

Character Development: Education at its Best

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The key purposes of education, to my mind, can be placed on a continuum. At the one end is the instrumental notion that the purpose of education is to prepare individuals for the workforce. At the other end are loftier purposes. Plato, for example, said that the primary purpose of education is to create a more just and harmonious society. In my view, if we want a society in which citizens care about one another - in which qualities such as honesty, integrity, fairness, courage and optimism are pervasive and violence of any kind is discouraged - we have no choice but to nurture these qualities in our homes, in our schools and in our communities. So, I side

with Plato. These human qualities are too important to be left to chance.

We must, I believe, re-commit ourselves to the higher mission of schooling - to transmit

from one generation to the next the habits of mind and heart necessary for good citizenship to thrive.

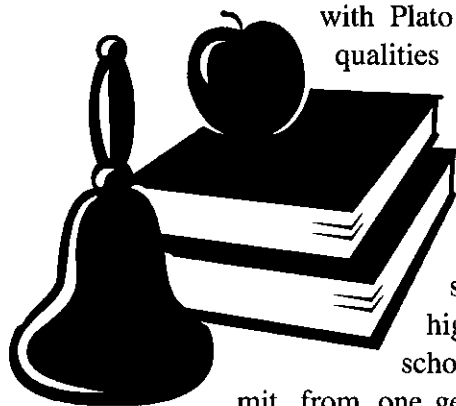
Almost 100 years ago, John Dewey said, "What the best and wisest parent wants for his child, that must the community want for all its children." Admittedly, many parents do teach character in their homes. In fact, they are the first character educators. But the fact remains that character development is also a

responsibility of educators who are responsible for nurturing all aspects of learning. When we place the student at the centre of all we do, and when home and school are seen as complementary spheres of influence, we create the web of support that is necessary for student success and the continuous improvement of our schools.

Not a New Curriculum, but a Way of Life

We all want our schools to foster positive attributes; to be the embodiment of caring and civility. We want them to be models of effective human relationships where students continue to learn what it means to be humane, empathetic and respectful. A systematic character development program nurtures the universal attributes that transcend racial, religious, socio-economic, cultural and other lines of division in our communities. It is a whole-school effort to create a community that promotes the highest ideals of student deportment and citizenship. These skills and expectations must be nurtured in an explicit, focused, systematic and intentional manner.

Character education is not a new curriculum; it is a way of life. It is the way we treat others and hold ourselves accountable for ensuring that our actions are compatible with our stated values and beliefs. In implementing the strategies that embed the character attributes into the fabric of the school, all members of the school community seize the "teach-



able moments” to reinforce the attributes which are determined in co-operation with a wide cross-section of community members. Teachers use every opportunity to integrate these attributes into their curriculum and make connections where appropriate. The attributes permeate all policies, programs, and interactions within the school.

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As stated consistently by leaders in the field of character education, the development of good character is not inherited, it is inculcated - it is not caught, it is taught (see, for example, the work of Marvin Berkowitz, Tom Lickona and P. Fitch Vincent). Students must see what good character looks like and have an opportunity to put it into practice. “Children,” the saying goes, “cannot heed a message they have not heard.” Marvin Berkowitz often says, “A child is the only substance from which a responsible adult can be made.”

It is easy to bemoan the turbulence of our times, to mimic the critics who assert that our young people have no moral voice guiding their actions. I do not adopt this approach because it is reactive. Our motivation as educators must be based on our fundamental beliefs about what constitutes excellence in education and what we believe will contribute to the future well-being of indi-

viduals and our society as a whole. Character education is about taking care of the common good and the universal values that we can all agree upon - those that bind us together as one human family - those values that take us to a new level of consciousness about who we are, what we believe in, how we wish to live our lives and how we choose to relate to others.

A few years ago, the *Financial Post* carried a series of articles on public views of education. Not surprisingly, parents who saw character development as a primary purpose of schooling rated character education very highly. Studies by Ken Leithwood and others at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education also found that, by and large, parents want schools to focus on character education and citizenship development.

A World-wide Concern

The Character Education Partnership (CP) has collected data on the status of character education across the globe. In England, for example, there is a recent renewal of commitment to citizenship development. Other countries emphasize character education, describing it as social and emotional learning (United Kingdom), or values, ethics and morals (New South Wales), virtue development and life skills (Lesotho), civic and ethics education (Mexico), value development (Estonia), moral development (Hungary), personal and social development (Malta), to name a few. Countries like Australia indicate, from research conducted in its jurisdiction, that when schools engage in explicit teaching of values students are more engaged in learning resulting in improved outcomes.

What we do know is that, increasingly, governments are recognizing that a holistic ap-

proach to education includes some form of character development. A common theme that runs throughout these programs is respect for self and others.

In the nineties, I spearheaded initiatives to implement character education in two Ontario district school boards first in York Region (outside Toronto) and later in Kawartha Pine Ridge (in Peterborough). Then in 2008, I helped the Ontario government launch a character development initiative province-wide. Whereas we did not see character development as a panacea, we believed in its possibility to create positive school cultures. We also recognized that it would take all the institutions in our community, working together, for character education to be successful. The saying, "It takes a village to raise a child," though perhaps over-used, is applicable in this context.



on our youth during these very challenging times we were helping to create the future we all wished to have; we emphasized that we would be nurturing characteristics identified by the business community as integral to a work ethic and prerequisites for success in the workplace.

At the end of the three sessions, the participants decided upon ten attributes that they wanted us to develop in our schools. These were: Respect, Responsibility, Honesty, Integrity, Empathy, Fairness, Initiative, Perseverance, Courage and Optimism.

Of great interest is the fact that when we conducted a similar exercise in the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board, members of that community chose the same ten attributes. The editorial in the local papers suggested that we can find "common ground as Canadians on the values that we espouse."

Character Education in Schools

In Ontario, we first implemented character education district-wide in the York Region District School Board. We convened three education forums for a wide cross-section of the community, involving some 250 parents, community leaders and educators in reflecting on the culture that they wished to foster in York Region schools. The forums created a space for a conversation about the role of schools in preparing citizens for the future and enabled us to forge consensus on the attributes we wanted our students to embody as members of their schools and community, and as future citizens. We convinced our community participants that by focusing

Communities Of Character

It is my view that elected officials play a pivotal role in the development of a civil society. And so when we established our character education program in York Region, I approached the Mayor of Markham and asked him to work with the school district to engage our community in an ongoing, systematic and focused character education effort. We engaged a wide cross-section of the community, including parents and educators as well as members of our business and faith communities, government officials, the police, labour and social representatives - all individuals who were interested in making our community safe, inclusive and inviting.

Through our collective efforts, York Region became the first jurisdiction in Canada to develop a character initiative to serve as an example of how community development could be led by the education sector.

York Region defines their “Character Community” as a community committed to keeping and enhancing its community as a place where families are strong, homes and streets are safe, education is effective, businesses are productive and neighbours care about one another.

In diverse societies especially, the need to find common ground on the values that we share as human beings becomes a necessity.

It is also important for our children to know what we stand for as a community. After all, they are receiving many messages through movies, television and other media. How are we helping them to know that respect for self and others is a fundamental value that will help them live with others in a community? How are we teaching them that respect for property and the environment will assist our efforts to sustain our resources? As stated before, these important aspects of education must be taught. They cannot be left to chance.

Character In The Workplace

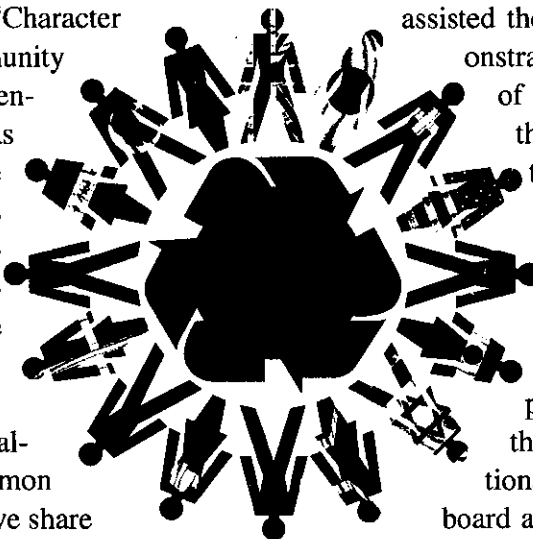
To the best of my knowledge, the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board was the first school district in Canada to establish a “Character in the Workplace” initiative in a systematic and intentional manner. We brought school district employees together and asked them to consider participating in

a program similar to those we were developing in the district’s schools and the wider community. Led by a board secretary and a member of the business department, the initiative introduced staff members to the common purpose of character development and assisted them in modeling and demonstrating the highest standards of character in dealing with their colleagues and with the public. The board also began to celebrate a character attribute each month and encouraged everyone working for the board to put these tenets into daily practice and to embody them in interpersonal relationships. Employees of the board assumed leadership for this initiative.

We believed that this initiative would make a difference in the culture of the organization and in the service quality we provided to students, parents and the community. The district’s next step was to take this initiative to the business community.

Citizenship Development

In Canada, as in other nations around the world, we are part of a governing process that attempts to serve the best interests of society. The role we are expected to play in return is manifested through the institution of citizenship. Citizenship is a right as well as a very important responsibility. With citizenship come rights such as freedom of expression, religion and lifestyle. However, these rights come at a cost; that is the responsibility we all share to support the democratic process within our nation, cities and communi-



ties. These responsibilities are manifested in many ways. As citizens, we must work hard to maintain and improve the economic, political and social aspects of our society. Citizenship is a right, but it is more importantly a privilege; we cannot take it for granted.

In Ontario, through mandatory courses in civics and history as well as optional courses in law and world issues, our public education system has introduced students to the ideals of a democratic society and fostered pro-social concepts of citizenship among our younger generation. We also require mandatory community service for students prior to graduation to encourage a sense of community involvement and responsibility.

It is important that, in a world dominated by popular culture in which very confusing messages reach our young people every day, we reinforce the need for an active and involved citizenry. We need to teach these important elements of democracy in a manner that engages young minds and redirects their enthusiasm. Young people are full of passion and interest, and are willing to take on responsibilities that we, as adults, do not always provide for them. Let us realize their immense potential, and work with them to sustain and create a world where citizenship and all its privileges, rights and responsibilities are extended to all.

The excerpts that follow are some of the answers that Grade 10 Civics students in Peterborough Ontario provided when asked what citizenship meant to them:

“The definition of citizenship is to have full rights in a country. Citizenship in Canada means a lot more. We are given the opportunity to learn and create a better world.

We are given freedom of lifestyle, speech and religion. To me, citizenship means a person who has good qualities and uses these qualities to bring good to the world.”

“To me, being a citizen does not mean always agreeing with the current powers, but working with others (or if need be standing alone), to fight peacefully for the things you believe in.”

“A good citizen respects the beliefs and religions of others and is involved in his or her community and country. They pay their taxes, vote, volunteer to help improve the community and give to others, and express their views or ideas in a peaceful manner.”

“Citizenship is fighting for human rights. Being part of the global community is also part of citizenship. Citizenship is like being a member of a gigantic club. It is getting involved in the politics of your country by voting and protesting.”

Education At Its Best

It is incumbent upon educational leaders to help to create community where we educate hearts and minds and shape future generations able to maintain and strengthen our democratic society. In this vein, I have been challenged over the years by the words of Peter Drucker who in an essay in *Leading Beyond the Walls* said:

“Society in all developed countries has become pluralist and is becoming more pluralist day by day ... But all early pluralist societies destroyed themselves because no one took care of the common good ... If our modern pluralist society is to escape the same fate, the leaders of all institutions

will have to learn to be leaders beyond the walls. They will have to learn that it is not enough for them to lead their own institutions; though that is the first requirement. They will also have to learn to become leaders in the community. In fact, they will have to learn to create community.”

Implementing character development has helped us to create community in Ontario schools and school districts. The inclusive nature of the initiative brought us all together. After one of the consultation sessions, one parent said

“You have put the ‘public’ back into ‘public education’.” Researcher Marvin Berkowitz points out that whereas character education is not a panacea, it has the potential to address many of the issues that we are grappling with in schools today from school climate to student behaviour to academic motivation.

The business community also depends on the school system to help develop the graduates who will ultimately work in their companies and institutions. Business leaders often say that they can develop the technical skills but they want us to develop qualities such as initiative, perseverance and honesty. Sandy McDonnell, a business person who has devoted

his life to character education in St. Louis schools, once said:

“We in the business world don’t want young people coming into our employment and into our communities who are brilliant, but dishonest; who have great intellectual knowledge, but don’t really care about others; who have highly creative minds, but are irresponsible. All of us in business and the entire adult community need to do our part in helping build young people of high character. There isn’t a more critical issue in education today.”

I encourage my educational colleagues across the globe to ensure that schools teach qualities such as empathy and respect; to take seriously the intent of holistic education to educate hearts as well as minds; to ensure that education lives up to its loftier mission and its core values of preparing students to think critically, feel deeply and act wisely and ethically. I am convinced that we can help to build vibrant communities and caring individuals by emphasizing the qualities that make us truly human.



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Dr. Avis Glaze is one of Canada’s outstanding educators and a recognized international leader in education. From classroom teacher, to superintendent and director of education, this award-winning educator has experience at all levels of the school system. She was one of only five Commissioners on Ontario’s Royal Commission on Learning. As Ontario’s first Chief Student Achievement Officer and founding CEO of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, she played a pivotal role in improving student achievement in Ontario schools. Dr. Glaze has served as Ontario’s Education Commissioner and Senior Adviser to the Minister of Education, been a Professor in Residence in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, and currently, is President of Edu-quest International Inc.