”—viewed as “habits of mind”—that are integrated into classroom instruction and students’ report cards:

1. Practices organizational skills
2. Supports and interacts positively with others
3. Is enthusiastic about learning
4. Takes risks and accepts challenges
5. Accepts responsibility for own behavior
6. Listens attentively, follows directions, stays on task
7. Evaluates own learning

Each standard is broken down into four or five specific skills. For each skill there are four levels of competence: “in progress,” “basic,” “proficient,” and “advanced.” Charts posted all around the school help students understand what these standards or good habits look like in practice. For example, the first item under “Practices Organizational Skills” has to do with “completing and turning in work.” The four levels of competence in this particular skill are:

In progress: *I rarely complete my work and turn it in on time.*

Basic: *I sometimes remember to hand in my completed work, but I need a lot of reminding.*

Proficient: *I usually remember to hand in my completed work with few reminders.*

Advanced: *I consistently hand in my work with no reminders.*

Teachers teach students the seven standards and use them to evaluate students' progress. Students use them to self-assess. In assemblies, the 5th-graders (the highest grade in the school) do humorous skits showing what kind of behavior meets a particular standard and what doesn't. ("It's a hoot," says principal Michael Galvin.) Before parent-teacher conferences, teachers sit down with all students individually to rate where they are on the standards and help them set goals. Says one teacher:

I had always evaluated the children's behavior for the quarterly report cards, but it was always difficult because it was so subjective. With the Personal and Social Responsibility Standards, I now have a rubric with objective benchmarks. Because the whole staff uses these, any child who attends our school has the same standards throughout their time here.

Principal Galvin adds: "Our students are really hooked on the idea of being aware of their own learning. Once you achieve that, you can let go of extrinsic incentives. You won't see many pizza parties at our school."^[4]

Columbine's staff noticed that if a particular student scored low on Standard 7 ("Evaluates own learning"), he or she also tended to score low on standardized reading tests. So they designed a tutoring program that coached those students in both reading skills and ability to evaluate their own learning. Subsequently, standardized reading scores of Columbine's 3rd-grade students rose from 79% reading at or above grade level in 1998 to 98% in 2000.^[5] (For information on Columbine's Seven Standards and its award-winning character education program, contact: columbineelementary@myschoolmail.com).

USE AN INSTRUCTIONAL PROCESS THAT MAKES CHARACTER-BUILDING PART OF EVERY LESSON

If teaching and learning are designed to foster diligence—the virtue of trying to do all tasks well—then character development is, in that important sense, part of every lesson. But beyond that, we can use certain instructional strategies that enable students to practice interpersonal virtues—such as respectful listening and cooperative peer effort—regardless of the subject they're studying.

Internationally known for his work on cooperative learning, the psychologist Spencer Kagan points out that *how* we teach may be even more important for character development than *what* we teach. For example, if we lecture in an autocratic way about democracy, students will not become more democratic. If instead students work together on a project that involves collaborative decision-making, respect for minority opinions, and peaceful resolution of

disagreements, they are likely to become (no matter what the project's content) more democratic in their attitudes and behavior. Kagan says all this dramatically came home to him and his colleagues when they were field-testing a conflict resolution curriculum. "In classrooms," Kagan says, "students learned and could intelligently discuss our eight steps for solving conflicts—but then would go out on the playground and get into fights!"

Kagan calls this problem "the transference gap." If we want classroom character education about something like respect for others to transfer to subsequent real-life performance situations, then we must use "learning structures" that enable students to *practice* the character virtues we want them to internalize and apply.

How to make these learning structures an integral part of academic instruction is explained by Kagan staff development specialist Maureen Mulderig, who is also principal of Walberta Park Primary School (K-2) in Syracuse, New York.

In any subject area, the teacher can use a structure called "numbered heads together." This has kids count off (1, 2, 3), and then the teacher poses a question such as "How do you spell zebra?" or "What causes snow?" Students first write down responses individually, then huddle in their groups to compare and discuss ideas and come up with an agreed-upon answer—making sure that each group member knows the answer. The teacher then calls a number, and students with that number must show or explain their answer to the class. This learning structure gives children practice in several character skills: attentive and respectful listening, helping each other understand a concept, arriving at consensus, and taking the responsibility of being prepared to report the group's answer to the rest of the class.

At Mulderig's school, a teacher support group called SAM (Structure A Month) meets to share ways teachers have used that month's focus structure, to troubleshoot challenges, and to learn a new structure. In addition, there's a basket near the main office copy machine where teachers can swap student work sheets they've created for particular structures. (For more than a dozen learning structures, consult Kagan's book *Cooperative Learning* and www.KaganOnline.com).

MANAGE THE CLASSROOM AS IF CHARACTER MATTERED

Thoughtful teachers also integrate character-building and academics by managing their classrooms in ways that foster both intellectual and ethical responsibility.

For example, Scott Tiley, a former computer lab instructor and now Middle School Head at Michigan's Grosse Pointe Park Middle School, shares his approach to character education in his book *Character Education in the Classroom*.
<http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/plegal/ppac/ch6.html>

Point Academy, used a “Computer Pledge” to build a moral community and teach computer ethics. Following classroom discussion of the pledge, he asked his students to sign it as an expression of their commitment to the moral code of the classroom:

Gross Pointe Academy’s Computer Pledge

- *I pledge that I will respect copyright laws.* (No copying of software is permitted. Please respect what others have created and use only legal copies of software.)
- *I pledge that I will be careful with hardware.* (Please treat each computer, keyboard, and mouse with respect. Report anything that’s not working.)
- *I pledge that I will respect “electronic privacy.”* (You may open only three kinds of folders on the GPA network: your own, the class folder, and the lost and found folder.)
- *I pledge that I will leave the computers as I found them.* (Please do not install software or alter the control panel, clock, colors, patterns, desktop settings, fonts, etc.)
- *I pledge that I will do what I can to be helpful in the GPA Computer Lab.* (Everyone needs help with something at some point.)

I have read the above pledge and give my word as a student or faculty member to follow it. I am part of a community of computer users, and I know that whatever I do has an effect on someone else.

Some teachers get students to contribute actively to the learning community of the classroom by seeking their input on how to approach an upcoming unit (e.g., “What’s the most exciting way we could study the Civil War? If we can’t do that, what’s the second most exciting way we could study it?”). Their students become more committed to their learning. Other teachers have a regularly scheduled class meeting or council in which the teacher and students discuss classroom issues (e.g., How can we reduce tardiness? Improve the quality of homework being turned in? Help the class do better on the next test?) in a collaborative effort to make the class the best it can be.

TEACH CURRICULUM CONTENT

AS IF CHARACTER MATTERED

Another key strategy in teaching character and academics simultaneously is to view the curriculum through a character lens. What are the natural opportunities for highlighting character than can be found in virtually any academic subject?

We need to begin by seeing character development as a fundamental purpose of the school's curriculum. The curriculum should carry the intellectual and moral heritage of our culture. At its best, the curriculum is a source of moral wisdom and examples of how to live life well and make a difference in the world. In any academic discipline—science, math, music, art—biographical and autobiographical material can give students a glimpse of men and women of distinguished achievement in a particular discipline and raise the question: What strengths of character enabled them to achieve what they did?

With a little thought, all teachers can make the character connections. A science teacher can promote respect for the environment and the virtues (care in collecting data, truthfulness in reporting it, cooperation in the pursuit of knowledge) needed to do science. Math teachers can emphasize the importance of perseverance especially if math does not come easily; model empathy for students by teaching in a way that accommodates individual differences; and foster the spirit and skills of cooperation by having students help each other. Social studies teachers can address appreciation of cultural diversity, the struggle for justice, and individuals whose moral actions have changed the course of history. A foreign language teacher can use the Internet to find the latest news (about war and peace, world hunger, political developments) reported in the language under study and use it to foster a global perspective. Art and music teachers can help students appreciate the power of those endeavors to lift the human spirit and the self-discipline required for sustained creative work. (For curricular integration lesson plans, see *Character Kaleidoscope: A Practical, Standards-Based Resource Guide for Character Development* by Mirka Christensen^[6] and *Teaching Virtues: Building Character Across the Curriculum* by Don Trent Jacobs and Jessica Jacobs Spencer.^[7])

History and literature are especially rich in moral meaning. Do we draw this out—and take care to include curriculum content that has a strong character dimension? William Bennett asks, do we want our children to know what courage means? Then we should teach them about Joan of Arc, Horatius at the bridge, and Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. Do we want them to know about kindness and compassion and their opposites? Then they should read *A Christmas Carol* and *The Diary of Anne Frank* and later on, *King Lear*. Do we want them to know that hard work pays off? Then we should teach them about the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk and Booker T. Washington's learning to read. Do we want them to know about persistence in the face of adversity? Then they should know about the character of Lincoln during the Civil War, and our youngest should read *The Little Engine That Could*. Do we want them to know about the dangers of unreasoning conformity? Then they should read *The Emperor's New Clothes*. And if

we want them to respect the rights of others, they should study seminal documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, the Gettysburg Address, and Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham City Jail.”^[8] Resources like these ground them in the best of their culture.

CONNECT CHARACTER WITH LEARNING STANDARDS

Teachers everywhere are under the gun to help students perform according to their state’s mandated “learning standards” that spell out what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. I believe that once teachers get the hang of making character connections with their curriculum content areas, it’s a short step to teaching state learning standards and character at the same time.

In her article “Teach Character Education Through Mandated Standards,” Regent University professor Helen Stiff-Williams says that the trick is to look, during lesson planning, for the opportunities present in virtually every learning standard to integrate an area of character growth.^[9] For example, one New York State standard for English and Language Arts at the upper elementary level reads: “*Students will use verbal and nonverbal skills to improve communication with others.*” In teaching this standard, Stiff-Williams says, a teacher could incorporate instruction in conflict resolution, respect for others, and the value of collaboration. Demonstration of these skills could involve actual communication and collaboration among members of the classroom.

Dr. Janet Atwood, a curriculum specialist with the Mahopac Central School District in Mahopac, New York, uses an 8 ½ x 14 fold-out grid to show how to plan, for each month of the school year, essential questions, curriculum content, learning activities, and demonstrations of understanding that correspond to state standards such as “Read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding,” “Use language for critical analysis and evaluation,” and “Create and perform an art form.”^[10] For example, all three of those standards are addressed in September as follows: *Essential Question*: “What is honesty, and why is honesty important?”; *Curriculum Content*: *Pinocchio*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Richard Nixon and Watergate, and plagiarism; *Learning Activities*: Write an essay on honesty in government; interview two adults, asking, “How is honesty developed? Are we an honest society?”; and *Demonstrations of Understanding*: Role-play a real-life situation demonstrating honesty; create a storybook, *Mr. and Mrs. Honesty*.

USE A CHARACTER-BASED SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Core Virtues by Mary Beth Klee is a schoolwide K-6 interdisciplinary character education curriculum that makes strong use of fiction and non-fiction, integrated with American history, world civilization, and fine arts and organized around virtues clustered differently from grade to grade. This curriculum was developed and field-tested by Klee and colleagues at the Crossroads Academy, an independent school in New Hampshire.

In February of the 2nd-grade curriculum, for example, students focus on Citizenship and study the concept of “We the People” from the Preamble to the Constitution; Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation; a unit on immigration; historical figures such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, and Caesar Chavez; and the song “When Johnny Comes Marching Home.” In January of the 4th-grade curriculum, they focus on Courage and study Maya Angelou’s *Life Doesn’t Frighten Me*; Longfellow’s “Paul Revere’s Ride”; Patrick Henry’s “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death”; St. George and the Dragon; and Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and George Washington. In February of the 6th-grade curriculum they focus on Justice and study Judaism’s concepts of law and justice, including the Ten Commandments; Greek notions of the good citizen; the trial of Socrates; the French Revolution; American labor conditions at the turn of the century; and Samuel Gompers, Ida B. Wells, Susan B. Anthony, and Eugene Debs.

In addition to this rich grade-by-grade curriculum, schools using the *Core Virtues* program have a monthly schoolwide focus on a common virtue. There is a three-year rotation of these schoolwide virtues, with some of them (e.g., respect and responsibility) recurring across all three years. In the course of the three-year cycle, students encounter a wide range of character qualities, including many rarely seen on most schools’ character lists: hope, joy, graciousness, stewardship, faithfulness to country, gentleness, mercy, humility, and wisdom. In every classroom, at every grade level, the day begins with the Morning Gathering, the highlight of which is reading and discussing a story related to the monthly virtue. (For more information on *Core Virtues*, which includes an extensive annotated bibliography of children’s literature, visit www.linkinstiute.org; 800-276-6440.)

A caution (one recognized by *Core Virtues*) about using literature to teach character: We must always remember that stories are first of all stories, works of imagination that take us into different worlds, enlarge our experience, and delight us aesthetically. They should not be reduced to merely examples of good and bad character traits. A teacher needs a light touch—one that respects the beauty and integrity of literature even while helping students discern the moral truths therein.

STRUCTURE DISCUSSION AS IF CHARACTER MATTERED

Capitalizing on the character-building potential of a value-laden curriculum depends on the teacher’s ability to focus students’ thinking on the character dimension of the material at hand. Consider, for example, one of the most memorable moments in Mark Twain’s classic, *Huckleberry Finn*: The bounty hunters who are searching for Jim, the runaway slave and now Huck’s river raft companion, ask Huck if he has seen him. Huck decides to lie to protect Jim—even though he knows the law requires the return of a runaway slave and even though he thinks he might go to hell for his law-breaking deception.

In their book *Building Character in Schools*, Kevin Ryan and Karen Bohlin point out that many teachers, wanting to discuss the moral significance of this episode, might ask, “Did Huck do the right thing?” This “moral dilemma” approach engages students in discussing the pros and cons of a particular moral decision, and in the hands of a skillful teacher has the potential to stretch students’ powers of moral reasoning by considering all sides of an issue. The downside of the dilemma method, however, is that the discussion often ends with the class still divided, the moral question up in the air, and the feeling that there are reasonable-sounding arguments for and against almost anything (an impression that, unfortunately, only serves to reinforce the shallow moral relativism that many students bring to moral discussions). Moreover, questions of character are left unexplored.

To put the focus on character a teacher can ask, instead of “What’s the right thing to do?”, what would be a courageous thing to do? What would show unselfishness? Trustworthiness? Wisdom?

For an example of a teacher who focuses on character, Ryan and Bohlin take us into the 11th-grade English class of Mrs. Ramirez as they reach the point in the novel where Huck lies to save Jim. She asks her students to take 20 minutes to write an in-class reflection: “What does this decision reveal about Huck—about the kind of person he is becoming? Drawing from our previous discussion of virtues, which virtue is he beginning to show in this scene? Or is he simply acting out of enlightened self-interest? Give evidence from the text to support your response.”

At the end of the 20 minutes, Mrs. Ramirez engages the class in a discussion (abridged here) of their papers:

Mrs. Ramirez: What kind of person is Huck becoming?

Deborah: I think Huck is really changing. He stands up for what he believes is right, even if he has to lie.

Steve: Yeah, Huck shows a lot of guts. He’s changed a lot from the beginning of the novel.

Mrs. Ramirez: How has he changed?

Steve: I’d say he’s gained courage.

Danielle: I don’t think so. Huck needs Jim, and he doesn’t want him taken away. I think he’s acting out of his own self-interest.

Norma: No—for the first time, Huck realizes that Jim is a person, not property. It reminds me of people who hid Jews in their homes during the Holocaust and then lied to the Nazis. Huck shows respect for Jim—and courage. [11]

Character-based discussion centers on what it means to behave and live well. From a character standpoint, for example, the primary question regarding an out-of-wedlock pregnancy is not, “Is it right to get an abortion to deal with this unintended pregnancy?” but rather, “How can I live my life in such a way as to avoid putting anyone in this position?” Such an approach, as in Mrs. Ramirez’s discussion of Huck, keeps the spotlight on character—providing students with opportunities to reflect on their own character and the sort of person they wish to become. To engage

students in this kind of character-centered reflection, Ryan and Bohlin suggest posing questions such as:

- Which character (in this biography, novel, short story, play) would you most like to be like? Why?
- Did this character face a difficult challenge? How did he or she overcome it?
- What have you learned from your encounter with this character?
- Which character would you *least* want to be like? Why?

[12]

TEACH AS IF TRUTH MATTERED

Did the Holocaust really happen? If it did, who shares the blame? Who was responsible for the slave trade of the 1700s and 1800s that doomed millions of Africans to bondage? Is American history a story of commitment to human freedom, a story of discrimination and exploitation, or a combination of the two? Is global warming really happening, and if so, how serious a threat does it pose? Is our planet threatened by overpopulation, or are bad policies and practices (e.g., corruption and incompetence within nations, exploitation and neglect from without), rather than too many people, the real cause of poverty and deprivation?

Questions like these are questions about what's really true. They make it clear that in school and in life, the most important intellectual virtue is the pursuit of truth. That virtue includes a cluster of supporting intellectual virtues: an openness to consider all sides of an issue in a search for the whole truth; a respect for evidence even when it contradicts our bias; a willingness to admit error; a desire to keep learning; and a humility in the face of all that we don't know. [13]

But in order to pursue the truth and to see education as fundamentally about truth-seeking, we have to first believe that objective truth exists and can be known. Some current schools of thought—subjectivism and postmodernism, for instance—argue that all “truth” is subjective; that we process experience through our personal “filters” and thus each create our own truths. In the national debate about how to teach history, some historians—as in the book *History on Trial*—argue that it is “preposterous folly” to believe that historical “facts” exist “objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian.” [14]

There is, of course, a partial truth in this line of argument. But the reality that historical interpretations are biased should not cause us to give up striving for greater objectivity and completeness in getting the historical record right. When historians of the past have been shown to be wrong, they have been shown to be wrong about *real things*—that their claims about the past were different from what really happened. [15]

When totalitarian governments are overthrown, one of the first things native historians attempt to do is to put into the history books the true story of their people's sufferings at the hands of their oppressors, such as the denial of human rights and the jailing, torture, and execution of political opponents.

What, then, is objective truth? Objective truth—whether it’s historical truth, scientific truth, or moral truth—is truth that is independent of the knower. It’s true whether or not we know it. That Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the U. S. president when Pearl Harbor was bombed is objectively true whether or not I know it. Similarly for scientific truth. I may believe I can fly, but believing won’t make it so, as jumping off a building will quickly confirm. In the ethical domain, the assertion that slavery, torture, rape, and murder are wrong is an assertion of moral truth. When we make a moral judgment about an evil such as slavery, for example, we don’t say, “Well, in my personal opinion, slavery is wrong.” Rather, we make an objective claim: “Slavery—owning another human being as property—is wrong.”

The notion of objective moral truth has profound implications for character education. If moral truth were purely subjective, there would be no right or wrong that everyone would have to follow. You might think lying, cheating, and stealing are wrong, but I could say, “Hey, that’s just your opinion.” We’d each be free to follow our private conscience. If, on the other hand, right and wrong do exist, then everyone’s first moral duty—as we should point out to our students—is to *discern* the truth and to *form our consciences correctly*, in accord with what’s truly right. We should also point out to students that historically, a badly formed conscience has been the source of great evil. The September 11 terrorists were presumably following their consciences, as American slaveholders were presumably following theirs. Character education is based on the premise that some ways of behaving—with respect for human life and human dignity, for example—are truly better than other ways.

Do people sometimes disagree about where the truth lies? They do. As a nation, we once disagreed about slavery. Today we disagree about issues such as abortion, capital punishment, and global warming. But the fact that some issues are controversial or complex shouldn’t deter us from seeking to know the truth as fully and objectively as we can. In the past, that is how our intellectual and moral mistakes were corrected.

Consider just two examples from the historical realm that underscore the importance of seeking the objective truth. There are groups today that question or even deny that the Nazi Holocaust ever occurred. In well-designed school curricula such as “Facing History and Ourselves,” students examine the challenges of these skeptics, then examine historical evidence such as the transcripts of the Nuremberg trials that investigated the concentration camps and other

[16]

Nazi war crimes. New sources, such as the book *Masters of Death* by historian Richard Rhodes, keep adding to the evidence. In some schools, students hear first-hand accounts of the death camps from guest speakers who are Holocaust survivors. Students are encouraged to reflect not only about what the Nazis did but also about those who stood by and let it happen—and about the human propensity for mistreating those who are different that has given rise to persecutions throughout history.

A second instructive controversy centers on the question of who was responsible for the horrific slave trade that supplied slaves to pre-Civil War America. In one published teacher’s guide, teachers and students are told merely that

Africans were “kidnapped,” “captured,” or “abducted” from their homelands in the largest forced migration in recorded history. The guide makes no mention of the role that African royal families and indigenous slave dealers played in supplying European slave merchants. By contrast, as an example of a source that does confront the whole truth, historian Sheldon Stern quotes from the book that accompanied a recent four-part PBS series on “America’s journey through slavery”:

The white man did not introduce slavery to Africa. The bowing of one human being to another was an accepted notion from the moment man first sensed frailty on the part of a rival. . . . Long before the arrival of Europeans on West Africa’s coast, the two continents shared a common acceptance of slavery . . . Africans and Europeans stood together as equals, companions in commerce and profit. Tribe stalked tribe, and eventually more than 20 million Africans would be kidnapped in their own homeland. [17]

“Any apology for slavery,” Stern says, “should also be joined by Portugal, Britain, France, and especially Brazil, which purchased over six times more African slaves than the United States. America received under 5% of the Africans brought to the New World. In addition, the Moslem Arab states, which imported more African slaves than the entire Western hemisphere, could confront their past by helping to abolish the slavery which persists *today* in Mauritania and Sudan.” [18] In learning the whole truth about slavery, students learn not only a lesson about history but also an important lesson about human nature: that no nation or race has a monopoly on evil.

TEACH WITH A COMMITMENT TO BALANCE

A commitment to truth often translates into a commitment to balance. Harvard scholar Peter Gibbon has written about the notable *lack* of balance in the recent treatment of American history and particular historical figures. The truth is ill-served if we omit or gloss over our nation’s faults and failures (such as the displacement and killing of Native Americans, the enslavement and subsequent segregation of blacks, the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, and foreign policies that have supported repressive governments), but it is also ill-served if we emphasize the negative and downplay our country’s virtues and achievements. Indeed, the virtue of patriotism, defined as the love of what is noble in one’s country, requires that we appreciate not only our national shortcomings but also the democratic ideals that have been the spur for moral progress in narrowing the gap between what we profess and what we practice.

Gibbon says that when he travels around the country talking to students about the importance of American heroes such as George Washington, they tend to focus on their faults—on the fact, for example, that Washington owned slaves. (Washington did not, like Benjamin Franklin—who also once owned slaves—become an abolitionist, but he expressed

ambivalence about slavery.) He reminds them that Washington was human. His father died when he was 11. He watched his half-brother Lawrence die from tuberculosis and his step-daughter Patsy succumb to epilepsy. His own face was scarred by smallpox, his body weakened by malaria. When the American Revolution came, he didn't want to be commander. His soldiers were few and untrained, and defeat at the hands of Britain, the 18th-century's superpower, often seemed certain. But he didn't quit. He learned to dodge and retreat and use the wilderness. He forced himself to appear confident despite fatigue and frustration.

"I tell students," Gibbon says, "that Washington was great because he showed extraordinary courage—not just the courage to face bullets, but the courage to stick to a cause no matter how great the odds, to shake off failure and transcend pain, to take risks and to grow." When the war was over, he wanted to retire to a quiet life tending his garden at Mt. Vernon. But the new nation was fragile and wanted him to be its first president. He put his country's welfare before his personal happiness and served for eight years. As president, he was a masterful administrator and prudent statesman, always placing honor above power. "Washington was not brilliant like Hamilton nor eloquent like Jefferson," Gibbon concludes, "but our first president had character."^[19]

TEACH AS IF JUSTICE MATTERED

Even young children have a rudimentary sense of fairness. One of the most important challenges of character education is to develop that into a strong social conscience marked by a fully universalized commitment to justice.

What is justice? Treating others as they deserve to be treated. We should help students appreciate that every person has intrinsic dignity and value—sacred value, if one believes that we are created in the image of God. No person has more or less value than any other. Every human life is unique, precious, and unrepeatable. Every human being has human rights that derive from our dignity as persons. More than 30 of these rights are proclaimed in the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They include the right to a livelihood and living conditions that meet basic human needs and are consistent with human dignity.

The stark reality, however, is that for millions of our fellow human beings the conditions that support human dignity and human development do not exist. *Civics in Action* (www.civicsinaction.org), an online source of classroom lessons (grades 6-12) linking character and current events, recently carried a lesson on global citizenship. It included these statistics:

- 600 to 700 million children—40% of all the children in developing nations—struggle to live on less than a dollar a day.
- Nearly 11 million children—the population of New York City—die worldwide each year of diseases such as diarrhea,

malaria, and measles that could be prevented with simple shots and basic sanitation.

- 1.3 billion people—one of four—lack safe drinking water.
- More than 110 million children of school age do not attend school. One of every six persons worldwide is illiterate.
- 40% of children ages 10-14 work. Most are not paid.

Some global problems are approaching the catastrophic stage. Recently a team of United States Senators visited the pediatrics wards of a hospital in Johannesburg, South Africa. Half of the babies born in this hospital are HIV-positive. Currently, medicines needed to prevent mother-to-child transmission of the HIV virus reach fewer than 5% of women in sub-Saharan Africa. One Senator asked, “How long will these babies live?” A nurse answered, “Less than a year.”

Education for justice must also look honestly at the growing disparities between the haves and the have-nots. Just as the gap between rich and poor within our nation has widened in past decades, the gap between the rich and poor nations of the world has also grown. Whereas affluent Western countries consume more every year, some countries in Africa today consume 25% *less* than they did in the 1970s. Many African and other third-world countries use so much money to pay off their debt to multinational organizations like the World Bank that they have little left to spend on their citizens’ basic needs in education and healthcare. For this reason, many world leaders have called for wealthy nations to completely forgive the debts of third-world countries.

Our children have also inherited a world where terrorism and the violence it provokes are new threats to global peace. People of good conscience may differ regarding how best to confront the threat of terrorism and what constitutes a just use of force. But all people of conscience can agree on the truth expressed in a well-known quote: “If you want peace, work for justice.”

As the citizens of tomorrow, students should read accounts that put a human face on the suffering caused by injustice. Six weeks after the terrorist attacks of September 11, the *New York Times Magazine* carried an article by the [20] journalist Peter Maass depicting the plight of Pakistani youth ripe for terrorism. It opened with Emroz Kahn, now 21, who for the past 10 years has worked 12-hour days, six days a week, dismantling car engines with a sledgehammer and chisel. He earns \$1.25 a day. Under the skin of his forearm is a piece of pipe he drove into his body by mistake. It has been there for three years. He says he cannot afford to pay a doctor to take it out. “We work like donkeys,” he says. “Our life is like the life of animals.”

“These young men,” the article continues, “live where globalization is not working or not working well enough. They believe, or can be led to believe, that America—or their pro-America government if they live under one—is to blame for their misery.” When they are not at work, some of these young men attend religious schools known as “madrassahs,” most of which offer free tuition, room, and board. The more extreme schools teach that America is cruel to Muslims around the world and that “it is honorable to blow yourself up amid a crowd of infidels and that the greatest glory is to die in a jihad.”

A Pakistani lawyer interviewed asserts that Pakistan, largely ignored since it helped drive the Russians out of Afghanistan, must get something in return for its current assistance in the West’s war on terrorism. He says that nearly half of his city of Peshawar is without running water. There are few paved roads. Most inhabitants live below the poverty level. Children as young as 4 or 5 work in the pits making bricks. There has been no aid from the world at large or the government of Pakistan. “If we are asked again to make sacrifices for the West,” he says, “we must be able to show our young generation that we can get schools and hospitals and a properly developed city.” He adds: “I am not [21] hopeful.”

Kids can’t, of course, solve the world’s problems, but especially at the secondary level they should at least know about them—because they will be voting citizens soon. And even while they are still in school, both secondary and elementary students can take small steps to make the world a more just and caring place. Books such as *Kids Explore Kids Who Make a Difference* and websites such as www.dosomething.org, www.kidscanmakeadifference.org, and www.compassion.com offer students ways to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. And once they are informed about national and international issues, they can e-mail the President (president@whitehouse.gov) and their Congressional representatives to express a thoughtful opinion about how their country can use its influence for good.

Finally, we should challenge students to extend their concept of justice to include living creatures other than humans. Children, in fact, often have a natural empathy for animals that for some teachers has provided a starting point for developing a broader sense of justice. A new book worthy of study by secondary students is Matthew Scully’s [22] *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, which takes an unblinking look at our society’s growing cruelty to animals. One doesn’t have to elevate animals to equality with humans—Scully doesn’t—to be disturbed by the practices of modern “factory farms” that for the sake of efficient production raise animals under conditions so cramped, filthy, and painful that one shudders to read of them. Tough migrant workers who work on these farms can’t bear their jobs for more than a year. Of Scully’s book one reviewer wrote: “It gently questions whether we can foster human dignity in a society that treats other sentient beings as production units.”

It should be amply clear that educating for intellect and educating for moral character are equally important goals of character education. The two main ways that students demonstrate character in school are by doing their work diligently and treating others respectfully. And it should be clear why intellectual development and moral growth are both essential for full human development and the betterment of society. If we want our students to become competent and creative problem-solvers able to improve the human condition, we had better help them hone their intellectual skills. If we want them to use their brains to benefit others and not just themselves, we had better help them develop their moral sensibilities.

Character education, rightly understood, aims to develop the whole person. Better students, better citizens. It's the foundation that everything else builds on. That's why, as one principal said to his faculty, "Character education isn't something else on your plate. It's the plate."

[1] Julea Posey, *Character Education Evaluation Toolkit* (Washington, DC: Character Education Partnership, 2000).

[2] Daniel Solomon *et al.*, "Teaching and schooling effects on moral/prosocial development," in V. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (4th edition).

[3] Claudia Cangilla McAdam *et al.*, "Never a quitter," in *Portraits of character: Two* (San Clemente, CA: Kagan Publishing, 2001).

[4] *2000 National Schools of Character and Promising Practices Citations* (Washington, DC: Character Education Partnership, 2000). To order: www.character.org

[5] Posey and Davidson, op. cit.

[6] Mirka Christensen, with Susan Wasilewski, *Character kaleidoscope: A practical, standards-based resource guide for character development* (Port Chester, NY: Dude Publishing, 2000); 800/453-7461.

[7] Don Trent Jacobs and Jessica Jacobs-Spencer, *Teaching virtues: Building character across the curriculum* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001); 800/462-6420.

[8] William J. Bennett, "Moral literacy and the formation of character," in Jacques Benniga (Editor), *Moral, character, and civic education in the elementary school* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1991).

[9] Helen Stiff-Williams, "Teaching Character Education Through Mandated Standards," *Educational Leadership* (forthcoming, 2003).

[10] Dr. Janet Atwood, Mahopac Central School District, 845/628-3415 (ext. 347).

[11] Kevin Ryan and Karen Bohlin, *Building character in schools: Bringing moral instruction to life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

[12] I am grateful to James B. Murphy of Dartmouth College for this phrase.

[13] Thanks to Mary Beth Klee for her authorship of “The Portsmouth Declaration: A Call for Intellectual and Moral Excellence in School,” whose vision of education as truth-seeking has helped to shape my own thinking about this matter.

[14] Gary Nash *et al.*, *History on Trial* ()

[15] This point is from Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History* (Macleay Press, 1966).

[16] Margot Stern Strom and William Parsons, *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and human behavior* (Watertown, MA: Intentional Publications, 1982).

[17] Charles Johnson *et al.*, *Africans in America: America’s journey through slavery* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998).

[18] Sheldon Stern, “Beyond the rhetoric: An historian’s view of the proposed ‘National’ Standards for United States history,” *Journal of Education* (fall, 1994).

[19] Peter Gibbon, “Reflections on a man of undeniable character,” *Baltimore Sun* (February 16, 1998).

[20] Peter Maass, “Emroz Khan is having a bad day,” *The New York Times Magazine* (October 21, 2001).

[21] Ibid.

[22] Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The power of man, the suffering of animals, and the call to mercy*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002).