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## **How do we learn Virtue, Character, Morals and Social Responsibility?**

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School leaders around the world are more and more accepting responsibility for including social and moral education in their schools. Expanding a traditional academic curriculum to include these two issues usually generates a great deal of enthusiasm, confusion, and criticism. Thus, it is important for educational leaders, teachers, parents, and community leaders to think and plan carefully about the history, philosophies, and research pertaining to these broad reforms.

First, it is valuable to be clear about the two central elements of this broad educational reform—a curriculum that enables students to grow into young adults with individual integrity and good character as well as a curriculum that helps students develop into socially responsible and civically active members of their communities. For many generations and in many countries these key elements have been excluded from schools and were presumed to be conducted in other parts of a student's life; that is, in their homes, their churches, and community agencies. Often today that presumption is unwarranted.

Second, two powerful forces—globalization and rapidly expanding technology—have transformed the lives and learning of young people. One of the transformations affecting students' social and moral growth involves their instant access to vast new information sources, ideas, and differences. Thus, schools need to provide guidance so students can integrate their traditional academic subjects with their emerging capacities to make consistent, clear-eyed moral and civic choices.

Third, the basic modes of analysis across subject areas are part of the solution, but those must be much better integrated with students' decision-making talents so that ethical, moral, and socially responsible dimensions are regarded as just as vital as strictly rational analytics. The ability to reflect carefully and collaboratively about these kinds of daily decisions is the foundational ingredient of effective social and moral education.

Key Words: Virtue, Character, Social and Moral Education

Across a wide range of cultures teachers, parents and school leaders have been challenged to provide effective education in values, ethics, morals, virtue, and character education. This challenge usually emerges from a cacophony of reports about failures of individual character, particularly among the young. President Theodore Roosevelt has long represented many basic, classic American values. Early in the last century, he explained that “to educate someone in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.” Unfortunately too many have failed to understand his warning. And additionally, his warning could have been better expanded to include not only education about individual morals and virtues, but also education about each individual’s social-civic responsibility. The failure to teach students about the complexity of moral situations, both individual and civic moral problems, is not merely an oversight lost amid many other school responsibilities. Teaching this complexity is often risky and as a result assigned low priority. Because there are always many other pressures, schools and state legislatures often make a conscious choice to focus heavily or exclusively on the development of academic talents. This leaves matters of each student’s character growth to others. As a result, our national civic mind eventually suffers from a stultifying and artificial separation of academic and intellectual powers from moral decisions and behavior.

Too many educators are unable to resist the temptations of small, measurable bits of information which keeps their emphasis on a narrow version of traditional academics. This means we have not developed good answers to T.S. Eliot’s important questions:

“Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

“The Rock”

It is important that the basic question driving this

conference is wider: “How do we Learn Virtue, Character, Morals, and Social Responsibility?” I propose that these important capacities, which in significant ways are teaching wisdom, are learned in these ways:

1. Through Examples
2. Through Collaborative Academic Study-Analytic and Aesthetic
3. Through Careful Reflections on Experiences.

While educators have devoted enormous amounts of energy; time, resources to academic achievements (represented primarily in comparing international standardized test scores), they have correspondingly ignored education in morals, character, and social responsibility. Similarly, this entire process has narrowed not only the content of teaching and learning, but also the process of teaching and learning. Michael Novak has attempted to restore the importance of educators as exemplars for students. He makes important distinctions that apply particularly to students learning through examples. We can extend his claim from students modeling themselves on individuals to also include modeling according to values that schools, communities, and institutions represent. According to Novak

Contemporary studies in ethics, especially in Anglo-American philosophical circles, concentrate upon logic and language. I wish, instead, to concentrate upon the drive to understand and upon the myth of symbols. My reason for doing so is that men seldom, if ever, act according to principles and rules stated in words and logically arranged. They act, rather, according to models, metaphors, stories and myths. Their action is imitative rather than rule abiding. Prior to their intention to obey sets of rules they are trying to become a certain type of person.

(Novak, 1970, p.26)

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John Goodlad over 30 years ago identified this problem succinctly. He argued that we must overcome a major difference: “Students go to schools; teachers go to classrooms.” He is concerned that students are heavily influenced by the message, direct and indirect, from schools to students when a school is no more than a collection of discrete classrooms. This influence is especially noteworthy in education about morals, character, and social responsibility. There has been a long, unfortunate tradition in American schooling that schools somehow teach academic competence without teaching about morals and civic responsibility. Educators often regarded these latter obligations as the responsibility of families, churches, and other social-civic agencies. As that developed schools began to serve as an exemplar of an actual false dichotomy. It is not only unwise to separate these matters, it is impossible. By privileging academic education so markedly schools are in fact providing an incomplete education, academically and moral. It is impossible to fully understand a concept academically while excluding the moral dimension. And it is impossible to hold many moral positions while ignoring an academic component.

But the concerns and hesitations by educators are not completely unfounded. Many educators and some schools have overcome the challenges, particularly, the challenge embedded in the question – “If you are going to have the schools teach morals, then how do we decide what morals to teach?” This is an especially complex question in a multi-cultural society. To tackle that issue we must turn our attention to a key element in the teaching morals matter; what is meant by the phrase “to teach morals.”

A group of successful students recently graduated from fine liberal arts Colleges were preparing, as graduate students, to become teachers. They were asked to rank the priority of important educational goals for the public schools. This group generally had understood the educational system in

which they had been so successful for sixteen or more years. Of ten commonly cited goals for schools, students were most hesitant about setting “to teach moral values” as a high priority. They usually ranked it last or next to last. However, another group of students with the same background and professional aspirations using an only slightly modified list of the same ten goals ranked the phrase “to teach about morals” as one of the most important goals of schools. In the discussions of this prioritizing it was clear that the first group was deeply afraid that “to teach moral values” really meant instill or indoctrinate a specific set of moral values. They claimed that doing so would clearly violate all academic traditions as well as the important separation of church and state. They also thought that somehow doing so would violate the basic pedagogical value that encourages Students to explore options and draw their own conclusions. In the second group, the responsibility “to teach about moral values” drew strong support as a high priority because the group understood that teachers could discuss moral issues without the teacher exercising any leverage compelling an individual student to hold a particular set of values. They also hoped that by having such open-ended discussions teachers could avert declaring a position that would aggravate members of the community at large. When a group of talented young people, successful in schooling and eager to become teachers, equates the verb “teach” with “instill,” “inculcate,” and “indoctrinate,” great care must be taken. Unfortunately, the discussion about teachers’ rights and duties in studying moral issues in schools has often not proceeded far beyond this simple misunderstanding of the verb “teach.” Nor has it often extended beyond the simplistic dichotomy that schools can only either indoctrinate or avoid values.

But the question remains of what morals and civic responsibilities should schools teach about when it comes to morals and social responsibility? On the first level schools should see themselves as forums for

diverse ideas needing careful analysis and reflection. If schools restore some balance between academic achievement and the development of student capacities that lead to wisdom, they must recognize that the real and respectful exchange of ideas is a fine goal in and of itself. Doing so enables students to see that moral questions that are individual and moral questions that are civic are complex, interdependent, and cully mutually informing.

Let's look at an example of each. Students seldom have a problem knowing that being honest is better than dishonest or that kindness is preferable to being unkind. But those are individual virtues in which one gradually declares that he or she will be an honest, kind, reliable, responsible, respectful, diligent person. Those are all individual virtues that we can commit to as individuals and entirely on our own. Some educators have suggested that our duties as educators end with that. But two issues arise. First, what does a student do when two moral values are in conflict, known as the problem of competing goods? Second, what do we do about moral values that extend to broader community and civic decisions, policies and responsibilities?

Let's take up the competing goods problem first. When the standards of honesty conflict with the standards of kindness in a particular situation students need guidance on how to sort through the nuances and implications. For example, in simple but intensely personal situations, such as asking children how they like Aunt Betty's pie while in Aunt Betty's presence, we are asking for subtle judgments to be made quickly. One answer may be preferable to another, and students need to think carefully. Responding to the question about Aunt Betty's pie is one kind of moral-value judgment that is made spontaneously. Practice in this kind of judgment is important. Students have to assess quickly how to be honest and kind and how they can be caring toward Aunt Betty. Real life decisions are complex, demanding, evolving and involving. Too often, providing students, a list of important virtues is

of little help because they are too simplified, abstract, sterile and independent.

We do learn by example. We also learn about moral values and social responsibility by more traditional academic classroom teaching. There are two rich sources for teachers that Jerome Bruner identifies in his 1986 book, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Bruner, 1986) He describes two basic ways people make sense of experience and construct reality. Bruner's two modes of mental functioning are propositional thinking and narrative thinking. The first, propositional thinking, accords closely with what we usually mean when we discuss cognitive functioning. It is the kind of thinking that schools encourage in students, the cause-and-effect thinking which we learned regularly in formal education. Bruner describes this propositional thinking as a "logico-scientific" attempt to arrive at conclusions which are abstract and context-independent. The second is narrative thinking that is enmeshed with people and events, with time and place. It is concrete and context dependent. To think narratively is to think in story form. Actions and ideas are lived out in the intuitions, intentions, decisions, and experiences of each individual. While propositional thought may be more highly regarded for many human ends and in academic settings, narrative thinking, in many ways, is more fitting and more effective in helping students develop complicated moral understandings.

The clearest and most famous example of the propositional thinking in the area of moral education is the plan constructed by Harvard's Professor Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg predicated his reform on the analytic processes necessary for Students to resolve moral dilemmas. The ultimate goal is justice in a universal sense. Thus, to Kohlberg, the student's conclusions are universal and basically independent of cultural differences as well as independent of individual choice.

The strengths and weaknesses of the Kohlberg

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approach are epitomized in a moral dilemma often used by teachers. In simplified form, a young German woman in Nazi Germany is faced with the opportunity to possibly save her young Jewish friend. To do so, she will have to break German law and risk her fate, her family's, and her friend's. In determining a course of action, the Kohlberg-trained teacher is urged to provide a rationale and a clear, concise set of classroom procedures that reveal to students the strengths and weaknesses of each option. The procedures include rational/analytic questions and more general contextual questions. However, the overall strategy omits any sustained discussion of how this larger crisis came to be and, more specifically, how it could have been avoided. It also avoids the vital nuances of narrative analysis.

The heavy emphasis on discrete and artificially constructed cases can amount to an ahistorical and decontextualized habit of mind in students and, eventually, in our nation's civic mind. It is tantamount to the Harvard Law School Dean who claimed that the persistent study of only cases in law schools is like trying to educate horticulturalists by only allowing them to study cut flowers.

Concerns have been raised about the Kohlberg model being too rational and analytic. Good teachers recognize that the students' intellectual cognitive development must be taught interdependently with their emotional development. A lack of attention to the emotional, non-cognitive development would actually restrict the students' moral judgment capacities.

One of Kohlberg's Harvard colleagues, Carol Gilligan, has presented a specific challenge to his moral development model. She claims that Kohlberg completely omits the "morality of caring" that characterizes women's approaches to the kinds of dilemmas found in Kohlberg's materials. She asserts that Kohlberg's base of empirical data, upon which his curriculum is built, derived from a study of 84 boys over period of 20 years. The result, she concludes, is

that the very traits that have defined the "goodness" of women, that is, their care and sensitivity to the needs of others, would "mark them as deficient in an analytic model of moral development." Kohlberg's putatively higher and better stages, Gilligan claims, are inadequate to the lives of women in which their moral problems arise "from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract" (Gilligan, 1982, p.19).

Beyond the academic analytic model – morals, character, and social responsibility in classrooms – is the academic aesthetic model taught less often in classrooms. A good example of this would be a literature based curriculum on morals and social responsibility. This aesthetic approach could be used with other types of art, but must be based on a clear understanding of John Dewey's important observation:

"As long as art is in the beauty parlor of civilization, neither art nor civilization is secure."

Literature teaches us the important talents required for imagining the lives of others. A long list of desirable character traits like honesty, courage, respect, fairness, persistence, and social responsibility can be taught to students abstractly. Using literature to identify the nuances of each of these traits is vital to having students value them enough to practice them on a daily basis. These nuances are also indispensable to enabling students to conduct the kind of wise judgments necessary to live a life of integrity.

Character education that is predicated upon literature and biography enables teachers to address important aspects of good character. It recognizes how true character is something more than a sum of individual character traits such as honesty, courage, and responsibility. Character also involves judgment, which is more than analytic problem-solving skills or decision

making skills. At times judgment seems abstract and ineffable to students. They recognize that it has to do with real, but largely remote, concepts like integrity, wisdom, and experience. However, in Harper Lee's contemporary classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, much of this is made compelling and clear. As students see Atticus Finch bring his sense of courage, humanity, respect, and justice to bear in an urgent situation, they realize that high principles are worth holding, thinking about, and putting into action. This kind of story is important secondly because it shows how individuals affect the course of events. Character education must be personalized for students to see how it is worth attending to. If the curriculum in history and literature ignores, or even de-emphasizes, the role of individuals, the course of history risks becoming inevitable. As soon as that occurs, the schools have unwittingly mitigated the importance of individual responsibility and shared deliberation. Thus, the concept of citizenship is seriously damaged.

In the final analysis we must provide students with a rich and refined vocabulary so they can make fine distinctions in ways that capture and respect a wide range of subtleties and nuances. An authentic understanding of these more refined vocabulary terms only occurs when students apply them to real-life situations. Helping students understand the value of and process of careful and constant reflection will lead to graduates who are well educated and far from Theodore Roosevelt's dreaded "menace to society."

And finally we learn morals through experiences-spontaneous and planned. We can extend the narrative model to the students' daily lives by asking them to keep a journal of events they observe in daily life. John Dewey explains that such events are merely happenings unless we reflect on them. They become learning experiences when we reflect on the causes and consequences of events we observe or participate in. Students who keep a log of reflections about the moral and civic meanings of daily events and

who also share those ideas with their teachers and classmates develop a rapidly refined vocabulary and a much sharper eye for detecting vital details essential to a more mature understanding. Thinking collaboratively with classmates about spontaneous events is an opportunity schools do not use effectively for moral and civic education.

Teachers planning experiences beyond schools have often devised a rich opportunity for students to understand individual and social values. One of the widespread uses of these planned experiences are service learning programs, or as named in the UK, Youth Social Action Programs. Before considering service learning, or youth social action, think of Shakespeare's magnificent "quality of mercy" speech. In the Merchant of Venice Portia begins,

"The quality of mercy is not strained.  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven,  
Upon the place beneath.  
It is twice blessed,  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.  
It is mightiest in the mightiest,  
It becomes the throned monarch better than his crown."

Though the setting for Portia was judicial, both those leading school-based youth social action or service learning programs and the students experiencing them can easily recognize service to others is also "twice blessed." Providing service can be much more than merely helping others and good teachers realize such service is greatly enriched by detailed reflection about the nuances of such acts. The true benefits to the providers can only occur when teachers help students reject all forms of self-congratulation. Students in these programs come to understand richly how basic virtues such as humility, responsibility, respect, kindness, and gratitude, as well as the powers of careful reflection, derive from well-planned service and youth social action experiences.

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At a service learning program in one of New England's poorest high schools students regularly help others who are even less fortunate than they. One of the high school students was a recent immigrant living with relatives who had arrived not too much before he arrived. In discussing with the school principal his thoughts about his service project he commented with obvious pleasure, "Ms. Binienda that was the first time anyone has ever needed me." As the conversation unfolded he realized the connection between his benefitting from the gifts of others and his emerging duty to help others. His story is a rich data point for anyone trying to explain, or account for, why an educational service learning program has to extend, in design and in implementation, well beyond the commonplace observation that service is really only volunteerism and charity. Extending beyond such simplistic descriptions is a foremost challenge for good youth social action education. The most effective ways to extend beyond simplifications require thoroughly preparing students for the experiences as well as developing thoughtful reflection and debriefing components after the experience.

It is easy to imagine service learning and youth social action as a curriculum bangle – costume jewelry to brighten the solid, stolid characteristics of the basic curriculum. Sometimes public relations administrators pigeon-hole it all into a "helps improve community relations" space. It should never be regarded as an add on while all the rest of the school program continues to conduct "business as usual." Certainly service learning and youth social action programs have often been documented to:

- improve scores on standardized tests
- build authentic self-confidence
- strengthen communication skills
- improve problem-solving capacities
- deepen students' abilities to work effectively with others

as well as other worthy educational goals. These are important. But in fact service learning and youth social action are much richer, much more powerful, educational reforms that can completely transform how we teach and how we learn, in and beyond schools. Far too many schools have become academic terrariums with their own little sealed and scripted learning biospheres. With careful planning and community collaboration service learning and youth social action programs can easily re-invigorate a school's basic curriculum and lay the foundation for achieving two of the most fundamental and often overlooked goals of schools; which are, developing life-long learners and developing students able to move beyond their own highly localized ways of thinking and participate productively with an ethic of social responsibility.

In the steady to and fro about whether schooling should concentrate on transmitting the culture or transforming it, these experiential programs provide potent opportunities for schools to meet both goals. Through reflective experiences, good schools refine and transmit the finest qualities, understandings, and virtues nearly all would like to develop in young people. And they can at the same time enable students to participate actively in solving deep-seated problems across society, not only during their school years, but during a life-time habit of community participation.

In order for an individual, a group, or a society to truly learn each learner must be a little unsettled from a homeostatic condition. Tolstoy put it simply, "education must be troubling." Important learning opportunities are often annoying and confusing. Well-designed service learning and youth social action programs require students to depart from their comfort zone. The most common complaints about schooling derive from the passivity too often required of the learner. But, if learners are disturbed from their expectations and are a bit puzzled, then their intellect, emotions, curiosity, and creativity are stimulated. Well-crafted experiential education programs involve the students in

planning prior to their providing service or conducting a social action. In Robert Coles' classic, *The Call to Service*, he illustrates the importance of those who serve being completely respectful of those being served. One clerical leader, a veteran of many service projects, explained that "The last thing the kids in the ghetto need is for snotty kids from the suburbs to come into their neighborhood— or invade their neighborhood -in order to show how smugly virtuous they are." (Coles, 1993, p.59) It is important to add that "smugly virtuous" is the very last thing that the kids from the suburbs need as well. Any completely effective service learning or youth social action activity must be built on a foundation in which the students learn how to serve. They start by learning that much more is involved than an act of charity. Before they can learn from their serving they must learn about how to provide service in ways that form a collaboration with those served. Careful pre-planning by teachers and students is the vital center of the learning to serve dimension. Though service is fundamentally characterized as a giving event, it is just as important to students that they understand it must all be rooted in truly understanding and caring about the recipients. The more they know about the culture, history, problems and opportunities in the served community the more they will better interact on a personal level with the recipients. Successful service learning programs help service providers elicit personal narratives from the recipients. Understanding how to have those conversations is a vital part of the learning to serve phase. Though thorough preparation is important, we must also recognize that while delivering the service or completing the social action students must remain capable of and willingly accept surprises. Far too much of schooling these days is based on pre-digested understandings. The steadily heavier emphasis on standardized testing has only exacerbated that problem. Life is full of surprises, positive and negative ones, which means that educators must equip students to deal with life as it actually unfolds. Experiential

learning is the ideal opportunity to develop this talent. The heavy emphasis on individualized testing also turns student's attention regularly to their own individual learning most often devoid of working with others. Learning how to productively collaborate with others generally is a vital skill for a successful adult life. In first-rate service learning and youth social action models students learn not only by reflecting on their own experiences and understandings, but also from reflecting on the complete life stories of others unlike them. Authentic, face-to-face human interactions including careful reflection about those experiences, cannot be anything other than transformative for what educators, students, and parents understand about learning morals and social responsibility.

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