

# A Communitarian Position on Character Education

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AMERICA'S MORAL AND social fabric is weakening. Too often we demand rights without assuming responsibilities, pursue entitlements while shying away from obligations. More broadly, as the increase in antisocial behavior over the last decades indicates, we have lost our commitment to values we all share and few new ones have arisen to replace those that were lost.

We should not treat violence, drug abuse, illegitimacy, promiscuity, abusive attitudes toward people of different backgrounds, alcoholism, poor academic performance, and other social maladies as isolated phenomena. They reflect several social factors, but key among them is weakness of character—the inability to resist temptation and adhere to prosocial values. Communitarians maintain that values do not fly on

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their own wings. To shore up our moral foundations we must pay attention to the social institutions that undergird our values. These include the family, schools, the community (including voluntary associations and places of worship), and society (as a community of communities).

The focus here is on one institution, the school. Given that roughly 88 percent of students still attend public schools, they are what this examination deals with. It is assumed that even if families—whose societal task is to introduce children to moral values and lay the foundation of their characters—work perfectly, schools still need to round off the task. Given the burden and challenges parents face, they are rarely able to perform their job fully and hence even more responsibility falls on schools. It follows that schools should make the development of good character one of their primary responsibilities.

Those who consider such a mission at the obvious center of education should note that for quite a few years pressure has been growing to dedicate ever more resources, energy, and time to teaching ever-younger children academics. Newly introduced tests, on academic subjects, and drives to teach preschool children to read, all add to the neglect of attention to character education in public schools.

### Principles of Character Education: An Overview

Here are the high points:

1. Values education is a crucial part of public education that should be fostered in schools. There cannot be a value-free or value-neutral education. Schools must supplement the moral education provided at home, especially when homes are not intact.
2. Character-building is at the root of upholding values. Without *character* education, merely knowing what is right is no assurance that we will do it and incorporate these values into our

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lives. Critical to developing character are the two capabilities of self-discipline and empathy. Self-discipline is required because without it individuals cannot control their impulses and will grow up to be uncivil, unethical, and ineffectual. External controls are needed up to a point but if extended beyond that point, they undermine the cultivation of self-discipline. Empathy, the capacity to walk in another person's shoes, is also essential. It is at the foundation of many values, and without it those who are self-disciplined might commit themselves to nefarious purposes.

3. Character education should imbue students with the full range of school experiences—the human curriculum as well as the academic curriculum. It should not be limited to classes on civics, nor is it only a matter of curriculum content. The way sports are conducted, grades are allotted, teachers behave, and corridors and parking lots are monitored all import moral messages and significantly affect character development.

The preceding observations inform the following specific comments.

Extracurricular activities, especially sports, should not be considered extra, but a vital part of education. We must strive to develop stronger ties between these activities and character development. Sport is important not merely for a healthy body and as a substitute for street activities, but also a way to learn to play by the rules, bond, develop camaraderie, and much more.

The ways schools deal with infractions is of special significance for character education. Schools that ignore petty violence, gross disorder in the corridors, cafeteria and parking areas, disrespect for the teacher and the facilities, are undermining character education. The same holds for schools that hand out rewards (especially grades) too easily, provide automatic promotion and graduation, and allot rewards on the basis of nonachievement-based considerations. Peer mentoring of students and

patrols of shared spaces, guided by professionals, is a promising way to enhance character education.

Schools should teach those values shared by the community, such as veracity and treating others with dignity. The teaching of values particularly dear to the heart of subgroups should be reserved for religious and other private schools. The suggestion that there are only few such values, or that shared commitment to them holds only as long as they remain highly abstract, is not in line with the facts.

A public school should teach about the social role and historical significance of religion but not advocate a particular religion. One ought to support efforts such as those of the Williamsburg Charter to find common ground on religious issues that divide us and to find space in schools to discuss these issues.

“Value-free” sex education is unacceptable. Teaching family values without information about ways to prevent transmission of disease and unwanted pregnancies is dangerous. We need education for interpersonal relations, family life, and intimacy that provides a normative context for sex education and shares age-appropriate specific information on the subject. Students should learn about the value of delaying sexual involvement and the merits of abstinence while receiving contraception information to protect them and others if they do become sexually active. The second message need not cancel out the first one.

### *Schools within Communities*

Schools are often expected to correct society’s ills but the opposite must be considered. Schools need all the external help that can be marshaled to discharge their duties. Parents and other community members and institutions should see themselves as partners rather than as outsiders.

Parents should be deeply involved in all aspects of formulating and implementing school policies, curricula, discipline, community service and, above all, values issues. While teachers’ and other educators’ professional knowledge should be heeded, on matters of character the voice of parents and communities should take precedence, within constitu-

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tional limits as long as the policies favored do not pose a danger to life and limb. (For example, a school may well favor turning the school into a gun-free zone and oppose a community that favors allowing students to carry concealed weapons.)

One should support community schools that also serve as community centers. Schools should gradually shift to remain open more months a year, longer hours, and even during weekends. This cannot be done overnight, but the farmers' calendar is no longer useful.

Community service, when properly conducted, can be an effective means of developing civic commitments and skills by doing rather than by merely studying. Although community service should be the practicum for civics, imposing it on students defeats the purpose of developing the taste for volunteerism.

Greater integration must be achieved between work and schooling. Educators need to search for ways to connect schooling with activities that make sense to young people. Many businesses that employ high school students part-time ought to recognize that they are educators as well. These early work experiences will either reinforce responsible habits and attitudes or serve as lessons in poor civics and deficient work ethics. Corporations and small businesses should work with schools to better structure employment opportunities for adolescents to build character and prepare them for their futures.

Schools should be viewed as nascent communities. Students and teachers should have the same basic goals and should be discouraged from approaching one another in an adversarial or legalistic fashion. Although the basic rights of students must be fully respected, maintaining civility in schools should not require full court hearings and the cross-examination of witnesses when disciplining students. Simplified hearings, limited appeals, mediating, and similar measures are more appropriate for a school setting. We prefer that disruptive students receive more education rather than banishment. However, when these measures fail, schools should not be unduly hampered in removing those who destroy the learning environment.

*Diversity within Unity*

Enhanced diversity in the curricula and in the composition of the school enriches us, but also exposes us to the dangers of tribalism. Diversity should be advanced, but within the context of unity. We are richer if we learn about other cultures and traditions and develop more respect for others. But we must share certain basics, and above all, the superior value of the democratic form of government, the importance of the Constitution and its Bill of Rights, and the tolerance of one another. Educators should be mindful of the theme implied in the saying, “We all came on different ships but now we ride in the same boat.”

No class should teach hate against another group. We all have troubling parts in our respective histories. We need to learn reconciliation without forgetting the lessons of the past, lest we repeat them.

Teaching new immigrant children in their native languages for a limited time may ease their transition, but we should avoid prolonged separation of education along ethnic or racial lines.

## Discussion

Character development entails acquiring the capacity to control impulses and to mobilize for acts other than the satisfaction of one’s self. Workers need such self-control so that they can stick to their tasks rather than saunter into work late and turn out slapdash products—so that they are able to observe a work routine that is often not very satisfying by itself. Citizens and community members need self-control so that they do not demand ever more services and handouts while being unwilling to pay taxes and make contributions to the common good. Self-control makes people more tolerant of others from different ethnic, racial, and political backgrounds. This tolerance is at the foundation of democratic societies.

Newborns have almost no capacity for impulse control or mobilization to tasks that require deferment of gratification; they are preoc-

cupied with their immediate needs and desires. Education channels some of these drives to energize an internal regulator that gives self-direction to the person and is often referred to as character. Education ties gratification to the development of qualities that are socially useful and morally appropriate (a process psychologists call sublimation). By relating satisfaction to being punctual, completing a task, and taking other people's feelings into account, by playing by the rules, one acquires the ability to abide by moral tenets and to live up to social responsibilities.

It is possible to overeducate and to draw too much of the ego's energies into the inner mechanisms of self-control. This is what is meant by being "uptight"—people who are obsessed with their careers or achievements are unable to relax or show affection. Such excessive self-control has concerned social scientists in the past, especially in the sixties, and has led to a call for less character education in favor of more unbounded ego expression. Excessive self-control, however, is uncommon in contemporary America; indeed, many youngsters come to school with a grossly deficient capacity to guide themselves. The fact that a larger proportion of the young find it difficult to be punctual, get up in the morning, do homework on their own, and complete tasks in an orderly and timely fashion are but the most visible indications of a much deeper deficiency. As a result, schools must engage in character education. This is where various commissions that have studied educational deficits went wrong. By and large, they argue for loading students with more hours of science, foreign language, math, and other skills and bodies of knowledge. *But you cannot fill a vessel that has yet to be cast.* Character formation is an essential prerequisite—both so that pupils can learn, and so that by the time they graduate they will command the necessary human qualities to be effective, responsible adults.

#### *Discipline, Self-Discipline, and Internalization*

Parents and educators often stress the importance of discipline in character formation and in the moral education of the new generation of

Americans. In several public-opinion surveys, teachers, school administrators, and parents rank a lack of discipline as the number-one problem in our schools. They correctly perceive that in a classroom where students are restless, impatient, disorderly, and disrespectful, where rules and routines cannot be developed and maintained, learning is not possible.

So far, so good. Unfortunately, discipline, as many people understand it, takes on an authoritarian meaning. A well-disciplined environment is often considered one in which teachers and principals lay down the law and will brook no talking-back from students, who show respect by rising when the teacher enters the room and speak only when spoken to. In quite a few states physical punishment is still considered an effective way to maintain discipline. I maintain that if discipline is achieved by authoritarian means, youngsters will behave as long as they are closely supervised and fear punishment. But as soon as the authorities turn their backs, they tend to misbehave and their resentment at being coerced expresses itself in some form of antisocial behavior. This is because the discipline is linked to punishment rather than to a general sense of right and wrong.

What the pupil—and the future adult—requires is self-discipline, the inner ability to mobilize and commit to a task he or she believes in and to feel positive—that is, rewarded—for having done so. This quality is developed when the voice of authority is internalized and becomes part of the person's inner self, his ego. Internalization occurs in structured environments, but not under authoritarian conditions. What is not needed is close, continuous external supervision (and certainly not the kind of punitive environment that comes to mind when we think about military academies). Rather, what is required is a school structure made up of authority figures, rules, and organization of tasks that motivate students by providing clear guidelines. These must be both firmly upheld and be reasonable and justified, so that students can understand the need to abide by them.

Educational requirements must, in turn, be clearly stated, and the



link between requirements and goals fully explained. Curricula should be neither arbitrary nor subject to the whim of an individual teacher. To foster self-discipline, assignments must be “do-able,” appropriately checked, and properly rewarded. When they are excessive and mechanical (such as the time one of my high-school sons was required to memorize the names of all the Indian tribes that resided in America), or when rewards are allocated according to irrelevant criteria (such as teacher favoritism, minority status, or undue parental influence), requirements become dictates and not sources of involvement and ways to internalize commitments, to build self-discipline.

#### *Character and Moral Education*

Although character formation lays the psychic foundation both for the ability to mobilize to a task and to behave morally (by being able to control impulses and defer gratification), it is contentless: it does not educate one to a specific set of virtues or values. It provides the rectitude needed to tell the truth even if the consequences are unpleasant, but it does not teach the value of being truthful. It enables a person to refrain from imposing his sexual impulse on an unwilling partner, but it does not teach him that it is morally unacceptable to rape. Developing character without attention to value education is like trying to develop the muscles of an athlete without having a particular sport in mind. This statement inevitably raises the question: Whose values?

The challenge “Whose values will you teach?” is readily answered by starting with the many values that we all share (not only in one community or by Americans, but much more widely). Nobody considers it moral to abuse children, rape, steal, commit murder, be disrespectful of others, discriminate, and so on.

Some values, a small subset of the total in well-functioning communities, are contested. These exceptions can be dealt with either by letting the students learn about both sides of the issue or by openly omitting them. Moreover, these issues are helpful in showing the pain of moral conflicts and the merit of genuine consensus-building, a con-

sensus we do have on most values. Sure, say the opponents, but people agree only on vague generalities that almost amount to banalities. They argue: When you come down to specifics, disagreements will dominate, and then whose specifics will you teach?

In response I note that first, we would be way ahead if we could get everyone to truly subscribe to all these values and only argue with one another over the specific applications. Second, when it comes to specifics, there is more consensus than at first seems to be the case. Professor William Damon points to the following conducts that deserve our attention:

A counselor is calling a student's home about apparently excused absences, only to find that the parent's letters have been forged. A young boy is in the principal's office for threatening his teacher with a knife. Three students are separated from their class after hurling racial epithets at a fourth. A girl is complaining that her locker has been broken into and all her belongings stolen. A small group of boys are huddling in a corner, shielding an exchange of money for drug packets. In the playground, two girls grab a third and punch her in the stomach for flirting with the wrong boy. (Personal communication.)

Using these and other such behaviors as education opportunities is sure to keep teachers busy for years to come. This suggests that we have to attend to other sources of these behaviors—for instance, by rebuilding community within the adult world, which these children often emulate.

One need not worry that educators will brainwash students who are captive audiences in their classrooms and make them accept their moral viewpoints. Students are exposed to a large variety of voices, from television, magazines, porn shops, peers, and many others. There are natural checks and balances built into the social environment. If somewhere one teacher advanced a moral concept that was outside the community consensus, say, that we must all become vegetarians, pacifists, or Zen Buddhists, the students would have plenty of other sources to draw on to counter such teaching. Indeed, the opposite is true: if

typical educators, whose values tend to be well within the community range, refrain from adding their moral voices to the cacophony of voices to which the students are exposed, the students would miss one perspective and remain exposed only to all the other voices, less committed to values the community holds dear.

### *The Import of Experiences*

How does one teach moral values, as opposed to merely building up the capacity for moral reasoning and disputations? How does one build up moral commitments? One way far surpasses all others: experiences are more effective teachers than lectures and textbooks, although their narrative is also valuable. This is particularly evident in extracurricular activities, especially sports. True, these can be abused, such as when coaches focus on winning as the only object, and neglect to instill learning to play by the rules, teamwork, and camaraderie. Graduates of such activities tend to be people who are aggressive, maladjusted members of the community. However, if coaches and the messages they impart are well integrated into the values education of a school, and if parents see the importance of using sports to educate rather than to win, sports can be a most effective way to enhance values education.

Why do extracurricular activities command extraordinary power? Because they generate experiences that are effective educational tools. Thus, if one team plays as a bunch of individuals and loses because its adversary played as a well-functioning team, the losing players learn—in a way that no pep talk or slide show could teach them—the merit of playing as a team.

The same holds for other activities that take place at school. They provide experiences that have deep educational effects, either positive or negative. The first step toward enhancing the moral educational role of schools is to increase the awareness and analysis of the school as a set of experiences. Schools should be seen not as a collection of teachers, pupils, classrooms, and curricula. Instead, we need to include the parking lots: Are they places in which wild driving takes place and school

authorities are not in sight, or places where one learns respect for others' safety, regulated either by faculty or fellow students? Are the cafeterias places where students belt each other with food and the noise is overwhelming, or civilized places where students have meaningful conversations over lunch? Are the corridors areas where muscles and stature are required if one is to avoid being pushed aside by bullies, or are they safe conduits patrolled by faculty or students? Does vandalism go unpunished, are drugs sold openly, and are pupils rewarded or punished according to criteria other than achievement (perhaps because they avoid confrontation, obey without question, or come from affluent or otherwise socially preferred backgrounds)? Is vandalism held in check (and when it does occur, the damage corrected by the offending students), drug sales swiftly and severely dealt with, and students treated under rational general criteria?

A powerful example of how one may generate experiences in a classroom is found in Iowa. It is a well-known case in point, but one that deserves to be recalled. In 1968, Jane Elliott, a third-grade teacher, concluded that instead of talking about the plight of black Americans shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., she would teach her third-graders about discrimination by affecting their experiences. Elliott divided her class into two groups by eye color—the blue- and brown-eyed. “Today,” she said one Friday, “the blue-eyed people will be on the bottom and the brown-eyed people on the top.” Elliott continued: “What I mean is that brown-eyed people are better than blue-eyed people. They are cleaner than blue-eyed people. They are more civilized than blue-eyed people. And they are smarter than blue-eyed people.”

The experiment's effects were swift and severe. “Long before noon, I was sick,” Elliott recalls. “I wished I had never started it . . . . By the lunch hour, there was no need to think before identifying a child as blue- or brown-eyed. I could tell simply by looking at them. The brown-eyed children were happy, alert, having the times of their lives. The blue-eyed children were miserable.” The children had learned through

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experience what discrimination is like and were deeply affected by the exercise. Brown-eyed Debbie Anderson said: "I felt mad [on blue-eye-preferred Monday] . . . I felt dirty. And I did not feel as smart as I did on Friday." Student Theodore Perzynski wrote: "I do not like discrimination. It makes me sad. I would not like to be angry all my life."

A mother of one of Elliott's students said:

I want you to know that you've made a tremendous difference in our lives since your Discrimination Day exercise. My mother-in-law stays with us a lot, and she frequently uses the word "nigger." The very first time she did it after your lesson, my daughter went up to her and said, "Grandma, we don't use that word in our house, and if you're going to say it, I'm going to leave until you go home." We were delighted. I've been wanting to say that to her for a long, long time. And it worked, too. She's stopped saying it.

Such an experience leaves a strong and lasting impression. In 1984, Jane Elliott's class had a reunion. Former student Susan Rolland reported: "I still find myself sometimes, when I see some blacks together and I see how they act, I think, well, that's black . . . And then later, as I said, I won't even finish the thought before I remember back when I was in that position." Verla Buls added: "We was [sic] at a softball game a couple of weekends ago, and there was this black guy I know. We said, 'Hi,' and we hugged each other, and some people really looked, just like, 'What are you doing with him?' And you just get this burning feeling in you. You just want to let it out and put them through what we went through to find out they're not any different." Other students reported that their career choices were influenced by the discrimination experience. Several chose to join the Peace Corps or work with other cultures overseas.

*Less Rotation, More Bonding*

For teachers to be more than purveyors of information and skills, for them to be able to educate, to build character, they must bond more closely with students than they do now in many schools. Such bonding

may be encouraged by arranging for less rotation of classes and pupils. Many American high schools were reorganized as if a powerful sociological engineer intent on minimizing the bonds between students and teachers sought to ensure that whatever peer bonds formed would not be classroom-based. These effects stem from the fact that students are reshuffled each time the bell rings, every forty-five minutes or so, while the various subject teachers stay put. Students, especially in larger schools, rarely develop bonds as members of a class group, because the class members they related to in one period are different from the ones they see in the next. Because of this, peer groups, which often hold sway over members, especially in moral matters, are not classroom-based and are formed for other reasons often irrelevant to education. Peer groups are likely to be formed around other occasions and values, whether it is racing cars or rock music. This makes it rather difficult for teachers to draw upon these peer bonds and challenge them to support moral education. Peer groups don't necessarily have to oppose community and educational values, but sociological studies show that they often do, and they rarely are mobilized by educators on the side of moral education in the typical high-rotation schools.

Another result is that teachers cannot form bonds with their students, because they hardly have an opportunity to know them. Teachers are typically responsible for a subject, and not for a class or a given group of pupils, for example, all those in the eleventh grade, section five. Thus, the highly specialized school organization is, in effect, a systematic hindrance to bonding with educators, which is an essential prerequisite for moral education.

High schools should be reorganized to facilitate experience-based moral education. Teachers should be in charge of a particular class, teaching the same group of youngsters, say, three subjects (especially those rich in value content such as history and literature), or two subjects and civics. The same teacher would also be the class's homeroom teacher, explicitly in charge of disciplinary matters. Discipline should be sought not as if the teacher were a punitive police officer, but a

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faculty member whose task it is to use instances of improper conduct to enhance moral education. Schools might also institute a policy whereby such teachers would follow the same students from ninth through twelfth grades.

Such changes would, in turn, necessitate changes in the ways the teachers themselves are trained, to make them less specialized. Many teachers, especially those who teach humanities or liberal arts, are already broadly grouped. In any event, without more bonding and contacts that are more encompassing, extensive, and value-laden, moral education is unlikely to succeed.