

Politics of Character Education

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Character education's history in the United States goes back to the beginning of public schools. The emphasis and profile has waxed and waned, frequently with political trends. The current standards-based environment poses particular threats and challenges to character education. In spite of these pressures, character education continues and—by most measures—is growing. This article (a) defines character and examines the history of character education in U.S. public schools; (b) introduces and contrasts the major approaches: traditional character education, caring, and developmental; and (c) outlines and examines current issues including the relationship of character to citizenship education, the family and school roles in character development, the relationship of church and state, federal and state policies and funding of character education programs, and issues of evaluation and research. Although advocating for character education, the approach here to the issues is descriptive and as impartial as possible.

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FROM THE BEGINNING OF public schooling in the United States through today, character education has existed in classrooms and schools, although the favored label for it has shifted repeatedly. At the outset, character education was an explicit aim of education. Today, character education continues—and by many measures is growing—in spite of various pressures, most

notably the standards-based environment of contemporary public schooling. The standards movement, with its emphasis on test scores as the primary means of accountability, has led to a narrowing of the curriculum to matters more easily measured in high-stakes examinations. This is not the most fertile environment for character education. Nevertheless, grappling with ethical issues and a fundamental concern with the social, moral, and emotional growth of students are part of the human condition and will not disappear with the advent of any new paradigm of schooling.

Character education, because it deals with relations between and among individuals and among groups, conditions of civil society, and significant public issues, is central to citizenship education. Character education and politics exist—whether implicitly or explicitly—in any group or organization. Character education is an attempt to prepare individuals to make ethical judgments and to act on them, that is, to do what one thinks ought to be done. As we engage in preparing children and youth to answer and respond to these and difficult personal issues and societal issues, their character development takes on growing importance. Character education, a vital tool for preparing our young people in our schools, has had to confront political issues and challenges of its own. What these issues are, why they surface, and what and how they have been addressed compose the focus of this article. Although advocating for character education, the approach here to the issues is descriptive and as impartial as possible, and the focus is on K-12 public schools.

WHAT IS CHARACTER AND CAN IT BE TAUGHT?

In this examination of the politics of character and moral education, let us start with defining *character* and *character education*. The process of defining what is the ethically correct action and having the integrity, or character, to do the right thing is an ongoing element of the human experience. Every parent, educator, and society in general has an interest in fostering the development of character in children (as well as family, neighbors, etc.). The field of character and moral education deals with questions of ethics and ethical behavior.

Over the years, educators have given this quest different names (e.g., *moral education*, *values education*). The most common term at present is *character education*. Terminology can be problematic, because *character education* can refer either to the entire field or to one of three major approaches (described in more detail in a subsequent section): caring, (traditional) character, and developmental. The caring and developmental approaches tend to use the term *moral education*. For clarity in this chapter,

we will use the term *traditional character education* in reference to the narrow approach and *character education* to refer to the entire field.

Thomas Lickona (1989) provided one definition of *character*:

Character consists of . . . values in action. Character . . . has three interrelated parts: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral behavior. Good character consists of knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good—habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of action. We want our children . . . to judge what is right, care deeply about what is right, and then do what they believe to be right—even in the face of pressure from without and temptation from within. (p. 51)

In Lickona's (1989) definition, the major philosophical traditions—and tensions—are present. As will be detailed below, there are three major approaches to character education: the cognitive-developmental approach (often called moral education) gives primacy to “knowing the good,” the caring approach emphasizes “desiring the good,” and traditional character education, which sees “doing the good” as fundamental. In classroom practice and character education programs, the three approaches are frequently integrated. There is also a growing inclusion of social and emotional learning and academic service-learning in character education initiatives (e.g., Berman, 1997; Elias, Zins, & Weissberg, 1997). For clarity, this article will focus on what might be called the pure types of the three approaches and distinguish between and among them. These differences are major and frequently contentious within the field, however there are also many points of common ground. Perhaps the most fundamental is the general agreement that (at minimum) character involves making and acting on ethical judgments in a social context and that this is the aim of character education.

HISTORICAL ISSUES IN THE POLITICS OF CHARACTER EDUCATION

From the beginning and growth of the public school movement in the United States, character education has been a component—sometimes the primary mission—of schools, sometimes divisive, but ever present. Character education has typically been seen as synonymous with, compatible with, and/or a subset of citizenship education. With the development and expansion of free public schools in the United States in the 1830s and beyond came the concern that “values of the home” (or at least some of them) be reinforced in the classroom and that the children of others—particularly immigrants—learn and practice them as well. Women were to be teachers of good charac-

ter as they were considered to be better role models. After virtuous teachers, textbooks were the second major source of moral instruction (e.g., McGuffey's *Readers*).

As the Puritans' concern with a strict character education became less rigid and more informal, it evolved into a desire for dominance through a nonsectarian, albeit Protestant, character education. Changes in immigration brought large Catholic populations into the United States in the 1840s and 1850s. Catholics, seeing these Protestant beliefs as incompatible with their doctrine and hesitant to recognize any state authority in character education, established a system of parochial schools to foster their own version of traditional character education. McClellan (1999) wrote of the consequence to the Protestant-dominated public schools system:

The early Protestant supporters of public schools were insistent on the connections between morality and religion, and they clearly saw the public school as a way to spread the general tenets of Protestant Christianity. Yet in order to prevent state aid to Catholic education, they were compelled to expand the religious neutrality of the public school. (p. 45)

By the 1890s, two approaches were evident. The first, the traditional character education approach, sought to instill traditional values and virtue as a struggle against the perceived corrosive effects of modernity. Traditional character education with an emphasis on doing the good has its roots in the Aristotelian tradition that sees action and habit as fundamental, over knowing and desiring. As articulated by R. S. Peters (1966), "The palace of reason has to be entered by the courtyard of habit" (p. 314). Among the contemporary advocates of this approach are William Bennett (1993), William Kilpatrick (1992), and Kevin Ryan and Karen Bohlin (1999). Many of these programs were carried on through venues other than the school. The Boy Scouts and their oath is a classic traditional character education approach of specifying a list of virtues, then creating a community environment that imbues youth with the virtues and reinforces them through formal instruction, visuals (e.g., posters), positive peer culture, and ceremonies. McClellan (1999) wrote of the opposition to this approach:

The codes and clubs so cherished by these reformers sometimes did little more than reinforce the standards of middle-class respectability. The scheme showed little tolerance for cultural diversity, and there can be no doubt that reformers expected it to play an important role in eliminating the differences that set immigrants off from the mainstream American life. (pp. 54-55)

In contrast, the second approach had progressive change as the primary goal of schooling and a developmental—process-oriented—pedagogy for character education. The progressives saw the ethical world less in terms of absolutes and viewed ethical decisions and action as contingent on context (including cultural contexts). The terms used, *relativity* and *relativist*, sometimes were seen and attacked as ethical nihilism (and in some populations have only pejorative meaning and no neutral definition). It was not the absence of “right and wrong,” but teaching children to engage in critical thinking and to have a process on which to call in making decisions and actions that was the core of the progressive approach. The progressive tradition is more Socratic, with its emphasis on reasoning captured in the phrase (albeit an oversimplification) “to know the good, is to do the good.” Lawrence Kohlberg (1981, 1984) and Jean Piaget (1932/1965) are the best known figures in the developmental approach, which has its roots in the progressive movement of the early 20th century.

The progressives focused on development of the individual and a broader agenda: the betterment of society. Combined, as McClellan (1999) observed, progressives

consistently gave more attention to great social and political issues than to matters of private conduct. Reversing the emphasis of earlier moral educators, they expressed little interest in the drinking habits or sexual conduct of individuals as long as such personal behavior did not impede the ability to operate as intelligent and productive citizens. (p. 57)

Given the interest in public behavior and political movements to better society, progressives emphasized democratic participation in social groups, not to instill and reinforce specific virtues but to engage in the skills of democratic citizenship: deliberation, problem solving, and participation in governance of the group.

In many ways, John Dewey embodied the major precepts of the Progressives (Scheffler, 1974; Westbrook, 1991). He lost his faith in the conservative religion of his youth and early adulthood. Dewey was born in Burlington, Vermont, but moved to larger urban settings (e.g., University of Chicago and Teachers College, Columbia). Dewey was actively involved with political movements (e.g., women’s suffrage) and organizations promoting social justice. Dewey was a founding member of the NAACP and the American Association of University Professors. He also was a strong advocate for the role of education for democratic citizenship (e.g., see Dewey, 1916/1966).

Dewey (1909/1975) argued that the best way to prepare for full citizenship is to engage in it in educational environments. One of Dewey’s anec-

notes illustrates, by analogy, what he believed to be the futility of other approaches:

I am told that there is a swimming school in a certain city where youth are taught to swim without going into the water, being repeatedly drilled in the various movements which are necessary for swimming. When one of the young men so trained was asked what he did when he got into the water, he laconically replied, "Sunk." The story happens to be true; were it not, it would seem to be a fable made expressly for the purpose of typifying the ethical relationship of school to society. The school cannot be a preparation for social life excepting as it reproduces, within itself, typical conditions of social life. . . . The only way to prepare for social life is to engage in social life. (pp. 13-14)

The progressives eschewed the list of desirable values and gave great weight to the findings of Hartshorne, May, and their colleagues that cast doubt on the efficacy of what was later derisively called the "bag of virtues" approach (Kohlberg, 1981). In measuring cheating in 10,000 children and adolescents in multiple experiments, Hartshorne and May found that they could not simply assign adolescents into "good character" and "bad character" categories based on behavior. Cheating in one situation was not a good predictor of cheating in another. Children and adolescents who reported that they valued honesty could not be distinguished, in their behavior, from those who did not (Hartshorne & May, 1928; Hartshorne, May, & Mailer, 1929; Hartshorne, May, & Shuttleworth, 1930).

Progressives were attacked for subjecting students to the tyranny of the majority, for substituting one form of conventional morality with one indistinguishable from it, for eroding both the moral authority of adults (e.g., in their roles of teachers) and the moral authority of the community through tolerance of other perspectives, and for emphasizing context (or relativity) as a legitimate factor in moral considerations.

In public schools, the traditional character education approach and the religious approach have largely become one and the same and embrace the traditional character education approach. The direct instruction of virtues and socialization of the young are a point of common ground between Protestants and Catholics. The historical tension between Protestant character education and Catholicism has largely vanished, as is evident in the large number of Catholic educators and philosophers who are prominent advocates of traditional character education, among them Bennett (1993), Kilpatrick (1992), Lickona (1989), and Ryan and Bohlin (1999). From this point forward, we will treat religion-based character education as a subset of traditional character education.

The mid-1940s to the mid-1960s was a nadir for character education in K-12 public schools. McClellan's (1999) analysis of the causes is compelling. He cited, first, the influence of positivism; second, the ubiquitous anti-communism in the United States; and third, a greater distinction between public and private behavior and a fear that character education was, or would be seen as, improperly invading the privacy of students and families. In the 1960s, there was a perceived erosion of moral authority based on opposition to U.S. policy in the war in Vietnam, support for the civil rights movement, challenges to traditional sexual norms and values, and a growing cultural pluralism across generations with an increasing diversity of the population. During this time, there was growing pressure for a greater separation of church and state, most notably with the *Engle v. Vitale* (1962) decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, which prohibited teacher-led prayers in public classrooms. For the many who see religion as the foundation of ethics, banning prayer was perceived as tantamount to banning character education.

In the late 1960s, there was a revival of interest in the school-based promotion of student moral growth. Given the growing focus on cultural pluralism and antipathy toward conventional authority, the newly arising approaches avoided the indoctrinative aspects of traditional character education. One of the influential initiatives was "values clarification" (e.g., Raths, Harmin, & Simon, 1966; Simon, Howe, & Kirschenbaum, 1972). The values clarification movement was an understandable attempt to address the increasing cultural pluralism, engaging students in a range of exercises designed to increase personal awareness of and/or make critical decisions about the values they held. The range of values is vast, ranging from personal likes in foods and aesthetic preferences in music to choices faced in ethical dilemmas (e.g., situations where one is forced to choose between telling the truth or loyalty to a friend). Being clear about which cuisine one prefers is rarely controversial. However, the notion of value clarity falls far short of ensuring ethical action. Theodore Kaczynski was clear about the values outlined in his "Manifesto," but that does not justify his actions as the so-called unabomber. Because values clarification did not draw firm distinctions between ethical and other values, the movement drew criticism as being relativistic in the extreme. This relativism and the lack of empirical support of positive impact of values clarification (e.g., Berkowitz, 2002) resulted in decline of values clarification.

One indication of the nadir of values clarification is the fact that an author of one of the major values clarification books could in 1995 write a history of character education that never mentions *values clarification* by name (Kirschenbaum, 1995). In terms of influence, values clarification was eclipsed

by the cognitive-developmental approach of Kohlberg (Kohlberg, 1981, 1984; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989; Reed, 1997).

Seemingly ubiquitous in the 1970s and early 1980s, Kohlberg's approach to moral education grew out of his research focused on highlighting and discussing hypothetical ethical dilemmas in curricula (Reed, 1997; Reimer, Paolitto, & Hersh, 1983/1990). Questions such as whether Heinz should steal a drug to save his dying wife (a parallel to Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*) became a staple in courses in psychology and education. In a second, less widely known focus, Kohlberg attempted to create Just Communities in which students participated in governance through direct democracy and where real life dilemmas received more emphasis than hypothetical ones (Power et al., 1989; Reed, 1997).

Kohlberg was criticized on several fronts, and during the late 1980s and 1990s, the dominance of the developmental approach waned. Shweder (1982) and Simpson (1974) challenged Kohlberg's claim of universal and invariant stages of development, and Sullivan (1977) presented a critique from a "critical" point of view (see Kohlberg, 1984, for a response to the critics).

The most influential critiques of Kohlberg—in terms of character education—were arguments from feminist theorists. Feminists attacked Kohlberg because, in part, the original sample on which he built his theory was completely male (and predominantly Caucasian). Gilligan (1977, 1982) argued that, therefore, the theory failed to capture the development of girls and women. Gilligan wrote about the psychology of moral development with a focus on care. Noddings (1984) wrote about parallel philosophical issues. Caring—desiring the good—has a philosophical tradition based on feelings and relationships that includes David Hume (1777/1983). Both Gilligan and Noddings wrote about the educational prescriptions of their research (e.g., Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1989; Noddings, 1992, 2002a).

The caring approach to morality differs from the character and developmental approaches in significant ways: (a) a morality of care is relational rather than individual; (b) it gives primacy to moral emotions and sentiments, claiming these to be the stimulus to moral action and moral reasoning (not always in that order); and (c) care does not require that moral decisions need to be "universalized" to be justified. Creating and maintaining relationships and a restructuring of school curricula to include a broader range of content and a greater appreciation for the affective is at the core of the caring approach's prescriptions for schools.

It is ironic, given the historical power of the feminists' arguments against Kohlberg, that many of the prescriptions of caring character education are

found in practicing Just Communities. Notably, they share constructivist approaches, an emphasis on relationships, and using, addressing, and resolving real ethical dilemmas that arise in community to promote character development.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN THE POLITICS OF CHARACTER EDUCATION

The issues that surrounded character education from the outset of public schools in the United States continue today. Before detailing how these issues are framed, let us examine the range of character education programs that exist in today's schools. Table 1 presents a taxonomy of programs considered to be and described as character education.

Character Education and Democratic Citizenship

One of the points on which all approaches to character education in the United States agree is that there is a relationship between character education and preparing a student to become a democratic citizen. A well-functioning democracy is dependent on an enlightened citizenry and one that can engage in the "pursuit of happiness" while also considering the common good. Education for democracy is a central aim of education, and many scholars argue it is the central aim (e.g., Banks, 1997; Goodlad & McMannon, 1997; Parker, 2002; Soder, 2001).

As might be anticipated, however, citizenship education and developing democratic character (Berkowitz, 2000; Soder, 2001) are fraught with political issues and division. The definition of *responsible citizen* is also a critical matter of contention. Character Counts!, one of the high-profile programs, cites citizenship as one of the "six pillars" of character. The brief definition of *citizenship* gives imperatives to follow: "Do your share to make your school and community better, Cooperate, Stay informed, Vote, Be a good neighbor, Obey laws and rules, Respect authority, Protect the environment" (Josephson Institute, 2001, 2002). The orientation to transmit values of what is seen as a *prima facie* good society is evident in the charge to obey laws and rules and to respect authority. This raises questions of whether those, such as Rosa Parks for example, should be considered as good citizens or having good character. As Noddings (2002a) and Kahne and Westheimer (2003) argued, these traits are not unique to democracy, in fact they would be viewed with approval by dictators and tyrants.

Whether education is primarily a matter of transmitting democratic values to the young or whether the focus is on fostering the capacities necessary for the process of democracy is the feature that distinguishes the major

Table 1
Taxonomy of Character Education Programs

<i>Type</i>	<i>Major Pedagogical Approach</i>	<i>Example</i>
Moral reasoning— Cognitive development	Discussion of moral dilemmas facilitates student development of moral reasoning capacities	<i>Reasoning With Democratic Values: Ethical Problems in United States History</i> (Lockwood & Harris, 1985); Just Community Approach (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989)
Moral education— Virtue	Academic content (literature, history) used to teach about moral traditions to facilitate moral habits and internal moral qualities (virtues)	<i>The Book of Virtues</i> (Bennett, 1993); <i>Character Counts!</i> (Josephson Institute, 2001, 2002)
Life skills education	Practical skills (communication) and positive social attitude (self-esteem) stressed	Seattle Social Development Project of the University of Washington Social Development Research Group (e.g., Catalano & Hawkins, 1996; Lonczak, Abbott, Hawkins, Kosterman, & Catalano, 2002)
Service-learning	“Hands-on” experiences of community service integrated into the curriculum	Community service-learning (e.g., Born, 1999; Kielsmeier, 2000; Wade, 1997, 2000)
Citizenship training— Civics education	American civic values taught as a preparation for future citizenship	<i>We the People</i> (from the Constitutional Rights Foundation)
Caring community	Caring relationships fostered in the classroom and school	Child Development Project (1996) (from the Developmental Studies Center); Community of Caring (from the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation); <i>Educating Moral People</i> (Noddings, 2002a)
Health education— Drug, pregnancy, and violence prevention	Program-oriented approach used to prevent unhealthy/antisocial behaviors.	Here’s Looking at You 2000 (from the Comprehensive Health Education Foundation)

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Type</i>	<i>Major Pedagogical Approach</i>	<i>Example</i>
Conflict resolution— Peer mediation	Students trained to mediate peer conflicts as a means of developing constructive conflict resolution skills	Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum (from The Committee for Children)
Ethics— Moral philosophy	Ethics of morality explicitly taught	<i>Moral Questions in the Classroom</i> (Simon, 2001); <i>Philosophy in the Classroom</i> (e.g., Lipman, 1988); and Socratic Seminars (e.g., Adler, 1982; Gray, 1989; Strong, 1996)
Religious education	Character education taught in the context of a faith tradition, justifying morality from a transcendent source	The Virtues Project (Popov, 2000)

approaches in citizenship education. These approaches and their relationships to citizenship might be portrayed by visualizing a graph formed by placing *Participation* and *Transmission* on the left and right ends of an x-axis. Placing *Participation* on the left represents the tendency for it to be advocated by the political liberals. *Transmission*, on the right, is more characteristic of the political conservatives. The graph is completed by placing *Justice* at the top of the y-axis and *Caring* at the bottom. (This alignment of the image and terms with the political right and left is a mirror image of the original presentation of the graphic by Parker, 2003, p. 47.)

Traditional character education, with its emphasis on transmitting virtues, falls in the right two quadrants of this graph. Developmentalists, with the emphasis on the process of decision making and social action would fall predominantly in the left two quadrants. As the term implies, the caring approach falls in the lower two quadrants.

The terms for citizenship education, *traditional* and *progressive*, are consistent with how the terms are used in character education. Both the traditional and progressive approaches to citizenship emphasize (a) the obligation to vote, (b) deliberation of significant public issues, and (c) recognizing that democracy is always (to steal a phrase from existentialists) in “the process of becoming” and therefore requires constant vigilance.

Parker (1996, 2003) outlined and advocated a third concept and approach, “advanced democracy,” which differs from traditional and progressive citizen-

ship education by placing an explicit focus on diversity and what is frequently referred to as “identity politics” and/or “the politics of difference” (e.g., Grillo, 1998; Wilmsen & McAllister, 1996; Young, 1990). In identity politics, it is the smaller rather than the larger group to which the individual has allegiance. For example, in contemporary politics, identity politics is evident in debates and deliberations about issues of abortion with the competing pro-choice and pro-life identity groups. In the case of Northern Ireland, Protestant and Catholic and the differences between them are, for some, of greater importance than what they have in common.

Parker (1996) outlined the challenge of diversity and identity politics for advanced democracy:

Liberal democracy’s basic tenets of human dignity, individual liberty, equality, and popular sovereignty need to be preserved but extended and deepened within a new sense of citizenship that is not subtly or overtly hostile to diversity. This is a citizenship that embraces individual differences, multiple group identities, and a unifying political community all at once. The task ahead is to recognize individual and group differences and to unite them horizontally in democratic moral discourse. (p. 117)

As Parker noted, this required discourse is ethical in nature and, therefore, related to issues of character and character education (e.g., Habermas, 1990; Noddings, 2002a, 2002b).

The tension between the good of the individual or identity group and the commonweal is one that was noted by Alexis de Tocqueville (1835/2000) in his study of democracy in the United States. It is the “habits of the heart” by which individuals constrain their own self-interest and consider the good of the community. It has been dealt with in different ways by the three approaches to character education. Traditional character educators who rely on a finite list of virtues may differ in the number included in their lists, but have few doubts that the virtues are universal and on reflection, will supercede the narrow interests of any individual or identity group. The developmentalists have a tradition that emphasizes social justice. They see universality embodied in developmental stages rather than a set of virtues and see resolution through a careful examination of competing claims being judged in terms of rational ethical principles, most notably based on justice.

In contrast, the caring approach does not claim universality and questions both traditional character education and developmentalists in their shared liberal tradition. The liberal tradition is seen by proponents of caring as placing too much emphasis on individualism and rationality. Noddings (2002b) argued by using an example: “Jeremy Bentham, an early utilitarian, allegedly remarked that he could legislate for all of India, and presumably for the whole

world, from the privacy of his study” (p. 72). That Bentham could legislate for individuals with whom he had no relationship and limited experience with their culture, needs, emotions, and aspirations is an anathema for the caring approach.

Citizenship education consists of knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Learning the history of concepts of the U. S. Constitution is an example of the first, developing an ability to engage in respectful political deliberation is an example of requisite skills, and dispositions refers to being engaged in the community (sometimes called “social capital,” e.g., Putnam, 2000). One of the strategies to foster democratic dispositions is “service-learning.” Service-learning is a teaching strategy where students learn portions of a discipline’s curriculum by providing community service (e.g., Bhaerman, Cordell, & Gomez, 1998; Billig & Waterman, 2002; Education Commission of the States, 2001; Eylar & Giles, 1999; Kielsmeier, 2000; Wade, 1997, 2000). Teaching immigrants the answers to the United States’s test for citizenship is both a service and a way for students themselves to know the content. Providing a résumé service to unemployed homeless as a service and as a means of teaching one form of writing and vocational skills is another example. In many service-learning experiences, students confront ethical issues (e.g., what responsibilities individuals and government have toward the homeless, the poor, or the abused). Service-learning is a strategy with great potential to foster character education and is used in many programs (e.g., Born, 1999). Some (e.g., Berkowitz, 2000) have argued that it is a form of character education. Indeed, the Character Education Partnership (2003) recognized the Hudson Public Schools (Massachusetts) in 2002 by presenting it with a District of Character Award for its commitment to promoting social responsibility through service-learning.

That citizenship and character education have an unbreakable link and that service-learning is a strategy to foster both are two points of common ground among the three approaches. They do not, however, have a shared definition or a broad set of educational prescriptions or strategies (Berkowitz, 2000).

Relationship of Families to Schools

It is shibboleth of the character approach, to quote George W. Bush (2002), that the family is the primary unit of traditional character education:

Family is the first place where these values are learned. Our parents expect schools to be allies in the moral education of our children. That’s what they expect, and that’s what we must give them. The lessons of the home must be reinforced by high standards in our schools. (para. 13)

In our experience, many educators fear that character education will create major controversy, but the fear is exaggerated. That is not, however, to claim that such controversies do not exist. There are some parents and networks—formal and informal—who object to character education in public schools—frequently called “government schools” (e.g., see <http://www.learnusa.com>). The arguments offered often include that schools are teaching values counter to those held by the families, and that the focus of schools should be limited to “core knowledge disciplines.”

Many of these parents are on the political right and ironically, also use an argument often associated with the political left: that school is trying to produce workers, sacrificing the interests of the child and the family for those of corporations and the economy (e.g., Bowles & Gintis, 1976). One source lists the objectionable messages that one parent believes government schools are sending:

There is no right or wrong, only conditioned responses. The collective good is more important than the individual. Consensus is more important than principle. Flexibility is more important than accomplishment. Nothing is permanent except change. All ethics are situational; there are no moral absolutes. There are no perpetrators, only victims. (Eakman, 2002, pp. 41-43)

In the United States, with a history of an espoused value for the sanctity of the family, this tension is a complex and powerful one.

Some of the arguments raised by these parents and groups are unique to character education, but most deal with the larger issue of school and the education system as a whole. In terms of character education, all of the questions should be the subject of moral discourse between and among people with open and critical minds.

Relationship of Church and State

As noted earlier, there is a strong historical connection between religion and character education in the United States. The tension is evident also in the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights, which simultaneously prohibit a state-sponsored religion and guarantee the right of any person to join and follow any faith community, but where communities remain separate from the state.

These issues continue today. There is a strong perceived connection between religion and character in the minds of the U.S. population, which was documented in a recent survey by Farkas, Johnson, and Foleno for Public Agenda about the place and importance of religion.

One message arrived loud and clear: Americans strongly equate religion with personal ethics and behavior, considering it an antidote to the moral decline they perceive in our nation today. Crime, greed, uncaring parents, materialism—Americans believe that all these problems would be mitigated if people were more religious. And to most citizens, it doesn't matter which religion is involved. (Public Agenda, 2001, para. 3)

However firm the connection between religion and character is in the public's perception, citizens demonstrate a tolerance for other religions and faiths and in the views on many religious issues, such as school prayer. Farkas, Johnson, and Foleno (2001) found that

while many Americans seem to feel the nation has gone too far in removing religion from public schools, only 6 percent call for a school prayer tailored to the Christian majority. Most are reluctant to isolate students whose beliefs are different, and voice concern that school prayers may infringe on the rights of parents. Reaching for balance, the public favors a moment of silence over a spoken prayer. (p. 15)

The administration of President George W. Bush supports federal funding to faith-based organizations for delivery of education, health, and human service programs. President Bush sees religion as providing the meta-ethical foundation for and as being the genesis of character as well as providing the foundation for character education:

Now, I know there's a debate about values and character. I've heard it before—as you might remember, I was the governor of a great state at one time. I've heard every excuse why we shouldn't teach character. It always starts with religion, as to why we shouldn't teach character. Well, look, we should never promote a particular religion, I agree. That's not the—that's not the reason to have character education. But we've got to recognize in our society that strong values are shared by good people of different faiths, and good people who have no faith at all. (Bush, 2002, para. 16)

Advocating character education, while simultaneously holding that character education starts with religion, is a restatement of the tension of the constitutional requirement for a separation of church and state.

Some parents see secular character education as incompatible with their beliefs, however, most schools implement character education without such controversies. The major distinction in character education, and all academic disciplines, is between teaching about religion rather than promoting or proselytizing a particular faith (e.g., Haynes & Thomas, 1998; Nord, 1995; Nord & Haynes, 1998). Knowing about religion is essential to an understanding of

the situation in the Middle East. In character education, understanding the religious faiths of Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and the Dali Lama are required for a full understanding and appreciation of their moral philosophies and actions.

To summarize, an historical link exists between religion and character education, many citizens see them as inextricably linked. This ethics-based-on-religious-beliefs perspective is compatible with secular character education as long as it does not involve indoctrination or proselytizing. The teaching about religion and the role it plays in history, current events, and the lives of moral leadership can enrich the school curriculum (e.g., Simon, 2001).

Politics of Federal Character Education Pilot Programs

The U.S. Department of Education (2003) started funding character education programs during the Clinton administration with competitive grants. These grants have had a catalytic effect in the states to implement character education programs. Since the program's inception in 1995, 93 state and local education agencies have received funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2003, para. 3). In the most recent round, which for the second time did not limit application to state offices of education, 8 educational agencies received U.S.\$3 million for the 1st year of their multiyear character education grants (U.S. Department of Education, 2003, para. 1). The total expenditure from the Department of Education to support character education for fiscal year 2003 was U.S.\$24 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2003, para. 2).

In the presidential election of year 2000, character education was an issue supported by candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore. After taking office, the Bush administration in August 2001 unveiled its Communities of Character program. President Bush's recommendations for teaching strategies fall within the framework of the traditional conception of character education:

There are schools in our country where children take pledges each morning to be respectful, responsible and ready to learn—it's an interesting idea—where virtues are taught by studying the great historical figures and characters in literature; and where consideration is encouraged and good manners are expected. (Bush, 2002, para. 18)

The administration's Communities of Character program was a major focus in late summer of 2001, and it was sufficiently high in profile that it drew the attention of political pundits, op-ed pages, and newspaper editorial boards (e.g., "Values, Depoliticized", 2001). Bush's plans to put character education at the center of the citizenry's attention evaporated in the events of September 11, 2001. However, the administration—working with bipartisan

sponsors—tripled the amount of character education pilot grants available through the U.S. Department of Education.

There was a range in the quality of implementation of character education in the early years of the federal funding. The same was true of the efforts to evaluate the effects of these programs. In the state of Washington, for example, the politics of the evaluation of character education were far greater than those involved with implementing the programs, consequently hurting the evaluation efforts. This is typical of many of the early rounds of character education projects funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The quality of both programs and evaluation has improved over the years. The Department of Education has increased the standards, increased the number of eligible applicants, and is requiring more stringent evaluation (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Title IV, Subpart 3, Section 5431, pp. 1817-1823; U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Deputy Secretary, Strategic Accountability Service, 2003, pp. 57-58).

Politics and Character Education Research

What research does exist on character education is sketchy relative to the number of character education efforts extant. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to pose the question regarding the impact of character education, just as it is appropriate to examine the relationship of instructional strategies and/or curricula on character development. Evaluation of character education programs is a Gordian knot. It includes, by its nature, philosophical issues, research issues, and politics. In terms of philosophy: Is telling the truth an ethical decision? In all cases? If it leads to informing an attacker about the whereabouts of the intended victim? Are issues of drug use and sexual activity inherently ethical questions? Is the correct answer “Just say no,” and is that the same answer for children, adolescents, and adults? In terms of research, what is to count as success? Behavior, as noted, is vague in this context. Developmentalists tend to focus on maturity of reasoning, but there is always a tension and no guarantee that one will do what one decides is right. That is the “judgment-action” problem; that is, sometimes knowing the good does not lead to doing the good (Kohlberg, 1984). Similarly, moral motivation does not guarantee moral action.

Among the questions that need conceptual clarity and research data are: (a) What counts as evidence? (b) How can it be observed/measured? (c) What is known about what strategies and programs work? and (d) How to fund outcome research (in addition to federal funding)?

Although a conceptual and empirical quagmire, it is appropriate to question the impact of character education instructional strategies and/or curric-

ula. Berkowitz (2002) noted some of the findings that have strong supporting research data:

The Just Community Schools approach has demonstrated its effectiveness in promoting moral reasoning and stimulating the development of positive school culture and prosocial norms. . . . The most extensive body of scientifically sound research about a comprehensive character education approach concerns the Child Development Project (a program of the Developmental Studies Center). This elementary school reform program has been shown to promote prosocial behavior, reduce risky behaviors, stimulate academic motivation, create a positive school community, result in higher grades, and foster democratic values. Furthermore, it has identified the development of a caring school community as the critical mediating factor in the effectiveness of character education. . . . Numerous other character education initiatives and programs report single studies of effectiveness, but are not often reviewed and published. (pp. 56-57)

To elaborate on the findings of the impact of the Child Development Project, Battistich, Schaps, and Wilson (in press) found that character education in elementary school has an impact on academic performance in students' middle school years. Middle school students who participated in the Child Development Project as elementary students had higher grade point averages and academic achievement scores (both statistically significant) than their peers who had not participated in the Child Development Project. These students also liked school, had greater respect for teachers, and had higher educational aspirations than their peers. It may be the case that character education programs change the trajectory of development in small—and perhaps immeasurable—ways in the short term and that the effect is more observable over time.

Teachers and others engaged in character education are far more focused on implementation than on evaluation. The field suffers from having relatively few rigorous research findings. The results from the Child Development Project and the Social Development Project highlight the need for both research in general and longitudinal research in particular.

In response to the acknowledged need, The Character Education Partnership, the largest and most inclusive of the organizations, is promoting more rigorous evaluation of character education programs (e.g., Berkowitz, 1998; Posey, Davison, & Korpi, in press).

The most recent major change in federal involvement in education is the reauthorization of what was previously the Elementary and Secondary Education Act now titled the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (not to be confused with the policies of the Children's Defense Fund, which has used the

phrase *No Child Left Behind* as its motto for many years). In 2003, The U.S. Department of Education issued contracts to assess the effectiveness of character education programs through “scientifically based research.” The legislation requires that the research

- Involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs;
- Includes research that employs systematic, empirical methods that provide reliable and valid data across evaluators and observers, across multiple measurements and observations, and across studies by the same or different investigators;
- Is evaluated using experimental or quasi-experimental designs in which individuals, entities, programs or activities are assigned to different conditions and with appropriate controls to evaluate the effects of the condition of interest, with a preference for random assignment experiments or other designs to the extent that those designs contain within-condition or across-condition controls;
- Ensures that experimental studies are presented in sufficient detail and clarity to allow for replication or, at a minimum, offer the opportunity to build systematically on their findings; and has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective and scientific review. (American Psychological Association, 2002, p. 53)

This effort is in many ways admirable; however, the research contract opportunity ignores some of the political realities of schools and communities. It is often difficult to find, as required by the contract, 8 to 10 schools sufficiently interested in character education to implement a program. It is even more difficult to put them in a situation where, through the required random assignment, they have only a 50% chance of implementing the program. They would be forced not to implement for 2 years if random assignment makes them a control school ineligible for the “treatment category.” This concern is more than hypothetical. Character Counts! experienced this problem in an evaluation in South Dakota where control schools did not remain in the research project. The Community of Caring (a character education program of the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation) had one control school implement the program in the 2nd year of implementation in the experimental school.

Even if there are schools that have the character and discipline to delay educational gratification by being control schools and if data are gathered,

based on the history of “evidence-based” research and policy implications in reading, one cannot be sanguine that the forthcoming results will be viewed as objective by all educators and policy makers (e.g., Zimmerman & Brown, 2003). The evidence demonstrating the ineffectiveness of the drug-abuse prevention education (DARE) program (e.g., Ennett, Tobler, Ringwalt, & Flewelling, 1994; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003) has had only limited and delayed effects on convincing schools to drop the program in favor of programs with solid research evidence of effective prevention.

Politics of State Funding and Support of Character Education—States

Schooling is a responsibility of the states. The majority of school funds come from local and state coffers. In the 1999-2000 academic year, the average contribution of federal funds to the budgets of the 100 largest school districts was 8%. With the exception of the District of Columbia, the high was 15.3% and 2% the low (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). The federal government is sometimes accused of creating unfunded mandates with regulations that accompany the funds (the annual testing required by the No Child Left Behind Act and special education are oft-cited examples). This is not the case with character education. In the first round of the “pilot” funding, state education agencies receiving federal grants were required to attempt to secure state funding to replace the federal dollars at the end of the 4-year period of the grants. Indiana, Missouri, and New Jersey were successful, whereas most others failed. The politically charged issue of mandating, but not funding, character education is more prevalent at the state level.

For clarity and simplicity, let us consider three differing types (of the many existing and potential permutations) of support for character education: (a) a state mandate without funding, (b) a state that encourages without providing funding, and (c) a state mandating or encouraging with funding. Below are examples of each type.

New York is one of the states with a policy mandating character education by

Education Law 801-a, which requires schools to incorporate civility and citizenship into the K-12 curriculum, schools take on at least part of the responsibility of creating a generation of citizens who are prepared to take their place in a civil, democratic society. Character Education “is intended to instruct students on the principles of honesty, tolerance, personal responsibility, respect for others, observance of the laws and rules, courtesy, dignity, and other traits.” (Character Education Study Group, 2002, para. 2)

The challenge that this mandated approach presents to educators is well summarized by the Character Education Study Group (2002) in the intro-

duction to materials they developed to help schools and districts determine if they were in compliance with the mandate:

Administrators and classroom teachers were already feeling overwhelmed by the number of responsibilities the public schools have absorbed in recent years. This mandate leaves schools wondering what to do and how to do it. Committees began to form; teachers, parents, and administrators met; workshops became available and everyone seems to be asking the same question: "Character education: Aren't we already doing that?" (para. 3)

Turning to the second type of policy, in April 2003, the Iowa legislature passed unanimously and the governor signed into law a bill that supports character education through the encouraging type of policy. As is true with many state bills, Iowa combined character education with citizenship education and with service-learning. The legislation authorizes schools to require service-learning as a requirement for high school graduation and encourages schools to "consider recommendations from the school improvement advisory committee to infuse character education into the educational program" (Iowa House of Representatives, 2003, subsection 3).

That this bill was approved unanimously is a tribute to the sponsor of the legislation—a strong advocate for character education. The bill was not without detractors in the community; the Iowa School Boards Association (2003) expressed misgivings about the bill because "this bill imposes another unfunded mandate with significant responsibilities that would require precious staff development hours to be spent on the program" (Bill Tracker section, para. 3). In its editorial against the bill, the *Iowa City Press-Citizen* observed that "this Eisenhower-era approach to public education just doesn't make the grade" ("Character Education: One Bad Apple," 2003).

In contrast, in the state of Washington, the decades-old Basic Education Act calls on schools to teach "honesty, integrity, trust, respect for self and others, responsibility for person actions and commitments, self-discipline and moderation, diligence and positive work ethic, respect for law and authority, healthy and positive behavior, [and] family as a basis of society" (Bergeson, Kanikeberg, & Butts, 2002, p. 2). The prologue of Washington State's education reform act (ESHB 1209) gave character and citizenship as the foundation of reform, stating that the purpose of the act was to "provide students with the opportunity to become responsible citizens, to contribute to their own economic well-being and that of their families and communities, and to enjoy productive and satisfying lives" (Bergeson et al., 2002, pp. 1-2).

In 2000, the bipartisan coauthors of the House of Representatives introduced legislation supporting and funding character education. There were

many parallels between Iowa in 2003 and Washington in 2000, including support from both Democrats and Republicans and a negative editorial from the state's largest newspaper, the *Seattle Times*, titled "Voting for Character Ed: So Light, Tasty and Flaky" (2000). The major difference between Iowa and the state of Washington was funding. Iowa's legislation supports character education without funding and was passed; the Washington State legislation that would have provided support and funding went down to defeat.

Based on its survey, the Education Commission of the States (2001) reported that

one measure of how character education is growing is the number of states that have passed legislation; as of January 2001, nine states and Puerto Rico have mandated character education through legislation, and 11 more states plus the District of Columbia have policies that recommend some form of character education. (para. 6)

It is difficult to generalize about character education and state support because of the different types of policies and lack of a consistent definition of character across states (Education Commission of the States, 1999). Forty-five states and the District of Columbia received and implemented character education pilot grants through the U.S. Department of Education during the first version of the Character Education Pilot Program in years 1995 through 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a, para. 3). In 2002, Nevada joined the list of state education agency grantees and Texas received funds in awards to local education agencies (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-b). Of the awardees in 2003, all were in states that had earlier character funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). A total of 47 states and Washington, D.C. have received federal character education funds through either state or local education agencies. Less than half that number of states were reported by the Education Commission of the States (2001) to have formal state-level policy support, "nine states and Puerto Rico have mandated character education through legislation, and 11 more states plus the District of Columbia have policies that recommend some form of character education" (p. 1). Although it is possible to quibble about the precision of the numbers, there is evidence to indicate that character education has a strong presence and support, even in a standards-based era.

CONCLUSION

Character education is inherently part of education. The emphasis on it has fluctuated throughout the history of public education in the United States. It is tempting to conclude this chapter with an emotional call for

character education “now, more than ever” and provide a laundry list of pressing issues and dilemmas; we conclude, however, on a note of determination. As noted by many educators (e.g., Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990; Sizer & Sizer, 2000), character education comes with the territory of teaching and schooling. It is not a question of whether to do character education but rather questions of how consciously and by what methods. The political sands will shift and create different contexts. In spite of these changes, character education will continue and character educators will continue to grapple with questions of how to be our best ethical selves and how best to help students to know, care about, and do the right thing. Political pressures can support or thwart the effective implementation of character education.

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