

# Character

## as the Aim of Education

We have too often equated excellence of education with the quantity of the content learned, rather than with the quality of character the person develops.

**By David Light Shields**



Thinkstock/Creatas

Discussion about the aims of education is almost absent in current debates about education policy and practice. As a nation, we spend vast sums on education research, assessment instruments, accountability systems, teacher training programs, and curricular innovations, but toward what end? Is it to leave no child behind, though the meaning of forward progress is ambiguous? Is it to race to the top without a

**DAVID LIGHT SHIELDS** is an associate teaching professor in the Division of Teaching and Learning, University of Missouri-St. Louis, St. Louis, Mo.

Education should develop intellectual character, moral character, civic character, and performance character, along with the collective character of the school.

clear view of the summit? Is it to boost our standing in international rankings without knowing how, or if, improved scores improve lives or learning?

The most important question that educators and policy makers should be addressing is this: What goals should guide teachers and education leaders as they develop practices and policies to improve the quality of education in our schools?

We propose *character* as the aim of education. That is to say, developing beneficial and prosocial dispositions should be prioritized over acquiring more and more facts and formulas. To elaborate, we suggest that distinct, yet overlapping goals for education can be derived from considering the multiple dimensions of character. Education should develop intellectual character, moral character, civic character, and performance character, along with the collective character of the school. Together, the four forms of personal character define what it means to be a competent, ethical, engaged, and effective adult member of society. Isn't that what we want from our education system?

These multiple dimensions of character share a focus on *personal dispositions* and *patterns of interaction*. They focus on constructing meaning and how a person acts in various aspects of their life and learning. The goal of education is not acquiring knowledge alone, but developing the dispositions to seek and use knowledge in effective and ethical ways.

When we focus on the character of the learner, rather than the contents of learning, we address what's likely to be sustained through time and circumstance. Few people remember most of what they learned in school, but the school experience, for better or worse, nonetheless developed patterns of thinking, styles of interaction, and modes of engagement that carry forward. What endures are personal qualities that shape how a person interacts with ideas, people, social organizations, and institutions. Un-

fortunately, we have too often equated excellence with the quantity of the content learned, rather than with the quality of *character* the person develops.

Of course, character and content aren't in an either/or relationship. Educators can promote both content and character. Still, one will tend to take center stage. When character takes center stage, the learning of content becomes infused with both social and existential significance. Knowledge becomes enacted knowledge. By contrast, when we focus more narrowly on knowledge transmission, on teaching content, the reason to learn becomes opaque to the learner, resulting in isolated knowledge and superficial understanding.

### **INTELLECTUAL CHARACTER**

Most educators think first about academic subject matter — math, science, and English being the current Big 3 — when considering the goals of education. Typically, we think about academic progress in simple, quantitative terms: The more educated you are, the more math and science content you've stored in memory, and so on. We may give lip service to higher modes of thinking, but the focus of teaching and how we assess learning tend to emphasize the memorization of specific details and procedures.

Academic learning is important, of course. Yet the academic goal of education has less to do with accumulating specific knowledge than with developing *intellectual character*. In his book of that name, Ron Ritchhart defines intellectual character as “the overarching conglomeration of habits of mind, patterns of thought, and general dispositions toward thinking that not only direct but also motivate one's thinking-oriented pursuits” (2002: xxii). He identifies six dispositions that he sees as central to intellectual character. A person of strong intellectual character is curious, open-minded, reflective, strategic, skeptical, and truth-seeking.

Focusing on intellectual character as a goal of education offers three key advantages. First, growth in intellectual character will tend to generalize across domains in ways that specific content learning will not. A student who learns to be curious, open-minded, skeptical, and truth-seeking, for example, can apply these dispositions in math class as well as in social studies discussions. Perhaps more important, these dispositions toward thinking can transfer from the classroom to the home, workplace, and civic involvements.

In situations of choice and conflict, the person of moral character gives priority to moral over nonmoral considerations.

The second advantage to focusing on intellectual character was brought home to me recently by a personal experience. Not long ago, I was helping my daughter with her math homework. Math is not her best subject, and she was struggling with graphing the roots of quadratic formulas. Confidently, I offered help. As a student, math had always come easy to me, and I enjoyed its elegance and logic. But when I sat down to assist, I was stymied. I hadn't dealt with a quadratic formula in 30 years, and I had totally forgotten how to do them.

Almost without realizing it, I began muttering, "Why does she need to know this anyway? I loved math, and I've never encountered a situation in adult life where I needed such knowledge." True, knowing how to solve quadratic formulas (and hundreds of similar examples) may help her score better on the next big high-stakes test, but it's unlikely to help her make better decisions, advance in a good career, raise her children, or enrich her adult life in any other meaningful way.

Developing the dispositions of intellectual character, by contrast, will provide a foundation for a lifetime of intellectual adventure. It will promote ongoing learning, growth, and creativity. It will promote an ability to solve new problems rather than mimic solutions to textbook problems.

To stick with my daughter's example, some may argue that she should learn to solve quadratic formulas not because memorizing a technique for doing so is important, but because it's part of learning to think quantitatively. Learning the specific knowledge and skills is just a means to a broader end.

Developing intellectual character can't be done directly; it can't be accomplished apart from learning content. Yet two points need to be made. First, the "content" through which intellectual character is developed isn't limited to those subject areas needed by students who plan to enter such fields as

engineering and science. A young person interested in art, social studies, or child rearing can develop intellectual character better by studying those areas than by forced exposure to geometry or chemistry. The elevated and privileged place that math and science hold in the curriculum is due less to societal need than antiquated traditions (Noddings 2003).

In the teaching of every explicit curriculum, there is an implicit curriculum. When teaching is focused on transmitting facts, training in discrete skills, and preparing for tests, students are implicitly taught that the content itself is most important. When the content is taught in a more inductive, open, exploratory manner, when the teacher models and encourages inquiry, open-mindedness, critical thinking, and curiosity, then intellectual character can be developed along with content knowledge.

The third key advantage to focusing on intellectual character is that it makes clear *why* students should be in school. While content learning can be accomplished with very little intrinsic motivation, intellectual character can't be nurtured apart from a motivated pursuit to apply knowledge to life. From the perspective of intellectual character, intelligence isn't primarily an innate ability to master content; intelligence is a disposition to apply one's ability amid the complexities of life. This provides a segue into the next dimension of character.

## MORAL CHARACTER

As Thomas Lickona has pointed out, "down through history, in countries all over the world, education has had two great goals: to help young people become smart and to help them become good" (1989: 6). Certainly in the United States, a concern with moral development has been a strikingly regular feature of public education throughout our history, though it has experienced ebbs and flows in its prominence.

At its core, moral character reflects a disposition to seek the good and right. Moral character is rooted in a basic desire for goodness. In situations of choice and conflict, the person of moral character gives priority to moral over nonmoral considerations.

In the character education field, moral character is often defined in terms of specific contents, such as a list of preferred virtues. But moral character can't be reduced to what Kohlberg (1972) derisively labeled a "bag of virtues." Reflecting on virtues and promoting them may have educational value in terms of increasing students' sensitivity to the moral dimension of situations, but we shouldn't confuse content with disposition. The goal is to develop a disposition to seek goodness, not inculcate a specific list of preferred virtues.

Just as intellectual character focuses on intelligent

action more than on intelligence *per se*, moral character is more about enacting goodness than learning specific virtues. The circumstances in which people find themselves, both in terms of general life circumstances and immediate situational circumstances, will influence which values and virtues they develop and enact. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dedication to justice reflected his immersion in the African-American context of the 1950s and 1960s. Justice may be a virtue that's important to everyone, but not everyone will shape his or her life around it.

Similarly, acting on specific virtues, such as honesty or compassion, invariably reflects complex interactions between person and context. There may be times when a person of moral integrity is dishonest or breaks a promise, for example. For a person of good character, what remains relatively stable across situations is a disposition to perceive and prioritize moral considerations. In the language of cognitive psychology, the person of moral character has chronically accessible moral schema and scripts that predispose them to recognize and act on moral issues latent in situations.

In reality, no one develops the full range of potential virtues, nor does anyone fully overcome all vices. Educators don't dictate which moral virtues should take priority in a person's life, but we do have a responsibility to help students become sensitive to moral considerations, to gain the cognitive capacity to think deeply and clearly about moral issues and principles, and to develop a disposition to act in accord with considered moral convictions. That's the essence of moral character.

## **CIVIC CHARACTER**

On one point, there is unanimous agreement: We don't want to graduate *idiots*. Unfortunately, the word has lost much of its original meaning. In ancient Greece, an *idiot* was a person who was uninvolved in the community. Idiots were people who sought their own private good and didn't participate actively in the cultural or political institutions of the nation (Parker 2003).

While the meaning of the word *idiot* has taken on new connotations, it remains idiotic to ignore the dimension of civic character in our education agenda. A thriving nation depends on citizens who participate in governance and civic life. This view has a long and distinguished history.

On the eve of our nation's founding, John Adams wrote to Mercy Warren: "There must be a positive passion for the public good. . . or there can be no republican government, nor any real liberty." Passion for the public good is the heart of what we call civic character. And the need to develop civic character was a prime motive for establishing public education.

Adams' contemporary, Thomas Jefferson, was one of the most forceful voices seeking to establish public schools, and his argument hinged on the need to provide citizens with both the knowledge and skills necessary for sustaining a public process of shaping the nation in accord with informed ideas of the common good. Jefferson argued that a nation could preserve and protect the inalienable rights of all only through the deliberation of virtuous, free, and educated citizens. Despite his own truncated view of who was entitled to the label *citizen*, Jefferson's core insight into the central role of public schools has inspired education theorists ever since.

Few people remember most of what they learned in school, but the school experience developed patterns of thinking, styles of interaction, and modes of engagement that carry forward.

In 2005, 20 professional organizations — including ASCD, the American Association of School Administrators, and the three national education associations representing principals and state boards of education — signed a "shared vision" for America's schools that reads, in part: "In order to sustain and expand the American experiment in liberty and justice, students must acquire civic character — the knowledge, skills, virtues, and commitments necessary for engaged and responsible citizenship. Civic character is responsible moral action that serves the common good" (Boston 2005).

The best means to promote civic character, however, has been a contentious issue. On one side of the debate are those who emphasize teaching knowledge about government and democratic principles; on the other side are those who advocate empowerment and developing democratic skills. Delivering knowledge through direct teaching has been pitted against more active and engaged forms of learning. Clearly, both knowledge and skill, both comprehension and disposition, are important. And most theorists today adopt a both/and approach (Althof and Berkowitz 2006).

Knowledge is important. Yet knowledge of governance structures and political practices is insufficient. Again, this is a long-standing idea. First Horace Mann and later John Dewey emphasized that schools needed to become more democratic themselves if they were going to contribute to the further democratization of American society. Dewey stressed that schools must cultivate the dispositions needed in broader society and become miniature democratic societies where students learn how their actions affect the well-being and success of the group.

Civic character requires both an inclination and

a capacity for self-transcendence. It requires a disposition to consider the common good and to work toward it in collaboration with others. Civic knowledge gains its potency as individuals use it to address real issues connected with the good of a community. The passion for the public good can motivate the attainment of the relevant competencies: civic and political knowledge, such intellectual skills as critical thinking, and social and participatory skills (Torney-Purta and Lopez 2006).

Performance character includes such qualities as perseverance, diligence, courage, resilience, optimism, initiative, attention to detail, and loyalty.

Society has a right to expect that its public schools will graduate students who can effectively participate in civic life and shape the common good, guided by principles of social justice and an ethic of care (Oakes et al. 2005). This will involve cultivating respect for freedom, equality, and rationality; an appreciation of diversity and due process; an ethic of participation and service; and the skills to build the social capital of trust and community.

### PERFORMANCE CHARACTER

Performance character refers to the dispositions, virtues, or personal qualities that enable an individual to accomplish intentions and goals. Berkowitz (1997) called them “foundational characteristics.”

Performance character includes such qualities as perseverance, diligence, courage, resilience, optimism, initiative, attention to detail, and loyalty. Such qualities relate to the exercise of will and reflect honed skills in self-management. Often, they’re called virtues, but they need to be distinguished from the moral virtues. Unlike the latter, which are intrinsically good, performance virtues are good only when they serve good ends. A person could be courageous in stealing cars or persistent in hiding the truth. One can be loyal to ignoble people. Yet performance character is necessary to make the other dimensions of character effective. The moral virtue of compassion is ineffective unless it’s combined with resilience and persistence. The disposition to become engaged civically loses its efficacy without dedication and loyalty. Even the components of intellectual character must be combined with self-management skills for knowledge to be sought and enacted in any consistent and effectual way.

The performance virtues lead to high-quality effort and work. Those with well-developed performance character take pride in what they do and seek to make it the best that it can be. Ron Berger calls it an *ethic of excellence* (2003). This is a full-bodied view

of excellence that bears little resemblance to the truncated view that reduces it to quantified knowledge acquisition.

Of course, no one can seek excellence in everything, nor should they try. But those with strong performance character try to do their best in domains of activity that are important to them. They work hard, pay attention to detail, persist through problems, seek to overcome challenges, and maintain a grounded optimism.

Like the other aspects of character, performance character can’t be developed directly but only through working with content. The disposition to give one’s best effort, not just in a moment but sustained through time, evolves only as one goes through the actual process of gaining increasing degrees of expertise in selected areas. The domains in which performance character is best nurtured will vary from person to person and may include music, art, athletics, and other domains outside the so-called core curriculum. What’s critical is nurturing the disposition to seek excellence in at least one domain and then broadening it to others.

### CHARACTER AND CULTURE

To support the development of individual character, we need to promote a *culture of character*. What we seek in terms of individual virtues must be developed simultaneously as group norms. In Table 1, we identify the four dimensions of personal character and the dimensions of school climate, or school character, that will nurture and support them.

**TABLE 1.**  
**Dimensions of Personal Character and the School Culture That Supports Them**

Personal Character	School Character
Intellectual Character	Culture of Thinking
Moral Character	Culture of Love and Justice
Civic Character	Culture of Service and Engagement
Performance Character	Culture of Quality and Excellence

The old chicken-and-egg question of whether individuals shape the collective or whether the culture shapes individuals is fruitless; the influence is clearly bidirectional, and both levels must be addressed simultaneously. Thus, we can summarize the aims of education as promoting the development of intellectual, moral, civic, and performance character, along with the character of the school as a place of thinking, love and justice, service and engagement, and excellence in work.

The ultimate value of developing personal char-

acter is found not just in the individuals themselves, but in the quality of the communities and organizations in which they are members. As Dewey recognized, the school is a miniature society, and the quality of life reflected in the relationships of the school becomes a means of social progress and reform. Character as the aim of education finds its ultimate justification in what it contributes to the quality of our collective life. **K**

## REFERENCES

- Althof, Wolfgang, and Marvin W. Berkowitz. "Moral Education and Character Education: Their Relationship and Roles in Citizenship Education." *Journal of Moral Education* 35 (2006): 495-518.
- Berkowitz, Marvin W. "The Complete Moral Person: Anatomy and Formation." In *Moral Issues in Psychology: Personalist Contributions to Selected Problems*, ed. J.M. DuBois. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1997.
- Berger, Ron. *An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2003.
- Boston, Bruce O. *Restoring the Balance Between Academics and Civic Engagement in Public Schools*. Washington, D.C.: American Youth Policy Forum, 2005.
- Kohlberg, Lawrence. "The Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Moral Education." *Humanist* 32 (1972): 13-16.
- Lickona, Thomas. *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*. New York: Bantam, 1989.
- Noddings, Nel. *Happiness and Education*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Oakes, Jeannie, Karen H. Quarts, Steve Ryan, and Martin Lipton. "Struggling for Civic Virtue Through School Reform." In *Character Psychology and Character Education*, ed. Daniel. K. Lapsley and F. Clark Power. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005.
- Parker, Walter C. *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003.
- Ritchhart, Ron. *Intellectual Character: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Get It*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.
- Torney-Purta, Judith, and Susan V. Lopez. *Developing Citizenship Competencies from Kindergarten Through Grade 12: A Background Paper for Policymakers and Educators*. Denver, Colo.: Education Commission of the States, National Center for Learning and Citizenship, 2006.