THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN CHARACTER EDUCATION

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A comprehensive model of classroom character education is described in terms of nine components: the teacher as caregiver, model, and mentor; creating a caring classroom environment; moral discipline; creating a democratic classroom environment; teaching values through the curriculum; cooperative learning; the conscience of the craft; ethical reflection; and teaching conflict resolution. The article concludes with a critical examination of three different approaches for dealing with controversial issues such as abortion.

Many teachers use news clippings to engage students in discussion of admirable character qualities and their opposites. One such news item was an article by Arianna Huffington in the November 26, 1996 *Washington Times.* Huffington reported that one dead baby after another was found in the trash during the last few months of 1996. One was found in a plastic bag inside a bucket in Denver; another in a trash bin outside a convenience store in Knoxville, Tennessee; a third in a conveyor belt of trash in Portsmouth, Virginia; another in a freezing barn in eastern Iowa; and still another in a garbage truck in Brooklyn.

None of these deaths, however, attracted the national attention given to the arrests of two college students, Brian Peterson, Jr., and Amy Grossberg, both of wealthy families and charged with murdering their newborn son. Amy, with her boyfriend Brian's help, gave birth to a

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healthy baby boy on November 12 in a motel in Newark, Delaware. Soon after, police allege, they dumped the infant, with its skull fractured, in a trash bin outside the motel and left for Amy's dorm at the University of Delaware.

Joseph Hurley, one of Brian's lawyers, boasted to the press a week later that he had shifted public attention from "the horror of the crime" to "Brian, the human being, the nice, normal kid." Brian had "executed bad judgment," Mr. Hurley explained. Brian's mother told reporters, "My son did nothing wrong."

Consider a second news item: On September 15, 1996, an investigative newspaper report by the Bergen County, New Jersey, *Record* disclosed that at one New Jersey abortion clinic alone, half of its annual 3,000 abortions are now partial-birth abortions. In this procedure, the report explained, a mid-trimester or third trimester baby is delivered except for the head and then killed by suctioning out its brains. Nearly all of the partial-birth abortions at this clinic are performed on healthy women—most of them teens—and healthy babies.

Upon finishing a unit on the Civil War, a fifth grade boy in a New Hampshire elementary school raised his hand and said, "We think slavery was terrible. But what are people going to say about us in fifty years?"

What, indeed? Babies in the trash, a million and a half abortions each year, the steadily escalating physical and sexual abuse of children, one of four children living in poverty—how will our descendants view such things fifty or a hundred years from now?

Fortunately, we don't have to wait fifty years to take stock of our moral condition. In poll after poll, a large majority of Americans say that the United States is in moral and spiritual decline. There is a growing sense that schools, families, churches, the whole human community—all those historically responsible for passing on a moral heritage to the young—must come together in common cause to elevate the character of our children and ultimately, one hopes, our culture.

Schools, for their part, are rediscovering that there is much they can do to build good character. They can begin by making character development their highest educational priority—the goal that underlies everything else they do. They can challenge all other formative social institutions, especially the family, to do their part in teaching the young the virtues they need—respect, responsibility, prudence, self-discipline, courage, kindness, and chastity—to make a good life and to build a good society.

Educational reform, for the most part, comes down to a teacher and a classroom full of students. What can individual teachers do to contribute

to the character development of the young lives that are entrusted to them?

First, teachers need a clear understanding of what character education is. Character education is the deliberate effort to teach virtue. Virtues are objectively good human qualities. They are good for the individual (they help a person lead a fulfilling life), and they are good for the whole human community (they enable us to live together harmoniously and productively). Virtues, unlike "values," don't change. Justice, honesty, and patience always have been virtues and always will be virtues. Virtues represent objective moral standards that transcend time, culture, and individual choice.

Every virtue has three parts: moral knowledge, moral feeling, and moral behavior. To possess the virtue of justice, for example, I first must understand what justice is and what justice requires of me in human relations (moral knowledge). I also must care about justice—be emotionally committed to it, have the capacity for appropriate guilt when I behave unjustly, and be capable of moral indignation when I see others suffer unjustly (moral feeling). Finally, I must practice justice—act fairly in my personal relations and carry out my obligations as a citizen to promote social justice (moral behavior). Thus, in order to develop virtuous character in their students, teachers must help young people to know what the virtues are, to appreciate their importance and to want to possess them, and to practice them in their day-to-day conduct.

Once educators understand this comprehensive concept of character, they are ready to design a comprehensive instructional program. *Comprehensive character education asserts that effective character education must encompass the total moral life of the classroom and school.* A comprehensive approach recognizes that all interactions in the school—the way adults treat students, the way students treat adults, the way students are permitted to treat each other, the way the administration treats staff and parents, and the way sports are conducted, conflicts resolved, and grades given—send moral messages and affect students' developing character. Both explicit moral instruction (such as explanation, exhortation, and curriculum-based lessons in virtue) and implicit moral teaching (through processes such as modeling, discipline, and cooperative learning) are part of the moral life of the school.

Drawing on work with teachers and schools, our Center for the 4th and 5th Rs (Respect and Responsibility) at SUNY Cortland offers a comprehensive character education model that consists of 12 mutually supportive components, nine that are classroom-based and three that are schoolwide. These 12 components are presented in the character education wheel in

Figure 1. In the rest of this article, I briefly explain and illustrate the nine classroom components. (See *Educating for Character,* Lickona, 1991, for a fuller discussion of all 12 components.)
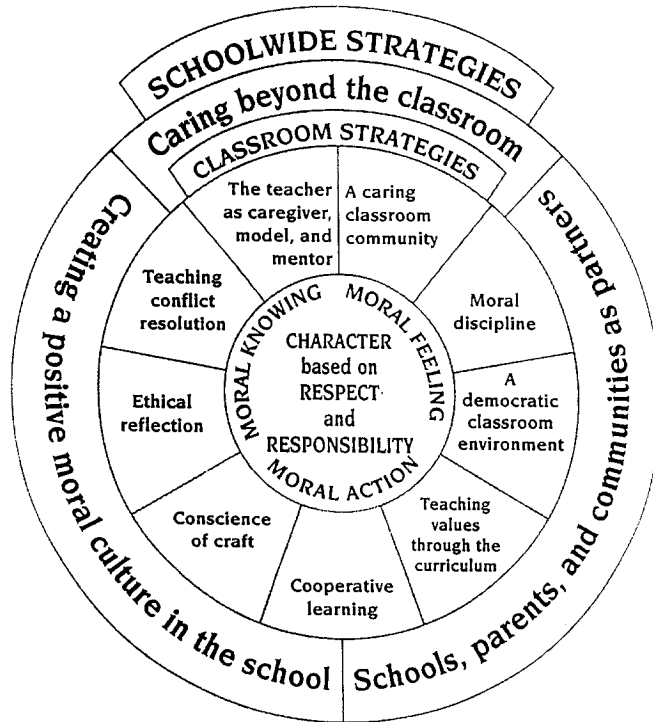

Figure 1. A comprehensive approach to character education.

CLASSROOM COMPONENTS

1. The teacher as caregiver, moral model, and moral mentor The quality of a teacher's relationships with students is the foundation of everything else a teacher may wish to do in character education. In their relationships with students, teachers exert positive moral influence in three complementary ways. First, they serve as *effective caregivers*— caring about and respecting their students, helping them succeed at the work of school and thereby building their self-respect, and enabling students to gain a first-hand appreciation of the meaning of morality by being treated in a moral way. Second, they serve as *moral models*— demonstrating a high level of respect and responsibility inside and outside the classroom and modeling moral concern by taking time to

discuss morally significant events from school life and current events. Adults cannot teach character unless they display character. Third, teachers serve as *ethical mentors*—providing direct moral instruction and guidance through explanation, storytelling, classroom discussion, encouragement of positive behavior, and corrective moral feedback when students engage in actions hurtful to self or others.

For example, Molly Angelini, a former fifth grade teacher, made courtesy an important virtue in her classroom. She treated all of her students with a high level of courtesy and modeled courtesy in her behavior toward anyone who came into her classroom. She required her students to apologize in writing if they called a classmate a name. She taught them to say, "Pardon me?" instead of "What?" or "Huh?" when they wished something repeated. When they went to lunch, she taught them to greet the cafeteria workers by name and to thank them when they put the food on their trays. Most importantly, she taught her children that all these behaviors were not mechanical gestures but meaningful ways of respecting other people.

2. Creating a caring classroom community   How can teachers establish respect and caring as operative norms in the peer group? The peer culture is a powerful influence on student conduct and character. If teachers do not take the initiative to shape a positive peer culture—one that supports the virtues they are trying to teach—the peer culture often will develop in the opposite direction, creating peer norms (e.g., cruelty to schoolmates who are different, lack of academic responsibility, and disrespect for legitimate authority) that are antithetical to good character.

By contrast, when a teacher is successful in creating a moral classroom community, students learn morality by living it. They receive respect and care from their peers and practice giving them in return. Through these repeated experiences, respect and care begin to become habits—part of their developing character.

At any grade level, teachers can create this kind of positive moral community in the classroom by helping students to: (a) get to know each other; (b) respect, care about, and affirm each other; and (c) feel a valued membership in, and accountability to, the group.

Building this kind of caring community requires teachers to be vigilant about peer cruelty, which is on the rise nearly everywhere. In a third grade classroom I observed, children excluded and repeatedly made fun of a girl named Rhonda who was shabbily dressed and had learning problems. No one would eat lunch with her or play with her at recess. Rhonda's response was to withdraw and to regress to immature behavior

such as "baby talk." One day, when Rhonda was absent, the teacher asked Rhonda's resource room teacher, Laura LoParco, to speak to the class about this problem. Here is what Ms. LoParco said to help these children understand—and want to stop—the hurtful effects of their behavior:

> *What you are doing is hurting Rhonda here [pointing to her own head], in her mind. You can't see the hurt, but it's very real. You can make her think that she is stupid and the kind of person that nobody will like. That thought may stay in her mind for a very long time, even years. It may affect her ability to learn and her ability to make friends with other people. You have a decision to make: Do you wish to continue doing this?*

The children said they did not wish to continue this behavior. After this discussion, students in fact did stop treating Rhonda cruelly, and many made an effort to talk and to play with her.

Teachers are wise, however, to try to prevent peer cruelty from getting a foothold by being proactive in developing a supportive classroom community. For example, Jan Gorman, a first grade teacher at Meachem Elementary School in Syracuse, New York, teaches a virtue a week for the first five weeks of school. She begins with the virtue of caring. She puts a large sign, CARING, on the board, along with a photograph depicting caring (two children working together). She asks her children to discuss these questions: What is caring? Who can show caring? Where does caring take place? How can each of us show caring? In our classroom? In our school? In our families? She makes a visual map of the children's ideas, which remains posted for the rest of the week. She then reads the class a children's book that conveys the importance of caring and leads a discussion of the story. During the rest of the day, she looks for opportunities to help children make connections between their own behavior and the virtue of caring. When a child behaves in a caring way, she compliments that child, sometimes calling the class's attention to the act of consideration or kindness. If a child behaves in an uncaring way, she speaks to the child privately, asking, "Did that show caring? Remember our story . . . remember our discussion." On each subsequent day of the week, she reads a different story about caring, has a class discussion, and again looks for opportunities during the day to reinforce the lesson. "By the end of the week," Ms. Gorman says, "caring has been established as an expectation in my classroom." The following week, she takes another virtue— such as respect or loyalty—and repeats this process.

3. Moral discipline   Discipline, if it is to serve character development, must be more than crowd control. It must help students develop moral reasoning, self-control, and respect for others. Rules should be established in a way that enables students to see the moral values or standards (e.g., courtesy and caring) behind the rules. The emphasis should not be on extrinsic rewards and punishment but on following the rules because it's the right thing to do—because it respects the rights and needs of others. Consequences used to enforce rules should serve as a moral teacher, helping students to understand how a given rule benefits self and others, and strengthening their feelings of obligation to follow the rule in the future.

Using this kind of "moral discipline," Tom Izzo carries out character education as a high school substitute teacher. He explains, "At the beginning of each class, I tell my students that I expect them to treat their classmates, as well as me, with respect, and to be responsible for their own work and actions. I give them examples that illustrate these behaviors. For example, I tell them that no one is to speak when someone else—a classmate or me—is talking, because it is disrespectful and disturbs the lesson. If a student misbehaves in class, I ask them if they thought what they did was respectful or responsible—and why."

As an example of how he handles misbehavior, Tom Izzo describes an incident that occurred when he was substituting in a high school biology lab. One boy—call him Bill—was copying answers from the student sitting next to him. Mr. Izzo pulled Bill aside, and the following conversation ensued:

Mr. Izzo: Do you think you are following the rules about respect and responsibility that I set forth at the beginning of class?

Bill: I don't know.

Mr. Izzo: I'll help you figure it out. Do you think copying someone else's work and using it as your own is being responsible?

Bill: I guess not, but it's no big deal.

Mr. Izzo: Let me give you another example. Imagine that you're a businessman, working on a big report. One of your co-workers copies it and hands it in to the boss, taking credit for your idea. What would you think of that?

Bill: I see your point. It would make me mad.

Mr. Izzo: Do you think the man who copied the report was acting fairly or responsibly?

Bill: No. I never thought about it like that.

Tom Izzo comments: "I tell my students that if they show people respect and are responsible, things will fall into place for them, and they'll have fewer hassles—not only with teachers and other students but also with people outside of school." In this way, he is teaching students the important lesson that good character helps a person in life. His approach is effective because students like and respect him. Unlike some substitutes, he is able to handle discipline problems on his own without involving the principal's office.

4. Creating a democratic classroom environment   Creating a democratic classroom means involving students, on a regular basis and in developmentally appropriate ways, in shared decision making that increases their responsibility for making the classroom a good place to be and to learn. A democratic classroom contributes to character because it provides a forum where any need or problem of the group can be addressed. It also provides a support structure that calls forth students' best moral selves by holding them accountable to norms of respect and responsibility.

The chief means of creating a democratic classroom environment is the class meeting, a face-to-face circle meeting emphasizing interactive discussion. Class meetings can be used to address problems (cutting in lunch line, put-downs, homework problems) or to plan upcoming events (the day, a field trip, a cooperative activity, the next unit). Most importantly, class meetings help students go beyond "saying the right words" to putting words into moral action.

Patty Brody, a second grade teacher at a Catholic school in Syracuse, New York, called one of her first class meetings in the middle of a snowy winter day to deal with a continuing problem: "chaos in the coat closet." There had been angry words, jostling and sometimes tears as children tried to find their boots, mittens, hats, and so on. Some children even missed the bus as a result of the confusion and conflict.

At their class meeting, Ms. Brody asked her students to describe what had been happening in the coat closet. They readily did so. She then posed the problem in the collective moral voice: "How can we, working together, solve this problem?" After brainstorming possible solutions, the class decided that everyone should be assigned a hook to put things on or under. "How are we going to make sure everyone does this?" the teacher asked. A girl suggested that if people didn't put their things where they belonged, they would have to keep them at their desk during the next day. The class agreed.

Ms. Brody then drew up a class agreement, had each of her 34 children sign it, posted it next to the coat closet, and set a time when they

would meet again to see how their solution was working. She comments, "Since we adopted this plan, not a single person has missed the bus." Note all the steps that Ms. Brody took to improve moral conduct. She asked the children to (a) describe the nature of the problem and to agree upon a solution; (b) decide together upon a consequence for not following the new plan; (c) show a commitment by signing the posted agreement; and (d) assess the effectiveness of their solution in a follow-up meeting.

In a similar way, middle and high school teachers have used the class meeting to convert classroom management challenges (e.g., students talking out of turn, being tardy, not doing homework) into occasions for students to take responsibility for solving problems.

5. Teaching values through the curriculum   There are countless opportunities for teachers to use the morally rich content of academic subjects—literature, history, science, and art—as a vehicle for teaching virtue. Mining the school curriculum for its moral potential requires teachers to look at their grade-level curriculum and ask, "What are the moral questions and lessons already present in the subject I teach? How can I make those questions and lessons salient for my students?"

A science teacher can design a lesson on the need for precise and truthful reporting of data and on how scientific fraud undermines the scientific enterprise. A social studies teacher can examine questions of social justice, actual moral dilemmas faced by historical figures, and current opportunities for civic action to better one's community or country. A literature teacher can have students analyze the moral decisions and the moral strengths and weaknesses of characters in novels, plays, and short stories. A mathematics teacher can ask students to research and plot morally significant societal trends (e.g., violent crime, teen pregnancy, homelessness, children living in poverty). All teachers can engage students in the study of men and women who have achieved moral or intellectual distinction in their fields.

Teaching character through the curriculum also includes making thoughtful use of published character education curricula. *The Heartwood Ethics Curriculum for Children* (The Heartwood Institute, 1994) uses ancient and contemporary classics in children's literature from around the world to foster seven character qualities: justice, respect, honesty, courage, loyalty, hope, and love. *Facing History and Ourselves* (Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 1994), initially developed for eighth-graders and later adapted to high school and college levels, uses history, film, and guest speakers to study the Holocaust—and to ask students to look within themselves to probe the universal human tendency toward

prejudice and scapegoating. *Choosing to Participate* (Stoskopk & Strom, 1990), which grew out of the *Facing History* curriculum, has students study all the ways people have historically participated—through human service, politics, social activism, and other voluntary activity—in creating a society that seeks justice and dignity for all its members. Students then are encouraged to conceive and to carry out social action projects of their own. *The Art of Loving Well* (The Boston University Loving Well Project, 1993), described by its creators as an "anti-impulse curriculum" for junior high and high school English and health classes, uses an anthology of short stories, poems, essays, and folk tales to help students reflect on romance, love, commitment, and marriage. In a federally funded evaluation that used anonymous self-report questionnaires to survey several thousand students, 92 percent of those students who experienced *The Art of Loving Well* curriculum were still sexually abstinent two years later, compared to 72 percent of the control group.

6. Cooperative learning Cooperative learning is an instructional process that gives students continual practice in developing important social and moral competencies—the ability to take perspective, the ability to work as part of a team, and the ability to appreciate others—while they are learning academic material. Cooperative learning also contributes to the development of a cohesive and caring classroom community by breaking down ethnic, racial, and other social barriers and by integrating every student into the small social structure of the cooperative group.

In a sixth grade classroom in Montreal, Quebec, a teacher faced the most divisive group she had ever taught. The class was torn apart by racial conflict; blacks and whites exchanged insults and physically assaulted each other during recess and after school. The school psychologist observed the class and recommended that the teacher set up structured cooperative learning groups. He encouraged the teacher to: (a) put together children who have trouble getting along; (b) give them joint assignments and projects with roles for all members; (c) monitor them closely and to teach them to monitor themselves; and (d) most importantly, stick with the groups even if they didn't seem to be working in the beginning.

The teacher had students work together—usually in threes or fours— in all subjects for part of each day. They worked on math problems in groups, researched social studies questions in groups, practiced reading to each other in groups, and so on. "It took them two months to really make this work," the teacher said, "but they finally got it together. Moreover, their test scores went up." Mastering the skills of cooperative learning is a gradual, developmental process for both teacher and students, but the

academic and character development benefits—documented at all grade levels—justify the effort (Slavin, 1990).

7. The conscience of craft   The literature on moral and character education often treats moral learning and academic learning as separate spheres. But academic work and learning have moral meaning. Work is one of the most basic ways we develop self-discipline and self-worth and contribute to the human community. It is a mark of people's character when they take care to perform their jobs and other tasks well. Syracuse University professor Tom Green calls this a "conscience of craft"—the capacity to feel satisfaction at a job well done and to be ashamed of slovenly work.

Anne Ritter, who teaches first graders (85 percent of whom come from families below the poverty line), works to inculcate a conscience of craft through continual conversation about and demonstration of the ethos of hard work. One posted rule in her classroom reads: "Always do your best in everything." In another part of her room, a sign reads: A PERSON WILL SELF-DESTRUCT WITHOUT A GOAL. One "value of the month," featured on the class bulletin board, is AMBITION, defined as "hard work directed toward a worthwhile goal." She, like other teachers who effectively develop students' work-related character qualities, combines high expectations and high support. As a new teacher in her school, Anne Ritter astonished fellow teachers by getting 90 percent of her class up to grade level in reading and math. Her comment: "It's the job."

8. Ethical reflection   This strategy focuses on developing several qualities that make up the cognitive side of character: being morally alert; knowing the virtues and what they require of us in concrete situations; taking the perspective of others; reasoning morally; making thoughtful moral decisions; and having moral self-knowledge, including the capacity for self-criticism.

Especially important is teaching students what the virtues are, how their habitual practice will lead to a more fulfilling life, and how each of us must take responsibility for developing our own character. Psychologist Patricia Cronin (1995) has designed a junior high school curriculum for doing this. The emphasis in Cronin's curriculum is on helping students increase their awareness of their own behavior—of how they treat themselves and others. Students are encouraged to set small daily goals for improvement in their practice of a particular virtue such as respect, cooperation, or generosity (e.g., to give help before it's asked, or to defend someone against negative gossip). At the end of the day, they

self-assess and, if they choose, record their progress in a personal journal. This daily goal-setting is considered important for self-awareness and good habit formation.

Teachers can extend the impact of classroom moral reflection if they send home materials that will encourage a similar process between parent and child. "Character education homework" can be parent-initiated (e.g., dinner discussion topics or bedtime stories) or child-initiated (e.g., school assignments where children interview their parents concerning their attitudes about drugs, their views on friendship, what virtues they were taught growing up, etc.)

Teachers, especially at the secondary level, often struggle with the problem of student moral relativism. A high school teacher in Atlanta comments: "Our children have learned the lesson of relativism well. They say, 'There are no absolutes—what's right is just your opinion.' We have produced kids who think that the individual is the center of the moral universe and who believe, 'You need to do what works for you.'"

Christina Hoff Sommers, who teaches philosophy at Clark University, faces a similar challenge. She has tried to find some act her first-year students will condemn as morally wrong: torturing a child, starving someone to death, humiliating an invalid in a nursing home. Their reply is often, "Torture, starvation, and humiliation may be bad for you or for me, but who are we to say they are bad for someone else?"

Students' moral relativism is an expression of subjectivism—the intellectual belief that all truth is subjective. Boston College philosopher Peter Kreeft comments, "Of all the symptoms of decay in our decadent civilization, subjectivism is the most disastrous of all. A mistake—be it a moral mistake or an intellectual mistake—can be discovered and corrected only if truth exists and can be known." Objective truth, as Kreeft explains, is truth that is independent of the knower. That Lincoln was president during the Civil War is objectively true—even if I don't know it. That adultery is wrong, cheating wrong, date rape wrong, torture wrong, child abuse wrong, and the taking of innocent human life wrong are objective moral truths—even if I don't realize it. Objective moral truths have a claim on my conscience and behavior. Take away the notion of objective truth, and moral chaos quickly follows. Character education is founded on the idea that objective moral truth exists and must help students to grasp the validity of this idea.

Teachers also encourage moral thoughtfulness by the way in which they handle issues arising from the collective moral life of the classroom. In a second grade classroom in Auburn, New York, Mrs. Williams was conducting a chick incubation project. She suggested to her children that

they might wish to open an egg each week to monitor the embryonic development of the chicks.

Later that day, however, seven-year-old Nathaniel confided: "Mrs. Williams, I've been thinking about this for a long time. It's just too cruel to open an egg and kill the chick inside!" Mrs. Williams listened with respect to Nat's concern, and said he could share his concern with the whole class.

When Nat did, there was some agreement that his point was worth considering. But many children said they were curious to see what the chick embryo looked like. Nat replied that being curious wasn't a good enough reason for killing a chick. "How would you like it," he said, "if someone opened *your* sack when you were developing because they were curious to see what you looked like?" He then argued that the library must have chick embryo pictures, which would be a better way of finding out what they looked like.

Mrs. Williams asked the children to think about this issue overnight. The next day, when the discussion continued, the class concluded that Nat's objection should be honored. They decided not to open the eggs.

The potential moral learnings here were many: that all life, even that of a chick embryo, is to be taken seriously and respected; that just wanting to do something isn't a good enough reason to do it; that the reasoned dissent of even one member of the group deserves a fair hearing from the rest; that an important moral decision should not be made in haste; and that, if possible, a conflict should be resolved in a way that tries to meet the needs of all parties. (In fact, the class did search out pictures of chick embryos in the library).

These moral learnings—and their contribution to the children's individual characters as well as to their character as a classroom community—were possible because Mrs. Williams took the time to help her students think carefully about a real-life moral problem. And, in this case, the moral learnings extended to Mrs. Williams, who learned from Nat's distressed reaction to her egg-opening proposal that such an activity was respectful of neither the chicks nor the children.

9. Teaching conflict resolution   Teaching students how to resolve conflicts without force or intimidation is a vitally important part of character education for at least two reasons: (1) conflicts not settled fairly will erode a moral community in the classroom; and (2) without conflict resolution skills, students will be morally handicapped in their interpersonal relationships now and later in life, and may end up contributing to violence in school and society.

There are a great many ways to teach conflict resolution skills in the classroom. Susan Skinner, a kindergarten teacher at Heathwood Hall Episcopal School in Columbia, South Carolina, uses two effective methods. When two children have a conflict, she stops the action and uses it as a teachable moment. She invites two other children (not the ones involved in the dispute) to come to the front of the class to role-play a positive solution to the conflict. She then asks the whole class for their suggestions. Finally, the two children who were involved in the conflict are invited to act out a positive solution that draws on what they have just seen and heard.

When one child has hurt another, Mrs. Skinner teaches a reconciliation ritual that fosters the virtue of forgiveness. She instructs the offending child to say, "I am sorry. Will you please forgive me?" If the victim judges the apology sincere, that child is instructed to respond, "I do forgive you." These behavior patterns have the best chance of becoming part of a child's character when they are learned early and practiced often. But effective training is possible at the adolescent level, where the stakes are even higher because conflicts may explode into deadly violence.

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES AND CHARACTER EDUCATION

Where do controversial issues fit into the scheme of character education? Let us return to the problem of declining respect for life, posed at the beginning of this article by the story of Amy and Brian's murder of their infant son and by the investigative report on partial-birth abortions. There is societal consensus that infanticide is wrong, but there is no societal consensus that abortion is morally wrong and should be prohibited by law. Abortion is fiercely debated in our society. But both sides in the debate cannot be right. Should character education bring this debate into the school, and, if so, how?

This question, I believe, does not admit of an easy answer. What follows is a consideration of the three different approaches to dealing with controversial issues.

1. Steer-clear-of-controversy approach   This approach advocates exclusion of controversial issues from the school curriculum, or at least from the character education program. The school's job in the area of character education is to help students develop basic virtues (honesty, respect, responsibility, etc.), qualities of good character about which there is little disagreement. Controversial moral matters such as abortion fall outside this domain. People of good character, the argument goes, can disagree about abortion and other controversial issues. Moreover, if the

school tries to teach about volatile subjects such as abortion, homo-sexuality, and doctor-assisted suicide, it is likely to create community conflict and to undermine support for the general character education effort.

The problem with this steer-clear-of-controversy position is that even if teachers don't bring up controversial questions, students will. Indeed, controversy is an unavoidable part of moral life, including school life. Should a particular book containing material that some or many parents consider inappropriate be kept in the curriculum? In the school library? Should a girl who wants to join the boys' wrestling team be allowed to do so? Should the school suspend field trips for all fifth-graders because some students have abused the privilege? What restitution should a group of sixth grade boys make to a girl they teased about a love note she sent to a boy? Was the teasing a form of sexual harassment, as the girl claimed but as the boys denied? Students want to discuss these and other matters—even if they have no say in deciding them. Opponents of the steer-clear-of-controversy position argue that the school is failing in its mission to develop moral reasoning and democratic citizenship if it doesn't teach students how to think critically about controversial issues, which certainly will confront them as citizens later in life.

2. Remain-impartial approach   A second approach is to include controversial topics—both societal issues and school-based issues—as part of character education but to do so with impartiality. The impartial approach grants students the intellectual freedom to reach their own conclusions. For example, if the teacher treats abortion in the classroom, the character education goal should be to demonstrate fairness to both sides of the debate and to help students develop intellectual virtues such as a respect for the right of others to hold a view different from their own, a capacity for reasoned and civil dialogue, a willingness to examine new information and arguments, and a commitment to truth. From this perspective, the teacher's goal should *not* be to influence students to adopt one or another position on the controversial issue under study.

One problem with this impartial approach is that it is very hard in practice for a teacher to ensure unbiased, even-handed treatment of a controversial issue such as abortion, especially if the teacher has strong feelings about the issue. For one thing, many teachers who have strong pro-choice or pro-life views have already made their views known out-side the classroom; consequently, they hardly function as an impartial presence in a classroom discussion of the issue. Moreover, many teachers believe that their right to take a stand on a controversial issue should

include the right to disclose that stand in the classroom, as long as they do not try to inculcate it in their students. But even if teachers scrupulously withhold their personal views and try to remove any pressure to defer to the instructor's position, their biases are still likely to infiltrate the classroom. Bias may occur, for example, in the selection of stronger readings to represent one side of the debate, if only because the teacher is more familiar with the literature on that side of the issue. (If you hold strong pro-choice views, would you trust a pro-life teacher to represent adequately the pro-choice side, or vice versa?)

Even if teacher impartiality could be fully achieved, it does not guarantee an impartial atmosphere in the classroom. Peer opinion sometimes strongly favors one side of a controversial issue, creating an intimidating climate for the students holding the minority position. Other students, initially not sure of what they think, may be unduly influenced by the dominant peer attitude rather than the merits of the arguments.

3. Take-a-stand approach   The third approach points out that character educators generally seek to guide students toward objectively right moral conclusions: It's wrong to lie, cheat, steal, be racist; it's right to be honest, kind, respectful of all persons, and so on. These objective moral truths, as previously noted, do not depend on social consensus; rather, such truths are independent of the knower and remain true even if most people failed to recognize them. If character education embraces this principle in general, why not with respect to a particular moral issue such as abortion? Roger Rosenblatt (1995), in his *New York Times Magazine* article, "Teaching Johnny to Be Good," put the question this way: "Intellectual fair play aside, if a teacher of character education truly believes in definite rights and wrongs, why would he or she wish to refrain from promoting his or her absolute values?"

If character educators disdain the values clarification position ("Here are the arguments for and against stealing; make your own decision," or "Here are the arguments for and against cheating; make your own decision."), why would they use this approach with an issue such as abortion? The answer "But people don't *agree* about the rightness or wrongness of abortion" doesn't suffice. Imagine that you were teaching high school in pre–Civil War America and believed that slavery was unquestionably evil; or that you were a teacher in Nazi Germany and believed that the persecution of the Jews was unquestionably immoral. These issues were certainly controversial in their time. Would a character educator with integrity and a commitment to justice have practiced neutrality on these issues, merely exposing students to the pros and cons of slavery and genocide?

Of course, moving away from strict neutrality doesn't mean using the classroom as a soapbox. It insists upon careful examination of arguments on both sides of an issue. A pro-life teacher, for example, could have students read the most articulate arguments for abortion rights. But the principle of guiding students to the objective truth would mean helping them to see what the pro-life teacher would take to be objectively true: that we are human from our earliest beginnings; that abortion kills a developing human life; that no human life can be held to have greater intrinsic moral worth than another; and that one cannot hope to promote respect for life as a general social value and simultaneously claim the right to kill children in the womb.

The problem with this third approach, however, is that it fails key ethical tests. First, it fails the test of reversibility: If I were the student, would I want the teacher to be promoting, overtly or otherwise, a moral position on abortion that was opposed to my own? I would not; it would be oppressive. Second, it fails the test of universalizability: Apart from my own involvement, would I be willing to universalize this position and grant permission for all teachers to act this way in a similar situation? Would I want teachers everywhere to use the classroom to promote their views on controversial issues such as abortion? I would not. (Never mind that many do.) Third, it fails the test of parental rights: Does the school's promotion of one view on abortion respect the rights of the many parents who think otherwise? If my community's school taught a pro-choice position on abortion and I were a pro-life parent (or vice versa), I certainly would feel that my rights were being violated.

As I have tried to establish, there are no easy answers to the challenge of controversial issues in character education programs. Efforts to exclude them from the curriculum, to treat them from an impartial, morally neutral stance, or to address them directly, are all problematic. Perhaps the best we can do regarding controversial issues is to teach students the tools of serious and thorough intellectual inquiry, including how to find the best information and arguments on both sides of an issue—then step back, let them inquire, and trust that objective truth, well-presented, will win in the end.

In the meantime, character education will serve the nation well if it succeeds in convincing children and adults to practice virtues in the many noncontroversial ways—everyday applications of honesty, responsibility, kindness, and courtesy—that constitute good character and basic human decency.

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