Teaching for Character: Three Alternatives for Teacher Education

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The concern over the proper induction of the younger generation by the older into the norms and canons of good conduct is probably a universal of the human experience. For this reason the work of character development is a broadly shared goal that animates the work of socialization agents in every contextual setting that involves children, but most especially in classrooms and schools where youngsters and teens spend most of their time outside of the family. The development of character has been an explicit aim of education ever since the emergence of common schools and the rise of systems of public education (McClellan, 1999). How well schools have come to discharge this mission is broadly contested and the source of periodic but intense national dialogue (Goodman & Lesnick, 2001).

The status and efficacy of moral character education is the target of several recent reviews (Berkowitz, Battistich & Bier, 2008; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006; Lapsley & Yeager, in press). In this chapter we attempt to link what is known about effective character education with strategies that might serve as a basis for teacher preparation. As everyone knows nothing much happens in educational reform unless teachers do it and principals enable it. How teachers and principals organize classrooms and schools to deliver effective character education will hinge importantly on how moral character education is understood.

Some theorists are alarmed at the present status of moral-character education in educational policy debates. Kristjansson (2002) points to a crumbling of belief in direct moral-character formation in schools which is either a cause or consequence of moral concerns being sidelined from mainstream educational discourse. In his view the duty of schools to cultivate the character of children has been marginalized in the Western world. Perhaps we have lost our nerve or else lost contact with resources that would justify explicit moral character education in terms that do not excite intractable culture wars about “whose values” are taught and for what ends.

We contend that the case for moral-character education is simpler than has been supposed. There is little need to invoke the litany of alarm about the rising tide of youth disorder or to engage in tendentious historical analysis of who is responsible for allegedly purging character from the curriculum. Instead the case is made by pointing to the fact that moral values are immanent to school life and that instruction in values is inescapable and inevitable. Values are infused in every interaction of teaching and learning, from selection of topics and insistence on high standards and respect for truth, to expectations and modalities of community and discipline that govern school life (Carr, 1991).

Hence the immanence of values and the inevitability of moral education are embedded deeply in the life of classrooms and schools. Moreover the immanence-and-inevitability of moral-character education would seem to arm the character educator with all the resources that are needed to defend an intentional and transparent commitment to the moral formation of students (Lapsley & Yeager, in press; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006). The case is made by pointing to the fact that moral considerations are immanent to the life of classrooms and schools; that teaching and learning are value-laden activities; that moral aims are intrinsic to education. Making the case implies that it is unacceptable to allow the immanence-and-inevitability of character education to remain part of a school’s hidden curriculum. Indeed, the classroom environment is saturated with moral values and ripe with opportunities to engage students’ moral character formation. It is not “if” character education should be taught in the classroom, but rather “how consciously and by what methods” (Howard, Berkowitz, & Schaeffer, 2004, p. 210).

Stengel and Tom (2006) make a very useful distinction between the language of morality heard within classrooms and schools and moral language about schools often heard in public debates about values, morality
and education. The language of morality is heard whenever issues of right relation and what is worth doing emerge in instructional lessons and within teacher-student and peer interactions of all kinds. The school day resonates with language of this sort and is so pervasive that one hardly notices it. In contrast, moral language about schools is often a cudgel for debate (“There hasn’t been any morality in schools since prayer was banished”), a statement of policy (“our policy is zero tolerance”) or commentary about the state of things (“kids today need discipline and aren’t getting it at home”).

Yet moral language—the language of right relation and what is worth doing—has never been absent in schools and continues apace irrespective of the moral language about schools that waxes and wanes with the rise and fall of educational fads and paradigmatic commitments (Cunningham, 2005). How best to prepare teachers to speak well the language of morality and, indeed, for recognizing occasions that require it, is a task for which many teachers and educational leaders feel ill equipped to undertake and it is also one that is under-represented in many pre-service teacher formation programs (Schwartz, 2008).

In this chapter we propose three strategies to prepare teachers for moral character education. We call these strategies (1) Best Practice Education, (2) Broad Character Education; and (3) Intentional Moral Character Education. As we will see there is something quite positive to be said about each approach, although we will come down in favor of the third option but on the proviso that constructive Best Practice animates it. We provide a context for taking up these strategies in the next section.

Moral Education in Teacher Education

The relative neglect of moral character education in the formal preservice teacher curriculum has at least two proximal causes (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008). The first is the daunting surfeit of training objectives that already crowd the academic curriculum of teaching majors. When faced with the reality of finite credit hours available for teacher education, along with the demands of external accreditation and state licensing requirements, many teacher educators assume that the preservice curriculum leaves little room for formal training in moral character education. Research suggests that the focus on other and more pressing federal requirements such as adequate yearly progress effectively squeeze out other important programs from the official school curriculum (Schwartz, 2008). The second cause is that often it is not at all clear what it would mean to equip preservice teachers to take up the mission of moral-character education, even if there was an intentional commitment to do so in preservice teacher training programs.

How can we equip preservice teachers with the skills to take up their task as moral educators? What would training for character and ethical development look like? If moral character education is to be formally and optimally integrated into the classroom, then much is required in the preparation of the teachers who are the architects of these learning environments. Narvaez and Lapsley (2008) originally proposed two options that they termed a “minimalist” and “maximalist” approach to the preparation of teachers for moral character education.

What we previously called the minimalist approach to character education (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008) was an undifferentiated blend of Best Practice and Broad Character Education. This minimalist perspective asserted that “the knowledge base that supports best practice instruction is coterminous with what is known to influence the moral formation of students” (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008, p. 158), meaning that a substantially larger or different tool box of instructional practices is not necessary for becoming an effective character educator. We take up this view first.

Best Practice Education Perspective

Best Practice views character education as immanent to best practice instruction. Character formation is an outcome of good education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). Consequently there is little need for specialized instruction or design of distinctly moral education curriculum. Rather, character development is an outcome of effective teaching. It is a precipitate of best practice instruction. In order to be assured that the moral
formation of students will be in good hands the teacher educator need only ensure that pre-service teachers are prepared to be outstanding teachers.

In many ways this is already the default stance in schools. Schools marked by pervasive best practice have students who want to be there, who feel a strong sense of connection to teachers and who experience school as a caring community.

There is now substantial evidence that building students’ connection to caring school communities has the most pervasive and strongest relationship to a range of outcomes of traditional interest to character educators. Payne, Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2003) showed, for example, that schools characterized by communal organization—mutually supportive relationships among teachers, administrators and students, a sense of collaboration, and commitment to common goals and norms—tended to have students who reported attachment to school, a sense of belonging, and belief in the legitimacy of rules and norms.

Indeed, youth who feel connected to school are less likely to be delinquent, use substances, initiate early sexual activity or engage in violent behavior. They are more likely to report higher levels of academic motivation and lower levels of physical and emotional distress (Battistich, 2008; Hawkins et al. 2001; Elias, Parker, Kash, Weissberg & O’Brien, 2008). And the benefits of school connectedness have longer term effects. Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health showed that the sense of belonging to school predicted less depressive symptoms, social rejection, and school problems; and greater optimism and higher grades one year later (Anderman, 2002). Loukas, Ripperger-Suhler and Horton (2009) report similar findings. In their study middle school adolescents who reported low levels of school connectedness showed increases in conduct problems one year later. Low connectedness in late middle school was also associated with greater anxiety, depressive symptoms and marijuana use in high school and one year post-high school (Bond et al., 2007). School connectedness can also buffer the negative effects of poor parenting (Loukas, Roalson & Herrera, 2010).

And what promotes connection and community? According to a report of the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2004)—it is not anything exotic or even curricular. It involves educational practices well-within the wheelhouse of best practice education, including not separating students into vocational and academic tracks, setting high academic standards for everyone, giving all students the same core curriculum, creating small-size learning communities, forming multi-disciplinary education teams and providing opportunities for service and experiential learning and community service. Moreover, the Best Practice approach is underscored by several of the eleven principles for effective character education promoted by the Character Education Partnership (Beland, 2003). It aligns with principle 4 regarding caring school communities; with Principle 6 on the importance of rigorous academic curriculum; with Principle 7 with respect to fostering intrinsic motivation to do the right thing by building a climate of trust and respect, by encouraging autonomy, by building shared norms by class meetings and democratic decision-making.

In short, the Best Practice approach endorses a set of well-attested pedagogical strategies that are considered educational best practice, including cooperative learning, democratic classrooms, and constructivist approaches to teaching and learning. It endorses practices that cultivate autonomy, intrinsic motivation and community engagement (Beland, 2003). It requires authoritative leadership in the classroom much like authoritative parenting in the home (Wentzel, 2002). And it has the added virtue of requiring no significant alteration of preservice teacher training.

However, the problem with this approach is that while it foregrounds best instructional and educational practice it backgrounds intentional values education, and so is susceptible to the charge that it is content to remand moral-character education to the hidden curriculum. But the Best Practice moral education strategy is the first in this continuum of strategies precisely because it is the foundation for effective education in general, and a requirement for more intentional training in moral character education. In our view a teacher is an effective moral educator to the extent that one is an effective educator, and this requires expertise in
pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987), including content knowledge specific to moral education.

**Broad Character Education Perspective**

Lapsley and Narvaez (2006) drew a distinction between broad and narrow character education and character education conceived as a treatment or an outcome. Often the case for character education is made on the basis of troubling epidemiological trends on adolescent risk behavior. On this account character education is needed because there is an epidemic of poor academic achievement, school-dropout, cheating, premarital sex, adolescent pregnancy, and substance use. Showing disrespect, using bad language, and attempting suicide are forms of irresponsible behavior (Brooks & Goble, 1997). Presumably these risk behaviors bear the mark of poor moral character. Consequently, any program that drives down these trends, that is, programs that encourage school persistence, improves social skills, discourages the use of drugs and alcohol, and prevents sexual activity and pregnancy, and so on, might qualify as a moral education program.

Broad Character Education refers, then, to a wide range of psychosocial prevention, intervention and health promotion programs that cover a wide range of purposes, including health education, problem-solving, life skills training, and positive youth development, among others. These programs are folded under character education because they bring about desirable outcomes. Moreover, the success of risk reduction interventions and positive youth development are claimed for “what works” in character education because, after all, “they are all school based endeavors designed to help foster the positive development of youth” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004, p. 5).

One limitation of Broad Character Education is that it tends to define character education in terms of certain desirable outcomes. But perhaps this limitation is put too strongly. Broad Character Education has a number of attractive features. For example it might be on to something when it defines character education by its outcome rather than by method or intentions. It might indeed be the case that competent behavior hangs together as a cluster much the way that problem behavior does, and that all good causes in education, whether it be moral character formation or risk reduction, comes down to a common set of instructional practices. In this case it might not matter much if this practice is apportioned to moral-character education and that one to developmental psychopathology or positive youth development. Moreover, some positive youth development initiatives increasingly make explicit claims about the importance of character (Lerner, Dowling & Anderson, 2003) or understand its programmatic outcomes as a contribution to moral character education (Elias et al., 2008). Finally, the literature on successful psychosocial interventions has important lessons for moral-character education. It must be comprehensive, guided by explicit theory, involve multiple components, be initiated early in development and sustained over time with suitable concern for implementation fidelity. For these reasons we recommend finding a place for Broad Character Education in the preservice teacher education curriculum.

One characteristic of Broad Character Education is that it tends to define character education in terms of certain desirable outcomes. But acquisition of virtues but instead refer to constructs and explanatory frameworks of developmental psychopathology. This broad conception of character education does not point to anything distinctive by way of treatment; and the only reason to treat it as instances of moral character education is because such interventions reduce or prevent problematic behaviors associated with the “rising tide of youth disorder” so commonly thought to reflect the absence of character education in the schools. But if character education is all of these things then the singularity of character education as an educational program with a distinctive purpose is lost. Indeed, “there is little reason to appeal to character education, or use the language of moral valuation, to understand the etiology of risk behavior or how best to prevent or ameliorate exposure to risk or promote resilience and adjustment” (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006, p. 259).
what if character education is defined not in terms of outcome but in terms of treatment? What is moral character education is a treated as the independent rather than the dependent variable?

**Intentional Moral Character Education**

The Intentional Moral Character approach addresses moral character education as the independent variable. It includes educational frameworks infused with moral valuation and a transparent theory of action whose objective is to influence the moral formation of children in classrooms and schools. It aims to influence children’s moral capacities for the long term. Moral character education purposefully cultivates virtues or orients the dispositional qualities of youngsters towards morally desirable aims for normatively laudable reasons.

Hence, to justify moral character education in the Intentional Moral Character sense would seem to require facility with ethical theory or require some conception of how practice conduces to the formation of virtuous dispositions. It affirms that education is not whole or complete without an intentional and sustained focus on the moral and character development of children. This perspective further asserts that the “the Best Practice Perspective and the intermittent or occasional focus of the Broad Character Education Partnership (CEP) emphasizes student self-authorship in moral character building whereas Step 5 underscores the importance of integrating student flourishing into the fabric of community support. The Integrative Ethical Education (IEE; Narvaez, 2006) model is one example of how skill-building character education can be fully integrated into academic instruction and other aspects of school practice. IEE presents an empirically-derived set of ethical skills to be taught through a novice-to-expert approach. Educators adapt the research-based framework to local needs (Narvaez, Bock, Endicott & Lies, 2004). The framework is useful for preparing pre-service teachers to become effective character educators, and as classroom- or school-based guidelines to facilitate moral character in their students once they are teachers of record in their own classrooms (Narvaez, 2006).

The five steps of the IEE model (see Table 1) start with the relational focus of caring communities (teacher-student relationships and classroom climate). Teachers design well-structured environments that sustain students by meeting basic needs and fostering flourishing; such positive “moral habitats” facilitate ethical activity and reflection, fostering ethical citizenship (Narvaez, 2010a). Step three emphasizes skills and subskills in Rest’s four components (i.e., sensitivity, judgment, focus, and action; Rest, 1983; Narvaez & Rest, 1995). Teacher guidebooks offer ideas for integrating novice-to-expert ethical skill instruction into academic instruction as well as advisory periods (Narvaez, 2006; Narvaez, 2009; Narvaez & Bock, 2009; Narvaez & Endicott, 2009; Narvaez & Lies, 2009). Step 4 emphasizes student self-authorship in moral character building whereas Step 5 underscores the importance of integrating student flourishing into the fabric of community support.
Table 1. Integrative Ethical Education (IEE) Model

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<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Model and establish a close bond and secure attachment with each student</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Establish a sustaining classroom climate supportive of meeting student basic needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Cultivate ethical skills across the curriculum using novice-to-expert pedagogy</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Foster student self-regulation and self-authorship</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Connect students to and foster skill development with the home and local community</td>
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There are many other curricular approaches to character education that would fit under the Intentional Moral Character Education rubric, with varying levels of conceptual complexity, rigor, and effectiveness (see Lapsley & Yeager, in press). Our preference for this third approach is conditioned on a pedagogy that is consistent with cognitive-mediational perspectives on learning and constructivist best-practice instruction. Moreover there is recent interest in whether more “stealthy” approaches to moral character education (e.g., encouraging student attributions about the sort of person they are; or altering mindsets about the malleability of personality) might prove as effective as wholesale curricular and school practice infusion, or else should be a component of such curricular practices (Lapsley & Yeager, in press).

**Summary**

We outlined three strategies for preparing preservice teachers for their work as moral educators. One strategy (Best Practice) focuses on the skills, knowledge and dispositions to be the best possible teacher. The second strategy (Broad Character Education) is motivated by the language of developmental psychopathology and focuses on the programs, treatments and interventions suggested by the risk-and-resilience, health promotion and positive youth development literatures. This approach seeks to reduce risk behavior by any treatment that works. The third strategy (Intentional Moral Character Education) is motivated by morality and virtue as treatment or is designed intentionally to effect change in the moral sensibilities of students as outcomes.

Our preference for the third strategy is motivated by the fact that it regards the language of morality (and cognate considerations, such as virtues, character and values) as the intentional “treatment” fortified by constructivist best practices that also yield outcomes of interest to character education. The novice-to-expertise skill-building framework of IEE and the several organizing principles of the Character Education Partnership would be good examples of a commitment to Intentional Best Practice in moral-character education.

**Alliance for Catholic Education: An Example from the Field**

Is it possible to organize a teacher certification program that addresses the strategies outlined in this chapter? We teach in an innovative, accredited teacher formation program called the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) where these strategies are emphasized. ACE is a two-year, alternative teacher certification program that recruits and prepares approximately 90 classroom teachers each year for service in under-resourced Catholic schools in communities across the Southern and Southwestern United States. Nearly all of ACE enrollees are recent college graduates who earned their baccalaureate degree in a field or discipline other than education. They complete graduate level coursework and practical internships during a nine-week summer session prior to their first year of teaching, continue their graduate studies throughout the first academic year, and return to campus the following summer to repeat the cycle in their second year of service. ACE graduates earn a masters degree in education and qualify for an Indiana teaching license.

What we would like to highlight here is that even within an alternative and time-constrained academic framework, the ACE program is able to place an intentional curricular focus on moral character education for novice teachers that integrates best practice preparation in classroom teaching. For example, in their second year ACE teachers take a required “Development and Moral Education” course tailored to licensure area (i.e., middle-school and high school teachers take an adolescence-focused course;
elementary education teachers take a child-focused course). The course content is organized around the three pillars of the ACE conceptual framework (community, teacher professional knowledge and spirituality), but what is emphasized is the seamless weave of teacher instructional strategies that cut across thematic emphases of the conceptual framework.

The first week of the course focuses on developmental contextualism whose paradigmatic themes resonate throughout the course. Developmental contextualism reveals the importance of locating dispositional coherence and individuals’ stable behavioral signature at the intersection of person-by-context interactions. This highlights the importance of building proper contexts to support learning, development and behavior, with the implication that character education can never rely simply on “fixing the kids” without also attending to the culture and climate of classrooms and schools. The various contexts of development are addressed (e.g., family, peers, and classrooms, neighborhoods) to undergird the importance of home-school connection, of strong mesosystem connections among the various contexts that contain children and the influence of developmental assets found in communities and neighborhoods. The authoritative leadership qualities of effective parenting and teaching are emphasized, pointing out that these parenting and teaching practices are associated with virtually every outcome of interest to character education, including academic competence and prosocial behavior.

In the second week, following the second pillar of the ACE conceptual framework (“Teacher Professional Knowledge), students examine the research base supporting instructional best practice, including the literatures on intelligence, intellectual and cognitive development and how these topics fold into a cognitive-mediation approach to constructivist best practice. ACE teachers learn in the third week that constructivist teacher practices are represented among several of Character Education Partnership’s principles of effective character education promoted, with the implication explicitly drawn, that good education is indeed effective character education.

The third pillar of the ACE conceptual framework is “Spirituality.” This is a thematic element that is specific to the requirements for teaching in Catholic schools, but it is defined broadly to encompass a concern with values, morality and character formation. There is explicit instruction in the literatures of moral development and in strategies of socio-moral education from different theoretical perspectives. Several of these strategies have broader applicability across the curriculum. For example, although just community approaches to moral education evolved out Kohlberg’s specific theoretical paradigm the key features of the model, such as class meetings, giving students “voice-and-choice,” encouraging moral discussion, improving students sense of connection to teachers and schools, encouraging a sense of community, are now de rigueur in most accounts of effective schools (Blum, 2005).

Some sections introduce ACE teachers to specific moral character education curricula, such as Integrated Ethical Education designed by Narvaez (2006, 2007, 2008, 2010), or just community and moral discussion strategies (Power, Higgins & Kohlberg, 1987). Others introduce teachers to relevant instructional techniques promoted by Lemov’s (2010) Teach Like a Champion approach, particularly techniques that create a strong classroom culture, set and maintain high behavioral expectations and build character and trust.

The final week of the course takes up the literatures of risk-and-resilience and reviews psychosocial intervention and health promotion programs from both a developmental psychopathology and positive youth development perspective. Teachers learn about the elements of effective programs and the role of teachers in educational resilience in pupils.

The capstone event for ACE’s Development and Moral Education course is a conference poster session that requires ACE students to prepare a unit in a content area. Students are required to justify pedagogical decisions by reference to relevant scholarly literatures, but also show how it advances moral-character education. The poster must also illustrate how the lesson plan accommodates student exceptionalities and how learning objectives will be assessed. This exercise demonstrates how lessons plans have layered instructional objectives that include moral-character elements at its very core.
The approach of ACE teacher formation emphasizes instructional goals that are distinctly moral and aim towards explicit character education, including instruction in specific moral-character curricula and teaching strategies, while recognizing that these goals are animated and made possible by the pedagogical tools of constructivist best practice. It is Best Practice pedagogy linked with Intentional Moral Character Education content. But note also that our summer ACE class does not neglect Broad Character Education, indeed, it takes up the entire fourth week of instruction.

This intentional focus on moral character formation has particular resonance for ACE teachers insofar as moral and spiritual formation is an explicit charge of the Catholic schools in which they serve. But our recommendation does not hinge on parochial religious concerns but on the necessity of extracting moral language from the hidden curriculum of any school, and hence has wide applicability.

**Implications for Teacher Education**

What teachers must know to be effective character educators will depend on what one believes about character education: Is it broad or narrow? Is it an outcome or treatment? Is it a specialized curriculum or a precipitate of best practice? The three perspectives on how to prepare students for the moral work of teaching take different positions on these questions. The distinctions are not, of course, rigidly drawn and, indeed, teacher preparation would ideally include elements from all three perspectives, insofar as character education might just be all of these things, broad and narrow, treatment and outcome, a specialized curriculum and precipitate of best practice.

Moral education requires pedagogical content knowledge like any other instructional objective. Effective instruction will have good outcomes on a range of behavior of interest to moral-character educators, but such an effect will be catalyzed when best practice is yoked to intentional commitment to the content of morality, virtue and values. That is, fortify intentional character education as a treatment (“Intentional Moral Character”) with best practice educational strategies as the intervention (“Best Practice”). What we gain with this hybrid approach is a framework that starts with best practice as a foundation and builds upon it the “moral cosmopolitanism” required of distinctive moral-character education.

But the lessons of Broad Character Education should not be neglected. The frameworks of developmental psychopathology and positive youth development insist that context matters, and so effective moral-character education can never be a simple matter of fixing the kids without addressing the instructional press of school culture and climate, and without engaging stakeholders at every level of developmental systems (e.g., family, peers, neighborhood, community). Effective moral-character education must also have the features of all effective psychosocial interventions, and this is reason enough for preservice teachers to learn about risk-and-resilience, prevention and promotion.

The fundamental challenge for teacher education, then, is to determine how much it wants to take seriously the moral work of teaching, and then to organize a conceptual framework that takes one or more of the three approaches noted here as the way forward. But staging this exercise only makes sense if the immanence-and-inevitability of moral formation in classrooms is extricated from the hidden curriculum.

One implication for teacher education is that the three approaches should be held in creative tension in coursework that is transparently integrative across required coursework. This might require adopting a conceptual framework where the immanence-and-inevitability of values in education is the core of teacher preparation. In this framework methods instructors would draw out the implications of best practice for behavioral outcomes of interest to character educators. Content instructors could help preservice teachers see the possibilities for addressing issues of morality and values in lesson planning. But the foundational course for pulling this together would be a “development and moral education” course (much like ACE) where developmental science meets educational psychology in the service of moral-character education.
References


