

PARENTS LEAGUE OF NEW YORK

Review 2012

Essential Articles on Parenting and Education

Character Education

What Schools Can and Can't Do

WALTER C. JOHNSON

Headmaster, Hackley School

*For as wood is the material dealt with by the carpenter,
bronze by the statuary, so the subject matter of each man's
art of living is his own life.* — EPICTETUS

Pat Bassett, the President of the National Association of Independent Schools, has presented research on educational goals for the 21st century school, and found a consensus among authorities surrounding six skills students will need to succeed and prosper. They are:

- character (self-discipline, empathy, integrity, resilience and courage);
- creativity and entrepreneurial spirit;
- real-world problem-solving (filtering, analysis and synthesis);
- public speaking/communications;
- teaming; and
- leadership.

Notably the first item in that list is character. In this context, “character” could be seen as instrumental to success in the sense of material prosperity—to economic success. That’s not necessarily so, of course. Being seen by others as of high character may be instrumental to economic success, but actually having character

may be detrimental to such success. Character may occasionally require doing something actively contrary to what seems your self-interest. Everybody else is cheating on the test, which affects the curve, of course, but you don't, so you get a C. Everybody else

Character may require
doing something actively
contrary to what seems
your self-interest.

is selling credit derivatives that make bundles of cash for the bank, but since this may collapse the world economy, you don't, so you lose your job. We know that true character may be inconsistent with our hopes for the material safety and suc-

cess of our children, but we also instinctively know that failures of such character have caused and continue to cause world-damaging crises.

The Urgency of Character Education

We sense that the defining problem of the 21st century is our sun-dering of intellectual and moral development. To many this will seem a truism, but for those who might disagree, consider the manifest technological progress of our civilization—our development of atomic power, our explorations of the universe beyond our planet, and the continuing revolution in computing and artificial intelligence; then compare our ongoing experience of war, genocide, and environmental degradation. To those who would continue to argue for moral progress over the centuries, please note that while our technological progress is incontrovertible, our moral progress is at best arguable. Contemporary history may well be a race between our intellectual progress and our moral stagnation: will we develop the technological means to save ourselves from our own emotional

recklessness, or will our emotional recklessness become more dangerous because of our technological progress?

This brings particular urgency to discussions of character education in schools. The question is, how should we define character, and how should we approach educating for character in schools?

The Study of Moral Philosophy vs. Educating for Character

Often we confuse the study of moral philosophy with educating for character. High school students are intellectually able to consider competing normative ethical systems—for instance, a utilitarian analysis deployed to justify torture versus a deontological or rights-based argument against it. But sophistication of moral analysis

is not character, any more than understanding baseball statistics makes one a good shortstop. The study of moral philosophy may be useful for intellectual development without supporting moral development. Such intellectual

study of potentially conflicting normative systems can even undermine moral development, teaching a student that moral language can seem to justify anything.

The two fundamental questions of moral philosophy are:

- What is the right thing to do?
- What is the good in life and how can I live a good life?

Sophistication of moral analysis is not character, any more than understanding baseball statistics makes one a good shortstop.

The latter question has, I believe, logical and developmental priority, and should be the starting point for character education in teenagers.

Living a Good Life

For many ancient philosophers, a good life was one of virtue laboriously and intentionally developed. Virtue itself was understood as human excellence, the essential basis of happiness or flourishing.

Though character is now being discussed as a 21st century skill, perhaps we should call it a 4th century B.C. skill that we haven't yet mastered. Before there were six skills, there were four classical virtues. They are:

- Courage
- Temperance
- Prudence
- Justice

Of these, courage and temperance are the foundational virtues, appropriately cultivated during school years, while the virtues of prudence and justice may require more life experience to develop. In the pre-teen years, the goal of moral education is to lay the foundation of good habits, which will prepare teenagers to develop these virtues of courage and temperance. Courage is about managing pain, and temperance is about managing pleasure. Pain and pleasure have corresponding emotions—fear and desire. Virtue—and hence character—is about managing those emotions, and managing pleasure and pain. That does not mean simply avoiding pains and seeking pleasures. Virtue may require one to endure a pain or avoid a pleasure. Young people can begin to develop virtues when they begin to make choices,

when they gain experience in the actions which life demands and encounter the challenges of managing their own emotions, pleasures and pains.

What Can Schools Do?

Schools cannot guarantee the development of good character, because at the center of character formation is freedom of choice, which means freedom for young people to choose what we may believe to be the wrong action. Schools do have the responsibility, as do parents, to discipline children when they make significant mistakes, to help them learn to use their freedom with good judgment as they progress towards autonomy as adults.

Problems arise when parents and schools disagree on such discipline. Sometimes parents fear that school discipline will be detrimental to their child's future success, that a suspension, for instance, will limit their child's college prospects. Such a disagreement may be based in a fundamental philosophical difference. How are we to understand advantage and disadvantage? If we define the good in life in terms of money and social position, and a school as instrumental to those goods, then a school's discipline may seem to undermine the very purposes for which we enrolled our child. If we see the good in life in terms of virtue, in terms of integrity in one's sense of self and relationships to others, then the school's discipline may be exactly what we hope for to help our child learn to use freedom wisely.

Parents and Schools: Partners in Moral Education

Choosing a school for your child is thus choosing a partner in moral education. Educators will tell you that the most

important factor in your child's development of values is the example of your behavior and your spoken affirmation of values. The parent is the first and foremost moral educator. When you tell your children what you care about, the values you want to shape their choices and actions, they will absorb that message deeply, even if they seem not to be listening. When they see you act on those affirmed values, especially when doing so may seem counter to your self-interest or to their self-in-

To learn how to live
well—shouldn't that be
the goal of true education?

terest, the lesson is enduring. The school cannot substitute for your role as parent, but it can support and reinforce the values in which you believe. That makes it crucial that you consider whether

the values and culture of the school you choose are consistent with your own.

Just as parents must be careful to make a choice of school consistent with their values, so independent schools to be morally effective educators must be self-critical in considering the correspondence between the values we profess and our actions as schools, since our students will be shaped by our choices and actions, not just by our words. Schools cannot always be morally neutral in the interests of intellectual discourse. Just as character may occasionally require an individual's doing something actively contrary to material self-interest, so schools must demonstrate character in such choices as which students we will serve, the forms and occasions of school discipline, and what social environment will serve them well. Independent schools cannot be effective moral educators if we are economically exclusionary, or if our students' admission to elite colleges seems to matter more than the education for character.

Not for College, But for Life

As parents, we all want the best for our children, and we fear the economic uncertainties they may face in the world. We see education as preparation for those uncertainties, and admission to elite schools and colleges seems a gift of security we can offer them. But both parents and schools may fail our students if we let that fear control us and make admission to an elite college the defining goal of secondary education. Our students are best served when they have not only the name of a fine education, but its substance. Courage and temperance will prepare them better for the uncertainties of the world than a brand identity. To learn how to live well—shouldn't that be the goal of true education?

We are our own instruments of life—we have no other. If we know our instrument, we can use it better to serve our purposes, to obey our will. And as with all instruments, we only get better by practicing. Fortunately, life is a continual concert. We are playing all the time, but we are only practicing when we pay attention. So, parents and schools need to teach students to think about choices and actions. How did anticipation of pain or pleasure influence them? As with all arts, improvement requires effort and a determined will. And as with all arts, one never truly masters it.

Walter C. Johnson is the Headmaster of Hackley School in Tarrytown, New York.