

REFLECTIONS ON ROBERT MCGRATH'S "WHAT IS CHARACTER EDUCATION?"

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Robert McGrath's article has the great virtue of asking an important question: "What is character education?" He argues that currently "what it means to call something a character education program remains unclear." Without a clear definition, McGrath says, we cannot differentiate character education from other programs designed to increase prosocial behavior or promote psychological growth. As a solution to this problem he proposes a "character education prototype" that would enable researchers and practitioners to evaluate a character education program by the extent to which it possesses seven "central features" (it is school-based, structured, and aimed at fostering development in five areas—positive psychological characteristics, identity, moral growth, holistic growth, and the development of practical wisdom).

Let us start with the proposed prototype's first feature: "school based." Should character education be conceptualized as "school based" (even if exceptions can be made, as McGrath allows)? Supposed we asked a different question: "Should the *development of good charac-*

ter be regarded as 'school based'—that is, as the sole or even mainly the responsibility of schools?" The answer would be obvious: "Certainly not."

FOSTERING GOOD CHARACTER: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Developing good character, virtually everyone would agree, should be seen as the *shared* responsibility of families, schools, faith communities, youth groups, sports, the workplace, the wider community, universities, government at all levels—indeed, all institutions and spheres of influence that impact the values and character of our children. If that is the idea we want society to embrace, then "character education" is not the best name for our collective enterprise because it sounds like something that takes place in schools (rather than everywhere) and something you study (and have to make time for in a crowded curriculum) rather than a *process* you experience through human interactions, self-reflection, and so on. In fact, character education, rightly understood, is a

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process—one involving that dimension of human development we call character development. That process clearly is not limited to schools.

If we decided to call our collective enterprise “character development” instead of “character education,” and titled a publication like the one you are reading, the *Journal of Character Development* instead of the *Journal of Character Education*, three things would be more likely to happen: (1) The field would give heightened attention to defining and assessing the critically important aspects of character development that we should be promoting (McGrath makes a strong case for moral identity, holistic growth, and practical wisdom); (2) We would give greater attention to challenging and supporting powerful and often neglected agents of character development such as the family, the peer culture, sports, and young people themselves (who should be encouraged to consider themselves the chief architects of their personal character); and (3) We would focus more intently on identifying and promoting in all arenas of human activity the particular practices shown by research and practitioner experience to be effective in fostering important aspects of character development.

PRACTICES CENTRAL TO EFFECTIVE CHARACTER EDUCATION

Consider the family. Traditional wisdom and contemporary psychology regard the family as potentially the most powerful formative environmental influence on the character of the young. In their seminal article, “Fostering Goodness,” Berkowitz and Grych (1998) identified 5 core parenting practices consistently found to be effective in fostering significant aspects of social-moral growth:

1. **Nurturance:** Children learn love and respect when they are treated that way.

2. **Modeling and mentoring:** We teach best when we practice what we preach, and preach what we practice.
3. **Reasoning:** Children learn to care about the feelings and welfare of other people when we help them understand the effects of their actions on others.
4. **“Demandingness”:** Children, with support and accountability, tend to rise to meet high expectations.
5. **Moral empowerment:** Children grow in virtue when they are given a voice in, and responsibility for, the good of the group.

If character development occurs to a great extent in and through relationships, and relationship practices like those just described promote character growth in the family, it would be very surprising if such practices did not facilitate character development in other contexts as well. In fact, most character education theorists (e.g., Berkowitz, 2012; Lickona, 1991; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Urban, 2008) cite such practices as key to successful character education in schools as well as families.

In view of this, it’s surprising that McGrath’s proposed prototype says that “None of the features focuses on program process, because at present there is no literature consistently suggesting any didactic practices are uniquely featured in character education programs.” Well, perhaps not *uniquely featured*, but character education theory, research, and practitioner experience all point to the above-named practices such as nurturing, modeling, reasoning, and high expectations, as being *central* to effective character education in different domains.

IS A FORMAL CURRICULUM NECESSARY?

The second feature of McGrath’s proposed character education prototype—“the program is structured”—raises the question, “Struc-

tured in what sense?" He explains: "A true character education program is built around shared expectations about what is being transmitted or presented.... Ideally, a formal curriculum would be available for review to ensure consistency in implementation, allow for replication, enhance fidelity, and ultimately guide research on program effectiveness."

Arguably, schools can benefit by, and should consider making thoughtful use of, a formal curriculum part of their character education initiatives. Berkowitz and Bier's *What Works in Character Education* report (2007) found evidence of positive impact for more than 30 published character education curricula, and a well-designed curriculum for teaching what good character is, why it matters, and how to develop it has all the advantages—especially consistency of implementation—that McGrath names.

But neither the *What Works* report nor mainstream character education scholarship has ever regarded a formal character education curriculum as an essential component of effective character education in schools. Similarly, guides to good parenting do not typically tell parents they should follow a formal curriculum for fostering character development in family life. Rather, parents are encouraged to use practices (nurturance, modeling, reasoning, etc.) supported by ancient wisdom and modern research.

THE EMERGENCE OF CHARACTER EDUCATION FRAMEWORKS

In a similar fashion, the literature on educating for character in schools has emphasized fidelity to broad principles that guide implementation, rather than prescribing a formal curriculum of teaching character through classroom lessons like those we use to teach academic subjects.

A bit of history: When interest in character education was exploding in the early 1990s, there were no such broad guiding principles. School administrators were flooded with flyers

urging them to buy this or that character education "program." Critics were already dismissing character education as it the latest educational fad—"a mile wide and an inch deep." Schools were looking for guidance.

Fortunately, some schools were already lighting the way to deep and transformative character education by doing it in a systemic fashion that changed the relationships, work ethic, and culture of a school. Serious research was also underway. California's Child Development Project, using a rigorous experimental design with randomly selected program and control schools, found that elementary school children who experienced a multifaceted character education intervention—combining collaborative learning, democratic class meetings, character-rich children's literature, schoolwide community-building, and parent involvement—were superior to control-school students on multiple measures of prosocial attitudes and behavior, a superiority still present in middle school after the program was no longer in effect (Schaps, Watson, & Lewis, 1996).

Drawing on what we regarded as the best theory, research, and practice at the time, a group of academics and researchers associated with the Washington, DC-based Character Education Partnership (CEP; recently renamed Character.org) developed the *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education*, first published in 1995 and available in their latest iteration at www.Character.org. Our first two principles addressed the question, "What is good character?"

- Principle 1. The school community promotes core ethical and performance values as the foundation of good character.
- Principle 2. The school defines "character" comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and behavior.

Principles 3–7 addressed, "How can a school be effective in developing good character?"

- Principle 3. The school uses a comprehensive, intentional, and proactive approach to character development.
- Principle 4. The school creates a caring community.
- Principle 5. The school provides opportunities for moral action.
- Principle 6. The school offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them succeed.
- Principle 7. The school fosters students' self-motivation.

Principles 8–10 addressed, “Who is responsible for character education?”

- Principle 8. The school staff is an ethical learning community that shares responsibility for character education and adheres to the same core virtues that guide the students.
- Principle 9. The school fosters shared leadership and long-range support of the character education initiative.
- Principle 10. The school engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort.

The last principle addressed, “How should the effectiveness of a character education effort be assessed?”

- Principle 11. The school regularly assesses its culture and climate, the functioning of its staff as character educators, and the extent to which its students manifest good character.

We wanted these principles to be specific enough to give schools meaningful direction but broad enough to let them generate creative applications of the principles that would be developmentally appropriate and capitalize on their distinctive strengths, identity, history, and culture. Two years later, we designed a formative assessment survey, *Character Education Quality Standards*, that enabled schools

to rate, on a 5-point scale, the extent to which they were implementing each of the 11 principles.

Soon thereafter, this instrument was used in CEP's National Schools of Character program to recognize schools implementing the 11 Principles at a high level of excellence—an awards program still continued today by Character.org. In 2003, CEP published the *Eleven Principles Sourcebook* (Beland, 2003), an extensive training manual that explained each principle in detail and illustrated it with exemplary practices from elementary, middle, and high schools that had won the National School of Character award.

What the 11 principles provided was a character education “framework” that guided the definition of character, the implementation of character education practices, the training of character educators, and the assessment of character outcomes. At the same time, this broad framework encouraged schools to be creative and design new practices that would advance the art of educating for character.

Other frameworks had existed before the 11 principles, such as the “comprehensive 12-component approach” of *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (Lickona, 1991) and the “caring school community” model emerging from the Child Development Project (Schaps et al., 1996). New conceptual and implementation frameworks continue to be developed such as “Smart & Good High Schools” (Lickona & Davidson, 2005) and PRIMED: Prioritization of Character Education, Relationships, Intrinsic Motivation, Modeling, Empowerment, and Developmental Pedagogy (Berkowitz, 2009).

McGrath's article should prompt us to ask: What is the relationship between these previous “frameworks” and the new character education “prototype” he is proposing? Is the distinctive contribution of his seven-feature prototype not so much to get character educators to be more clear about what they mean by “character education” (after all, the various frameworks to date have spelled out what they

mean by that), but rather to force us to ponder more deeply and specify more precisely what we regard as the essential goals of character development that schools, families, and others should be educating for, regardless of the framework they employ?

WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL GOALS OF CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT?

Among the character development goals that McGrath prioritizes are identity, holistic growth of the virtues, and practical wisdom. Let us consider identity first. Whether one's sense of identity is a trustworthy predictor of actual morality is called into question by people's response when asked to agree or disagree with the statement, "I am a person of good character." (Nearly 100% of those surveyed agree.) Despite the abundant evidence that human beings often behave in ways not consistent with good character, nearly all of us appear to think of ourselves as being basically good. In the recent avalanche of allegations of predatory sexual conduct by men in powerful positions, some of the accused did not deny the charges but said things like, "This does not reflect who I am." Such responses suggest that human beings have a considerable capacity to insulate their idealized self-image (sense of identity) from their real-life behavior.

THE CASE FOR IDENTITY AS THE CORE OF CHARACTER

Although people can maintain a positive self-image in spite of their bad behavior, I think McGrath makes a strong case that character education differs from training in prosocial skills primarily in terms of the extent to which it focuses on "narrative identity." "The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves," McGrath points out, "represent coherent statements ... about our values and goals, our understanding of ourselves as individuals, the role of suffering in our lives, our cultural context, and many other pieces of who we are.

Where skills training emphasizes the participant achieving behavioral effectiveness, character education is more about the participant developing a greater sense of who he or she is or may become."

McGrath's suggestion that the heart of character development, as opposed to mere social skill acquisition, is a process of constructing a life narrative and a moral identity embedded in that narrative, calls to mind *Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment* (1992), Anne Colby and William Damon's classic study of 24 character exemplars. Each of these character exemplars—with distinguished contributions in fields as varied as business, science, medical care, the protection of the environment, the fight against poverty, and religious freedom—had at some point in their lives, developed a transformative personal goal that came to define who they were. Fidelity to that goal and the strong sense of identity it created shaped the continuing course of their lives.

New York Times columnist David Brooks, in his best-selling *The Road to Character* (2015), provides 10 "portraits of character" that raise a related question: Where does a transformative personal goal with the power to define one's identity come from? Do we choose it, or does it somehow choose us? Today, Brooks points out, commencement speakers tell graduates to "follow their passion," to ask "What do I want from life?" and then go after it. But, Brooks says, there is another, very different approach to finding one's purpose in life. In this approach, you don't ask, "What do I want from life" but rather, "What does life want from me?"

As one of his examples, Brooks cites Viktor Frankl. His wife, mother, and brother all died in the Nazi concentration camps. Frankl spent most of his time in the concentration camps laying tracks for railway lines. This was not the life he had planned for himself, not his passion or his dream. But, as he later wrote, "It did not really matter what we expected from life, but what life expected from us."

Frankl concluded that his moral task in the camps was to suffer well and to teach other prisoners to take their lives seriously and struggle to preserve their inner dignity and integrity. He encouraged them to focus their minds upward on the image of an absent wife or child or parent or friend and preserve their love for that person, even in an environment that conspired to destroy love, and even though the loved one might already have died in another camp. Life, he concluded, “ultimately means taking the responsibility to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets before the individual.”

Brooks observes that Viktor Frankl had a vocation—something a person does not choose so much as something that chooses them. It is a calling. People generally feel they have no choice in the matter; their life would be unrecognizable if they did not pursue this line of activity.

Another example from Brooks’ (2015) *The Road to Character*: By 1911, the young Francis Perkins had lobbied for worker rights and on behalf of the poor but in a conventional, genteel way befitting her class. Then on March 25 of that year, she and others helplessly looked on in horror as flames consumed New York City’s Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, where women workers had previously gone on strike to protest the firetrap conditions. One hundred and forty-six persons died in the fire, many leaping to their deaths from the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors because the stairwell doors had been locked by the owners to prevent the possibility of theft by workers.

Perkins, galvanized by this disaster, “indignant that this tear of the moral fabric of the world could be permitted to last,” threw herself into the rough and tumble of politics in order to fight for workers’ rights. She did so for the rest of her life, eventually becoming, under Franklin Roosevelt, the nation’s first female Secretary of Labor.

Brooks is at pains to show us that the men and women he writes about in *The Road to Character* were “not even close to perfect,” but were “moral realists ... acutely aware of

their own weaknesses.” They “waged an internal struggle against their sins.” They shared a belief that worthwhile living requires a “confrontation with ourselves.”

Reading the rich and nuanced accounts of the individual lives of character provided by Colby and Damon in their book and by Brooks in his, and contemplating McGrath’s suggestion that the core of our character is a personal identity that we continually construct by “the stories we tell ourselves,” leads one to ask, What are the implications of all this for character education?

In my own work, I have defined character education as the “deliberate effort to develop virtues,” and have defined virtues as objectively good human qualities—such as honesty, justice, caring, and diligence—that benefit the individual person and serve the common good. Such a definition may be a useful start, but defining character in a general way in terms of universal virtues doesn’t begin to capture the diverse lives and distinctive strengths of the character of real people in real circumstances.

To what extent do we engage our students in close study of these individual lives of character, in order to gain insight and inspiration? How might the examination of such lives help young persons as they think about and craft their own character, as they clarify a sense of who they are and discern what their calling in life might be? In the field of character psychology, what do we know about how a sense of identity and a sense of vocation develop? How do we help our students and our children see the development of their character as an inescapably personal responsibility, an “inside job” that no one can do for them and that will last a lifetime?

McGrath is also right to urge us to prioritize *holistic* character development—the interdependence of the virtues and the pivotal role that certain virtues play. When educators and parents try to foster relational virtues such as respect, fairness, kindness, and honesty, it’s important to realize how much those qualities depend on foundational virtues such as practical wisdom, fortitude, and self-control. In

Character Building: A Guide for Parents and Teachers, David Isaacs (2001) argues that developing practical wisdom and fortitude should be emphasized throughout children's development because these are necessary for acquiring and acting upon all the other virtues. Practical wisdom, or good judgment, enables children to understand the purpose of each virtue and know how to practice it. Fortitude is needed at every age in order to overcome obstacles and make the effort needed to form a good habit.

WISDOM: THE MISSING VIRTUE IN CHARACTER EDUCATION

I was especially glad to see McGrath's emphasis on practical wisdom as an essential aim of character development. Schools engaged in character education typically display a list of the virtues they seek to develop in their students, but hardly ever is Aristotle's "master virtue" of practical wisdom on the list. That constitutes a gaping hole in a character development initiative. What would it take to fill it?

First, a practical understanding of what practical wisdom is. Wisdom is good judgment. Since the ancient Greeks, it's been regarded as the master virtue because it tells us how to put the other virtues into practice—when to act, how to act, how not to act, and how to balance and integrate different virtues when they conflict. Wisdom means *stopping to think*—taking the time to make a good decision by considering your choices and what's at stake. One 12-year-old British boy in the Narnian Virtues program that Mark Pike's team and our center (Pike, Lickona, & Nesfield, 2015) are currently researching in United Kingdom schools, spoke to this when he said:

My friends don't really respect people, and it's like peer pressure—they try to push me into it. Usually, I would just go with it, but when we started learning about the virtues, I knew wisdom meant, like, right or wrong—and now I have to think, "Is this right, or is it wrong?"

Wisdom enables us to choose the best means of reaching a worthwhile goal. In school, students are often asked to set goals for academic improvement. A student in math class might say, "My goal is to get all my math homework in on time this marking period," but often, students don't have a realistic strategy for achieving their goal and so they don't succeed. Figuring out a strategy that might really succeed in doing better at math or at solving an interpersonal conflict requires good judgment—wisdom. Guided class discussions can help to develop wise strategizing.

Wisdom also includes moral reasoning. To act virtuously means to do the right thing for the right reason. We can do a good deed such as returning a lost wallet because we want a reward, because we want to be noticed and praised, or because we want to help the person who lost his wallet. Only the last of these reasons a virtuous one.

Wisdom enables us to discern correctly, to see things as they really are. In this sense, our character includes our beliefs—about ourselves, others, the way life works, and what will make us and others happy. Our beliefs can be accurate—reality-based—or inaccurate. Benjamin Franklin (Rogers, 1996) said that if we want to be happy, we have to form a "right opinion" about "the nature of things" and then live in accordance with that reality. If we think that money, power, popularity, or beauty is the secret of a happy life, we will find out, sooner or later, that deep and lasting happiness does not come from such things. If, on the other hand, we believe that loving relationships, work done well, and doing good for others are a more dependable source of happiness, our belief is more in touch with how things really are. Beliefs based on wisdom about how things truly are will help to set young people on the path to a flourishing and fulfilling life.

Finally, if we wanted to foster the development of practical wisdom in our young, we would help them realize they have a capacity for wisdom that they are not necessarily using. "You've got wisdom, but you don't always use it," said a high school counselor to a

15-year-old student who had been sent to her because of getting into a fight. “What do you mean?” he said. “Well,” the counselor said, “you kept your appointment to see me, right? That showed wise judgment. You could have just blown it off.” She had his attention, and continued:

You’ve made a lot of other decisions today that showed good judgment. You came to school instead of skipping. You’ve probably followed a dozen or more school rules since you entered the building. All that showed good judgment. Unfortunately, you didn’t use your best judgment when you got into a fight.

I’d like to see you again in a week. Between now and then, keep a list of all the good decisions you make—the commitments you keep, the fights you don’t get into, the temptations you resist, the work you get done, and the good things you do for other people. All of your good decisions, big and small, in school and out of school—write them down. We’ll look at your list together when we meet. You’ve got wisdom—now go and use it.

WHY SELF-CONTROL SHOULD BE AN ESSENTIAL OUTCOME

McGrath’s character education prototype doesn’t include self-control as an essential outcome, but I think it should. Consider the crucial role played by self-control in the life of character. Self-control is the ability to govern ourselves—to control our temper, regulate our appetites and passions, and pursue even legitimate pleasures in moderation. In their bestselling book *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, social psychologist Roy Baumeister and science writer John Tierney (2011) report the growing recognition that most major problems, personal and societal, are to a considerable extent failures of self-control. Compulsive spending and borrowing, impulsive violence, underachievement in school, procrastination at work, alcohol and drug abuse, unhealthy diet, explosive anger—all reflect shortcomings in self-control.

Baumeister and Tierney cite a global survey which found that when people were asked to rank their failings, a lack of self-control topped the list. As parents and teachers, we’ll have trouble getting our kids to be thoughtful decision-makers and persons who are kind, respectful, and fair in their relationships if they do not have self-control.

CONCLUSION

Let me sum up what I see as the important contributions of Robert McGrath’s reflections on the field of character education and his proposals for future progress. He asks the most basic question one could pose: What is character education? As character education scholars and practitioners, are we talking a common language—or even trying to? How does character education differ from other programs aimed at promoting prosocial behavior and personal growth? In addressing these questions, McGrath shows us the usefulness of a prototype consisting of essential features of character education. Especially helpful, in my judgment, is his inclusion of critically important character development goals that have been neglected by much character education: the development of a personal moral identity, holistic growth in the virtues, and the pivotal role of practical wisdom in the life of character. To that list of essential goals, I would add self-control. Greater attention to these essential goals—to what is most important in developing a person of good character—should produce better theory and better practice in the field.

I think, however, that it is a mistake for a prototype to say, as McGrath’s does, that character education is “school based.” The field is at a point where we need to pay much more attention to other crucial arenas affecting character development, such as the family, the peer group, and community-based activities like youth sports. I also take issue with McGrath’s exclusion from his prototype of effective character education practices, since we have

research that has been able to identify a number of those. Practices such as building positive relationships with students and helping them learn to take the perspective of others need not be unique to character education in order to deserve inclusion in a prototype's list of essential features.

Moreover, while I think an empirically validated formal character education curriculum can make an important contribution to a school's character initiative, I do not agree with McGrath that it is essential. Making it seem so draws attention away from what is truly essential, namely, developing a school-wide culture of character where the target virtues are taught, affirmed, modeled, discussed, practiced, and consistently upheld in every phase of school life. Finally, I wish McGrath had given us a bit more historical perspective on the modern renewal of character education—something that began in the mid-1980s, has matured over more than three decades, and in the process has produced a series of widely used "character education frameworks" such as the 11 Principles of Effective Character Education. How does McGrath see the relationship between these existing conceptual frameworks and what he is proposing with his new prototype?

To get good answers in any field, we need good questions. Robert McGrath has given us plenty of those to think about for some time to come. For that, we are all in his debt.

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