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The Manner of Teachers and the Character of Students: What Distinguishes Character Education from The Manner Project?

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In this paper, we seek an understanding of character education and explore its connection (or lack thereof) with our own work in The Teacher Manner Project. Our interest is part curiosity and part self-defense. We are curious to learn whether the literature in character education holds promise for our own inquiries into how teachers foster the moral development of their students. We are also wary of character education, for a good deal of what is contained within this category appears to be an unhelpful entwining of ambiguity and hyperbole. Thus we want to take some care to distinguish our own work from much of what appears under the banner of character education.

Character Education

Character education is a topic much discussed in these times. It engages the interest of school teachers and administrators, parents, educational researchers, and policy makers. Such attention appears well-deserved, for who could take serious exception to so noble an

idea? Unfortunately it is not at all clear what one is getting when adopting or committing to character education. The term covers a range of moral theories as well as curricular and instructional approaches. Alan Lockwood (1997) remarks that "if character education is construed as any effort to combat undesirable behavior, the definition becomes so diffuse that the concept becomes pointless and discourse about it futile" (p. 177).

Alex Molnar (1997) offers some perspective on the general domain of character education when asserting that

> modern character education is driven by a broadly based consensus that the United States is in a period of moral decline. Unlike character education advocates in the 1960s and 1970s, who attempted to help students "clarify" their values or to progress toward a higher level of moral reasoning, contemporary character educators such as Thomas Lickona, Jacques Benninga, and Edward Wynne advocate instruction in "core" ethical values. They also link the development of children's character to civic renewal. (P. 164)

Civic education is not the only adjunct of character education. Values education, life skills development, and moral education are also activities or programs that are often grouped under the general heading of "character education." Not only are there a multitude of approaches to doing it, there are a number of different ways to go about studying it.[1]

As one examines the works of such advocates as Lickona, Benninga, and Wynne, a number of features or identifying tags for the modern character education movement surface. The first of these is that character education is grounded primarily in virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is a version of normative ethics typically traced back to Aristotle and his key work on ethics, the *Nicomachean Ethics*. As such, most character educators focus on the cultivation of specific traits and dispositions, such as honesty, respect, tolerance, and fairness.

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[1]See Bebeau, Rest, and Narvaez , 1999, for a helpful analysis of various research initiatives for the study of character education.

The second characteristic is that there is identifiable ethical content or subject matter that is conveyed to children as part of the broader instructional activities of teachers. For example, the traits mentioned just above are cultivated by name, with the teacher attending directly to such things as being respectful or truthful. There is typically little dependence on approaching the virtues as arising from such things as reading great literature or studying historical biography. Thus the virtues themselves become the specific focus of instruction, with educators seeking to convey them directly to students. Teaching straight to the various virtues is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of identifiable ethical content, but there are a number of other means, ranging from the telling of stories for the purpose of inculcating moral lessons to asking students to fill out simple diagnostic check sheets so that they may come to understand how their moods lead them to act unkindly or disrespectfully or uncaring.

The third identifying tag of character education as a school activity is that the ethical content can be and quite often is structured programmatically. The program typically appears as a package, consisting of print, audio or video tape, film, photographs, or web site, prepared for distribution to teachers and their students. This third feature suggests a distinct commercialization of character education, even though we do not want to suggest that commercialization is a significant part of the meaning of the concept. Rather, we wish only to make the point that much of what falls under the label "character education" takes the form of products available for a fee. A sampling of these can easily be obtained by entering "character education" in any World Wide Web search engine.[2] One quickly notes the range of things for sale, including banners, wooden blocks, lapel pins, flags, workbooks, lectures on tape, and brochures, pamphlets, and books intended to be used by teachers and their students.

A focus on traits and dispositions (virtues), on identifiable curricular content pertaining to moral conduct, and on the availability of products for facilitating the development of virtues in children appear to be the identifying tags for character education in the setting

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[2]For a small sample of these web sites, see the selection of URLs following the References at the end of this paper.

of the modern school. In some cases, there is also a consideration of the kinds of small group and classroom communities appropriate to the cultivation of virtue. In these cases, character education is viewed as pertaining to both the individual student as well as the community of students within a defined setting, such as an instructional group, a classroom, and often an entire school. With these features of character education in mind, we turn to some alternative ways of participating in the moral development of the young.

Alternatives to a Curriculum of Virtue

There is a seductive notion in the idea of character education. It is that we know what good character is and that we obtain it in the young by aiming straight for it. Despite a body of evidence to the contrary, beginning with the Hartshorne and May (1928-30) studies and continuing to the present (see Bebeau, Rest, & Narvaez,1999), advocates for character education continue to believe that the direct pursuit of character is an effective way to form children of high character. Sher and Bennett (1982) offer a fairly elegant philosophical defense for this view, referring to the activity as "directive moral education." Before joining that debate that rages over the implicit and explicit claims of Character Education, it will prove helpful to examine the alternatives.

We draw a distinction between moral content and moral instruction, in an effort to clarify a vital point: A teacher may be cultivating moral ends, and doing so intentionally, without specifically addressing moral content. This cultivation can be accomplished in several ways. The first of these is by attending to the moral features of content that is not itself explicitly moral. A teacher may do this in virtually any subject, be it natural science (e.g., the use of animals as test subjects), history (e.g., the moral dilemmas faced by national leaders in times of crisis), literature (e.g., the moral predicaments of characters in great fiction), or nutritional studies (e.g., exploring the relation between poverty and caloric intake).

Moral instruction can and often does occur in the absence of specific moral content.[3] One of the more fascinating insights of the Teacher Manner Project is our discovery of the repertoire of methods and techniques teachers use to attend to moral matters when their content is not about morality and even when their overarching purpose for a lesson barely elicits a reference on their part to anything about developing students as moral persons (Fenstermacher, 1999). In other words, teachers can attend closely to the moral without having moral topics as the prescribed content of instruction, and also without having specific moral ends as among the objectives for an instructional episode (if asked, the teachers would not deny that, in general, their instruction is undertaken for moral purposes, but may say of a particular instructional lesson or episode that it was undertaken for purposes other than promoting the moral development of their students).

Modeling is another way of cultivating the moral development of students, although when subjected to close scrutiny its definition can be quite fuzzy. Generally speaking, the presumptive moral force in modeling is that those witnessing the model will take on the characteristics of the model. Thus if the teacher exhibits sound moral behavior, the student may take on important aspects of that behavior. The concept of modeling is made complex by the fact that a teacher may engage in highly relevant and appropriate moral conduct, but the students have no predilections or commitments to imitate or adopt that behavior. Thus often when we think of teachers as models, we mean only that their conduct ***may*** be imitated or in some way taken on by their students. Despite this problematic feature of modeling, it remains a means of nurturing the moral development of students without specifically addressing moral content in a lesson dedicated to one or another moral end.

Moral curriculum (content) and moral instruction may serve as supplements to modeling as much as they serve as alternatives to it. Teachers may often be encountered deploying all three, a point we will pursue momentarily. The point to be made here is that the character of students may be fostered by means other than direct attention to

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[3]This point is well illustrated in the study of the moral aspects of classrooms presented by Jackson, Boostrom & Hansen (1993).

worthy traits of character. Indeed, there are some compelling arguments for why one should not focus on specific character traits if one's intention is to cultivate highly moral persons (Purple, 1999).[4] Mindful of these reservations to character education, we turn to an exploration of the more general notion of moral development and the place of character education within this more inclusive concept.

Moral Development and the Education of Character

Three questions engage our attention when exploring the phenomenon of moral development. They are:

Q1. How does moral development take place?
Q2. How do we aid moral development?
Q3. Is moral development aided by fostering moral agency?

We take the first question to be of interest primarily to scientists, clerics, and philosophers. It asks for an empirical, religious, or speculative explanation of how it is that human beings come to be moral persons. The second question, Q2, is of interest to, among others, parents and teachers (and, once again, to clerics and philosophers, who may be found not only providing an account of moral development, but also trying to promote it). Question 2 asks how human beings can help the process along. The third question, Q3, arises from answering Q2 is a particular way; it asks whether fostering moral agency is a particular way of aiding moral development. We defer its investigation momentarily, in order to gain better purchase on Q1 and Q2.

Although Q2—how do we aid moral development—is the more central for understanding character education and teacher manner, it would be an error to ignore Q1, how does moral development take place. As James Q. Wilson (1993) sought to show in *The Moral Sense*, worthy moral conduct arises from an interaction between certain natural propensities of human beings—living in families, friendships, work settings, communities, and congregations, for example—and the human disposition to wonder, learn, and critique. For lack of a better

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[4]See also Sections four and five of the 1997 N. S. S. E. Yearbook, Part II, edited by Alex Molnar.

way of putting the matter, there appears to be a natural and a rational element to moral conduct, making an inquiry into how it occurs of profound interest to scientists, philosophers, and clerics. This grasp of moral development is central to our unpacking of character education and teacher manner because it suggests that moral development is not simply a natural process alone, nor one that arises only when it is specifically sought after. Rather it is arises because it is both natural and sought-after.

Wilson (1993) frames the point well when stating that

> Mankind's moral sense is not a strong beacon light, radiating outward to illuminate in sharp outline all that it touches. It is, rather, a small candle flame, casting vague and multiple shadows, flickering and sputtering in the strong winds of power and passion, greed and ideology. But brought close to the heart and cupped in one's hands, it dispels the darkness and warms the soul. (P. 251)

This helpful and evocative prose fails in but one detail. It is not only to the heart that the moral sense must be held, but to the mind as well. That small candle flame is protected by our learning to be mindful of our conduct, as well as being heartfelt about it.

Given this perspective on moral development, we aid in moral development by both reinforcing the natural elements and cultivating the rational elements.[5] Put another way, there are impositional and deliberative ways to aid moral development (recall the previous reference to Sehr and Bennett, wherein they referred to directive moral education, which is what we are here calling "impositional"). The impositional means are often considered a form of indoctrination, wherein the critical faculties of the learner are encouraged to slumber while the heart and mind simply acquire unchanged the maxims, norms, and traits being conveyed. It is by this means that the very

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[5]This distinction provides little theoretical or conceptual space for the moral features of an ethics of care (in so far as we do not wish to lump the emotive and affective features of an ethic of care in the category of the non-rational). We consider this consequence a flaw in our argument, and ask the reader's indulgence as we attempt to explore how the work of Character Education differs from our own.

young (too young for the rational faculties to perform the task) are so often instructed in such things as elemental fairness, respect, and self-control. It is by this means that religions often impart their core principles or commandments, as well as their proverbs and homilies. It is often by such means that congregations, communities, and even nations are formed.

Though imposition serves to aid moral development, it is also a risk to moral development. As Thomas Green (1984, 1999) makes clear, there is a considerable difference between my following a rule because I am required to do so and my obeying a rule because it has moral authority for me. Pursued too extensively, imposition becomes blind obedience. It then fails the enterprise of morality because as individuals we are unable to work out right courses of action in particular circumstances. Moreover, we are unable to adjust to changing circumstances, applying moral ideals to new and different situations. And finally we are without means of advancing or perfecting our moral capacities because we are dependent upon the imposing authority to advance so that we may advance with it (conversely, if we are not in some measure rationally independent, our moral capacities may decline should those of the imposing authority decline).

If we are correct in our notions of moral development, it may be aided by both imposition and by rational deliberation. The developmental problem, of course, is how much of which, and when. We mention this problem not because we propose to resolve it (that would be akin to magic, inasmuch as the issue has been with our species for a very long time), but to make clear that there is a distinction between imposition and deliberation as forms of moral education. With this distinction, we can make the observation that much of what takes place under the heading of Character Education inclines far more to the impositional than to the deliberative. If that is so, programs of Character Education may be seen as potentially suppressing the deliberative aspects of moral development.

This last assertion provides the transition from Q2, how do we aid moral development, to Q3, is moral development aided by fostering moral agency. The argument we seek to advance here is that Character Education, in many of its manifestations, leans heavily upon imposition as an aid to moral development, while often (but, in

fairness, not always) failing to embrace deliberation as an aid to moral development. When deliberation is taken seriously as an aid to moral development, it serves as a means of fostering moral agency in the young. Fostering moral agency is, in our view, a worthy and highly appropriate objective for teachers and schools. This argument needs more careful unpacking if it is to be credible.

Fostering moral agency

When we speak of a person as an agent, we mean that the actions of the person are the result of the exercise of his or her own intelligence. Our view of agency is much like R. F. Dearden's (1975) view of autonomy. Dearden writes: "A person is autonomous to the degree, . . . that what he thinks and does, at least in important areas of his life, are determined by himself. That is to say, it cannot be explained why these are his beliefs and actions without referring to his own activity of mind" (p. 71). In *Philosophical Ethics*, Stephen Darwall (1998) states that a moral agent is "a person who chooses to act for reasons, and whose choices commit her to views about what choices are worth making" (p. 4).

Darwall's notion of a moral agent is the one we employ here. Agency is accomplished by means of deliberation on proper means and worthy ends. A moral agent is one whose choices can be accounted for by the giving of reasons, and these reasons explain and justify their choices. This stipulation does not mean that an agent must always have these reasons in mind before acting; to so require would remove habit from moral agency, a move we do not wish to make. What the stipulation does mean is that when asked, the agent explains his or her conduct by, as Dearden would say, "referring to his own activity of mind."

This notion of moral agency carries a fair amount of Enlightenment freight. It is, in part, grounded in the work of Immanuel Kant, who advocated powerfully for the place of reason in moral action. As such, it could be viewed as an implicit denial of other

forms of moral development, such as the imposition of moral traditions and customs, or the valuing of caring human relationships. We believe it would be an error to treat imposition and deliberation as standing in a relationship or "either-or, but not both." Instead we want to argue that both imposition and deliberation are vital aids to moral development, but that imposition without deliberation carries frightening consequences for the moral health of persons and their polities.[6]

There are, as noted earlier, developmental matters here, wherein imposition may be a useful, perhaps vital means of aiding moral development in the very young, while deliberation becomes increasingly useful, indeed vital, aid as the child matures. Again, we do not wish to become embroiled in whether one is more appropriately deployed at some time in the life of the young, while the other is more appropriate at another time. Nor do we wish to argue the matter of balance between the two. Our interest is somewhat less controversial, for we wish to make the more humble point that fostering moral agency should be a primary means for teachers in schools to aid in the moral development of the young.

We are asserting that the focus of Q3, moral agency, is a species of the genus Q2, moral development. We are further arguing that fostering moral agency is a fit and proper role for the public school. In so stating we do not wish to deny that the school may have a role in achieving moral development through imposition but that imposition alone, or in high proportion, is a highly questionable endeavor for an enterprise that takes the education of the young as its mission.[7]

A Brief Summary to This Point

We have explored a number of different approaches to aiding moral development. After identifying several of key features of the contemporary movement known as Character Education, we drew

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[6]It is also likely, in our still-thinking-it-through view, that deliberation in the absence of imposition is not very effective as a means of aiding moral development.

[7]Again this way of framing the distinctions excludes care ethics. To gain a sense of what might be involved in its inclusion, see Katz, Noddings, & Strike (1999).

distinctions between aiding moral development through curriculum or content, through instruction, and through modeling. We noted the heavy emphasis in Character Education on moral content, and how this content often drives moral instruction. There appears to be little that is subtle or sophisticated about Character Education's approach to moral development, focused as it is on specific traits or dispositions.

Moral instruction, we noted, can be pursued by imposition or deliberation. We sought to avoid privileging one account over the other, but noted the heavy emphasis on imposition in Character Education programs, and the relative inattention to deliberation. We described the pursuit of the deliberative as fostering moral agency, and argued that it should have a central place in the moral development work of the schools, particularly in the context of public schooling in the United States. Having set forth some features of Character Education and noted some of its consequences, we turn to what we learned from studying two schools, each with some avowed form of character education.

The Teacher Manner Project

Two schools participate in the Teacher Manner Project. One we call Jordan Elementary is in a mid-size city and contains a racially mixed group of students in grades K-5. The other, Highlands Academy, is an African-centered public school of choice in the heart of a large industrial city; its student population is 100% African-American, spanning grades K-8. Both schools have adopted a form of character education. In the case of Jordan, it is the Life Skills curriculum developed primarily by Susan Kovalik;[8] at Highlands, it is the Nguzu Saba developed by Maulana Karenga (1992).

There are 17 Life Skills, ranging from integrity, initiative, and flexibility to humor, patience, responsibility, and pride. They are part of a larger approach to teaching that Kovalik calls Integrated Thematic Instruction, or ITI (Kovalik, 1994). In the case of the Nguzu Saba, there are seven principles, including unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, creativity, purpose

[8]See her web site at http://www.kovalik.com, For additional web sites pertaining to Character Education, see the URLs at the end of this paper.

and faith. In the course of our three years of observation in the two schools, along with extensive interviews of the 11 participating teachers, the building principals, and the students, we have amassed ample evidence that these approaches to the moral development of the students are taken very seriously at both schools. Life Skills is a key component of the mission of Jordan Elementary and has been a central component in the leadership provided by the principal. The same assertion can be made for Highlands Academy; the Nguzu Saba, along with the spiritual principles of Maat, are central in both the school's adopted mission and in the expectations of the school's principal (Chow-Hoy, 1999, 2000).

Although both schools embrace a form of moral curriculum, they do so in somewhat different ways. At Jordan it takes only a few moments upon entering the school building to become aware that the Life Skills approach has been adopted as a school-wide initiative. The banners and posters referring to the Life Skills curriculum and to specific Life Skills are posted throughout the school, including prominent display in many of the classrooms. After a few moments of conversation with the teachers, one picks up the frequent references to the Life Skills approach of the school. In contrast, one cannot so quickly and directly observe the commitment of Highlands Academy to Maat and the Nguzu Saba. While the Afrocentric focus of the school is readily apparent, it takes some investigation to learn what is at the moral core of the school. There can be little doubt on observing the Highlands teachers that they see moral development as occupying a position of primacy in their instruction, but there is far less evidence of a program or package of some sort. Rather the emphasis appears integrated into the teacher's conduct (modeling), into the expectations they have for the conduct of their students (instruction), and into the references one hears the teachers make to specific African-centered moral ideals.

One also sees modeling and moral instruction at Jordan, but in accompaniment with Life Skills; whereas the moral principles and ideals are less spoken about at Highlands, although with clearly obvious expectations that these principles and ideals will be manifested in the character of the students. This contrast is instructive, for it reveals two schools, both of them acknowledging a strong moral component to their mission and practice, but one more exemplary of the Character Education movement while the other

appears to focus more on expectations for conduct that follow from certain ideals and principles.

Even with the more obvious focus on Character Education at Jordan, one finds that the teachers take a very broad approach to moral development, using many of the means at their disposal, including the moral curriculum. The teachers at both schools undertake moral lessons for their students even when these are not the specific focus of their instruction, and they seldom relinquish an opportunity to cultivate moral sensibilities, whether the lesson is about subtraction, grammar rules, or biology. The extensive repertoire of method and manner that teachers at both schools deploy to aid moral development leads us to believe that the adoption of a character education program or principles has considerable force as permission-granting and as a signal of what is valued within a setting.

The adopted moral content may not be the proper focus for understanding how these teachers aid the moral development of their students. Rather it is their enactment of this adopted content that deserves our attention. What one observes in both these settings is that the enactment by the teachers is rich in approach and technique, as well as in desire and purpose. One might speculate that these teachers regard moral development as a key feature of their work, and that the adoption of moral curriculum or content by the school and its leadership provides a kind of permission and encouragement to proceed with nurturing moral development. Once given that permission, the teachers pursue a wide range of means to achieve moral ends. These means and ends include those contained within the adopted program as well as many others introduced by the teacher's sense of good and right conduct.

While we believe we have abundant evidence for the full engagement of these 11 teachers in the moral development of their students, we are less certain of their contributions to moral agency. Impositional approaches are prominent in both schools, and the cultivation of the deliberative does not appear nearly so evident. We do notice that the deliberative gains more ground in the higher grades at Highlands, suggesting that this approach may be deferred to the late middle grades. However, the deliberative remains modest in comparison to the impositional. We wonder whether the adoption of a moral curriculum or program may lend authority to an impositional

approach, or whether we are simply seeing a more general characteristic of American public schooling. Our intent is to continue to examine the data to determine whether our sense of the modesty of the deliberative in comparison to the impositional is an idea that survives closer scrutiny of our data.

Some Implications for Character Education

The careful reader will have noted that we sometimes write Character Education with upper case C and E, while at other times these letters are lower case. When upper case, the reference is to a program for the moral development of the young, usually grounded in a normative ethics of virtue, and often pursued with a pedagogy that is more impositional than deliberative. The lower case version may encompass far larger borders for the moral domain, but it is still likely to retain an orientation to virtue ethics.

One of the schools in the Teacher Manner study has adopted a program more akin to the upper case version of Character Education, while the other has more of a lower case version. Though their moral orientation may differ, it is of more than passing interest that the teachers participating in the Project appear to take a considerable measure of sustenance from their school's adoption of a particular moral orientation. In both schools there is a sense among the participating teachers that moral development is a major focus of their work, and a major goal for school and community.

In this sense, character education, whether upper or lower case, can be seen as much as an *occasion* for aiding the moral development of the young as it is a curriculum or subject matter. However, there seems to be a downside, for the closer the endeavor comes to an upper case—Character Education—program, the more certainty there appears to be about what constitutes the right and good conduct of the students, and the less deliberation there seems to be about whether these are good and proper moral ends, and under what circumstances. This said, one also notes that lowering the case from big "C" and "E" to little "c" and "e" carries no assurance that moral agency will be more zealously pursued.

Finally, we observe what so many others have when they study the implementation of a program in school settings. The enactment of

that program by school administrators and teachers may give it a decidedly different shape than it has on coming out of the box in which it was delivered. In the case of the two schools described here, we find that the teachers are more diverse and sophisticated in the cultivation of moral development than any program of Character Education we have encountered to date. While they do, in many ways, keep faith with the moral orientation of the school, they supplement, revise, narrow, extend, rewind, and fast forward the content provided to them. Indeed, one gets the distinct impression that for these quite remarkable teachers, the program is permission, not pedagogy. If we have that right, upper case Character Education may have a far more profound and beneficial impact on moral development by lowering its case, thereby enabling teachers to span a broader range of moral perspectives and ideals while also gaining better purchase on what is involved in fostering moral agency.

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Selected List of Web Sites Pertaining to Character Education

http://www.charactercounts.org/
http://www.kovalik.com
http://www.cortland.edu/www/c4n5rs/
http://www.cde.ca.gov/character/
http://www.character.org/
http://education.bu.edu/CharacterEd/
http://www.usoe.k12.ut.us/curr/char_ed/
http://www.lifeskills4kids.com/
http://www.blocks1.com/