Teaching for Character and Community

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When teachers embed character education in their instruction, the classroom becomes a more caring, respectful, and inclusive community.

Two women stand on the bank of a swift river. The current carries a man, desperately struggling to stay afloat, toward them. Both women jump into the water and pull the man to safety. While the brave rescuers tend to the victim, the current carries toward them a second man, also desperate and screaming for help. Again the women jump into the river to the rescue. As they pull out the second victim, they spot a third man flailing about. One woman quickly jumps into the water to save the latest victim. She turns to see the other woman striding upstream. "Why aren’t you helping?" she cries. "I am," replies the other woman. "I am going to see who is pushing them in."

Although violence in schools is statistically on the decline, the number and severity of incidents of extreme school violence—of students bringing weapons to school and killing and injuring classmates and teachers—have increased. Well-intentioned educators have responded to this crisis by jumping into the river: erecting more and better metal detectors, installing more sophisticated surveillance cameras, hiring more resource officers, adopting and enforcing stricter harassment policies, and suspending and expelling more students. The situation, however, demands that educators walk upstream to identify the underlying causes of extreme school violence and develop prevention programs aimed at addressing these root problems.

School Violence, Student Isolation

Examining 37 incidents of extreme school violence involving 41 perpetrators, the Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center concluded that, in more than three-fourths of the incidents, the attack was planned two or more days before the shooting (Vossekui, Reddy, Fein, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2000). No consistent demographic profile emerged of the attackers. Some had histories of neglect, but others came from intact families; some were socially isolated, but others were popular; some were failing in school, but others were excellent students. Few were diagnosed with mental illness or had histories of drug or alcohol abuse.

The most important finding to emerge from the study was that more than three-quarters of those who had resorted to extreme school violence had a grievance. Two-thirds of all attackers felt persecuted, harassed, or bullied. Many had discussed the harassment with friends, seeking solutions. Most often their motive in the violence was to get revenge or simply to end the harassment.

Attackers described experiences of being bullied in terms that approached torment. They told of behaviors that, if they occurred in the workplace, would meet the legal definitions of harassment. (Vossekuil et al., 2000, p. 7)

Fellow students described the treatment that freshman Andy Williams—who opened fire on classmates in a Santee, California, high school—had received at the hands of peers: “They’d walk up to him and sock him in the face for no reason.” Kids would burn their lighters and then press the hot metal against his neck (McCarthy, 2001).

Why are some students singled out for harassment and isolation? During adolescence, young people turn from parents to peers for social and psychological support. This transition is part of the universal biological process of forming an independent identity. Adolescents segregate themselves into a hierarchy of subgroups. At the top are the Jocks, Preppies, and Socialites; in the middle are the Geeks, Nerds, Dorks, Surfers, and Skaters; at the bottom are the Roamers, Gothics, Freaks, Losers, and Dirts. Students in the subgroups at the top of this hierarchy are respected and admired by their peers. Students in the bottom subgroups are often belittled, harassed, taunted, excluded, and bullied.

For those at the bottom of the social pecking order, exclusion comes at the very time when their need for inclusion in a peer group is greatest. As a result, these students feel isolated, ashamed, and tormented; some become desperate. When the young perpetrators of the Columbine (Colorado) High School shootings resorted to violence, they were hoping to "kick-start a revolution of the dispossessed," to "finally get the respect they deserved" (Aronson, 2000, pp. 85–86).

Walking upstream to prevent extreme school violence means that educators must attempt to alter the process by which students form themselves into subgroups—a hierarchy that promotes the isolation of some adolescents who may turn to violence out of desperation and a desire for revenge.

Statistics of a Breakdown

School shootings receive a lot of media attention, but they are just one symptom of a larger problem: the breakdown of community, mutual caring, and moral orientation. Other symptoms are alarming and widespread:
In a national survey of 15,000 middle and high school students, 75 percent of boys and 60 percent of girls reported hitting someone out of anger in the last 12 months (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2001).

1 in 15 students is threatened or injured with a weapon each school year (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999).

More than 1 in 3 students report that they do not feel safe at school (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2001).

160,000 students skip school each day because they fear bullies (Bowles, 2001).

54 percent of middle school students and 70 percent of high school students cheated on a test in a given year (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 1998).

47 percent of high school students reported that they had stolen from a store in a given year (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 1998).

**A Curriculum of Character**

In *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*, Thomas Lickona (1991) documents the erosion of virtues such as honesty, respect, and caring among today’s youth. Although Lickona and others have been calling for schools to focus on fostering character for a decade, the recent spate of school shootings has made character education—the teaching of caring, respect, and common virtues—a high-priority curriculum. Educators can address the breakdown of community and morality among students by making character education a part of the school’s core curriculum.

Indeed, no more important curriculum exists. Today’s students will be tomorrow’s parents, passing their values to the next generation. In that sense, the values and virtues we instill in today’s youth determine our future. Nothing less than the basic social fabric of our society is at stake. We must not fail to address the lack of character and virtues in today’s youth; educators must incorporate the teaching of character in the school curriculum. For many students, character and virtues will be acquired in school or not at all.

What are the common virtues that nearly everyone agrees should be the outcome of character education? My list includes three sets of virtues: personal, relationship, and community.

Personal virtues include self-discipline, impulse control, good judgment, integrity, courage, perseverance, and self-motivation. Relationship virtues include caring, kindness, courtesy, cooperativeness, helpfulness, honesty, respect, understanding, and tolerance. Community virtues include citizenship, fairness, leadership, responsibility, loyalty, and trustworthiness.

Although educators can argue for different sets of virtues and different ways to categorize them, few would make the case that society would be better off if students were dishonest, uncaring, unfair, irresponsible, unmotivated, or lacking in good judgment. Educators have been reluctant to engage in character education for
fear that parents would object. When asked, however, parents overwhelmingly applaud any attempts by schools to foster common virtues.

The need for character education is clear. The support for character education is almost universal. The question then becomes, How can schools best foster the acquisition of character and virtues among students?

**Approaches to Community and Character**

Two distinct approaches to fostering inclusive school communities and positive character and virtues in students are curricular and instructional. Curricular approaches include separate lessons on the virtues, as well as using the existing curriculum to teach the virtues—as when the teacher focuses on the virtues exhibited or not exhibited by a historical or literary figure. Virtue-of-the-Month and Virtue-of-the-Week programs are popular examples of the curricular approach to character education: Classroom lessons focus on the importance of each month's target virtue—for example, honesty, responsibility, or kindness.

By contrast, the instructional approach to character education is based on the premise that the implicit curriculum—how teachers teach—is at least as influential on student learning as the explicit curriculum—what teachers teach. For example, before students analyze a poem, their teacher might introduce them to an instructional strategy called Paraphrase Passport, in which each student in a pair or group must paraphrase the prior speaker before stating his or her own opinion. Because the teacher encourages students to use Paraphrase Passport, students acquire a better understanding of others' viewpoints, become more empathetic, and improve their listening skills. A curriculum is embedded in the instructional strategy itself, and some would argue that this implicit curriculum (understanding, empathy, listening) is even more important for students than the explicit curriculum (understanding the poem). If instead their teacher were to lecture about the poem, students would be far less likely to develop character and virtues (and, in fact, would probably be less engaged with the poem).

Curricular and instructional approaches to character education are not mutually exclusive. While teaching lessons on virtues, teachers can use instructional strategies like Paraphrase Passport that promote the acquisition of virtues. Nevertheless, of the two approaches, the instructional approach is more powerful. Why? Because students practice the virtues daily. If students have a lesson on understanding or honesty in the fall and then move on to discuss different virtues each month, how much more understanding or honest will those students be in June? By contrast, if students practice understanding and honesty throughout the school year because they are components of the curriculum and embedded in the way the teacher teaches, then students may acquire the habits of being understanding and honest.
Structures for Community and Character

Structures are simple, step-by-step instructional strategies that teachers can use at any grade level, with any content. Embedded in many of the structures is a character development component. Teachers structure interaction among students and with the curriculum so that students acquire virtues as part of any lesson, regardless of the content.

RoundRobin

For example, teachers might use one of the simplest of all structures, a RoundRobin, to engage groups of students in topical discussions. Seated in small groups, each student shares his or her ideas in turn. As the students interact, they learn to take turns, a form of respect. Instead of using this structure, the teacher could call on students one at a time to share their ideas—but students would not learn to take turns and honor the contributions of their peers.

Corners

To explore the importance of the opening lines to a story, post the following four quotes, one in each corner of the room.

Crouched on a branch of a mukuyu tree, a girl tore open a speckled fruit. She grimaced as ants scurried over her fingers. So many! And the inside was full of worms, too.

"Tom!"
No answer.
"What's gone with that boy, I wonder? You, TOM!"
No answer.

The boy was about 15 years old. He tried to stand very straight and still when he heard the news, but inside of him everything had gone black.

It was a dark and stormy night.

— From A Girl Named Disaster by Nancy Farmer

— From The Adventures of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain

— From The Light in the Forest by Conrad Richter

— From A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle
Using the Corners structure, students first think about this question: If you read only the opening lines that are posted, which book would you most want to read? Students then write down the number of the corner corresponding to their choice, go to that corner, share with others in the corner why they made their choice, and finally listen to and paraphrase ideas from other corners.

In addition to deepening their appreciation of the importance of the lead lines of a story, students practice character virtues such as tolerance, understanding, and respect for opinions different from their own. They often find they have something in common with others with whom they might not otherwise have associated. Over time, Corners builds community.

Other possible content for Corners includes four possible solutions to a class problem, favorite type of math problem, or best explanation of a puzzling science phenomenon.

**Folded and Split Agree-Disagree Line-Ups**

Use this structure to explore controversial subjects—for example, the moral and scientific issues underlying President Bush’s decision to support limited research on human embryonic stem cells. After students read about and discuss the topic, they line up according to their agreement or disagreement with the following statement: Human embryonic stem-cell research should be allowed. Those who most strongly agree stand at one end of the line; those who disagree stand at the other end; those who have mixed feelings stand in the middle.

After sharing with those near them, students fold the line so those who most strongly agree face students who most strongly disagree. Each paraphrases the other’s point of view. Next, the line is unfolded and split in the middle. One half of the line slides down to face the other half, so those who strongly agree and disagree interact with those in the middle, again paraphrasing the other’s view. In addition to deepening their understanding of the risks, benefits, and moral issues associated with human stem-cell research, students increase their engagement with current events, learn respect and understanding for other points of view, and practice moral reasoning and the courage to stand up for their own convictions.

**Team Statements**

To explore and deepen student understanding of abstract concepts such as democracy, use the Team Statement structure. First, working alone, each student writes a definition of democracy using the sentence starter “Democracy is . . . .” Next, in teams of four, the students read their personal definitions, receiving feedback from their teammates. Finally, students work together to create a team statement that incorporates the ideas of all four students. In addition to deepening their understanding of the essence of democracy, students learn to respect all points of view and to synthesize the contributions of everyone. They are not only learning
about democracy but are also practicing it. (For more examples of structures, see fig. 1.)

Structures help teachers avoid the testing trap. Teachers are under pressure to teach what will be tested. If they adopt a curricular approach to character education, they are likely to abandon that curriculum in favor of the academic curriculum covered on standards tests. If character education is embedded in the instructional strategies that teachers use regularly, then students will practice character and virtues even as they prepare for tests.

Outcomes of Structures

Embedding character education in instruction has several important advantages.

**Structures increase engagement.** Teachers and students find the structures fun and engaging; structures enliven student interaction with one another and with the curriculum. Because structures carry their own rewards, sustained implementation is likely.

**Structures help students practice character and virtues.** Students do not develop character in a single lesson; rather, they acquire it over time. If teachers use a variety of structures in the classroom, students can practice the virtues on an ongoing basis in a number of different situations—making it more likely that students will acquire the virtues as enduring aspects of their character. A student who has one or two lessons on kindness may or may not be kind; a student who practices kindness all year is very likely to acquire that virtue.

**Structures build a classroom community.** When teachers use student teams and cooperative structures regularly, students no longer segregate themselves into in-groups and out-groups. Teachers form teams in ways that ensure that students work as teammates with those they might otherwise have excluded. Hence, students who might not have done so otherwise come to respect and understand one another. When teachers use cooperative structures in the classroom, students name more classmates as friends, care about more classmates, and feel more cared about (Kagan, Zahn, Widaman, Schwarzwald, & Tyrrell, 1985).

**Walking Upstream**

The best way to prevent school violence is to replace disparagement with respect, exclusion with inclusion, and lonely isolation with collaborative community. When teachers use cooperative structures in daily instruction, students experience being cared for by peers and caring for others. They practice responsibility, fairness, tolerance, teamwork, understanding, and respect for different points of view. They learn to help one another. As students work together in teams, the "us" and "them" of in-groups and out-groups become an inclusive "we." The classroom becomes a respectful, inclusive community. No curriculum is more important. When they include
structures as part of their curriculum for community and character, educators go a long way toward walking upstream to prevent student isolation and school violence.

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<tr>
<th>Figure 1: Structures for Character</th>
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<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
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| **Circle the Sage** | • Leadership  
• Helpfulness |
| Students from each team gather around a different “sage,” an expert on a topic. They return to their teams to compare notes and tutor one another. |
| **Pass-N-Praise** | • Kindness |
| While sitting around a table, each student validates the work of the peer passing the paper. |
| **Estimate and Prediction Line-Ups** | • Good Judgment |
| Students line up by the size of their estimates and then fold the line, so those with high estimates hear the reasoning of those with low estimates and vice versa. |
| **Expert Group Jigsaw** | • Cooperation  
• Helpfulness  
• Leadership |
| Students leave their teams to work with like-topic students of other teams and become experts on a topic. They return to their teams so each can teach the topic to their classmates. |
| **Gambit Chips** | • Courtesy  
• Understanding |
| Students have gambits chips (cards with phrases) that they use to practice the gambits. Different gambit chips foster different virtues, including Appreciation Gambits (“Thank you,” “What I appreciate is . . .”); Request Gambits (“May I . . .,” “If you are willing”); and Empathy Gambits (“I understand how you felt because . . .”). |
| **Talking Chips** | • Impulse Control |
| Students put their chip in the center of the table each time they speak. They cannot speak again until all students have put in their chip, and the chips are retrieved to begin another round. |
| **Team Pair Solo** | • Cooperation  
• Helpfulness  
• Leadership  
• Self-Motivation |
| Students work on a difficult problem, first as a team. When they are ready, they do a similar problem, working as a pair. Finally, when they are ready, they do that type of problem on their own. |
| **Three-Step Interview** | • Understanding  
• Responsibility |
| Students work first in pairs to interview each other and then do a RoundRobin, each sharing what he or she learned in the interview. |
References


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