

## Character First

### CARACTERE D'ABORD

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**Abstract:** The fundamental task of education is to cultivate talents. Our students are supposed to acquire knowledge and more importantly they should learn to be people with good character. Focusing on the cultivation of students' moral development and stimulation of their high self-discipline are the cornerstones of their life. In the current waves of globalization, good character can direct to a meaningful and fruitful life.

**Key words:** character; education; cultivation

**Résumé:** La tâche fondamentale de l'éducation est de cultiver les talents. Nos élèves sont censés de pouvoir acquérir des connaissances et, surtout, ils devraient apprendre à être des gens avec un bon caractère. L'accent mis sur la cultivation du développement moral des élèves et la stimulation d'une haute autodiscipline sont les pierres de soubassement de leur vie. Dans la vague actuelle de mondialisation, un bon caractère peut les diriger vers une vie significative et fructueuse.

**Mots-Clés:** caractère; education; cultivation

The distinguished American writer Harney Rubin once commented, "Watch your thoughts, for they become words. Watch your words, for they become actions. Watch your actions, for they become habits. Watch your habits, for they become character. Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny." Character is to the life what vitality is to the flower. Even a cursory glance at current social concerns points to the need for a renewed emphasis on developing in every individual an inner guide, an ethical vision, or, as many commonly say now, a "moral compass."

The Hyde School founder Joseph Gauld remarked that the current educational system focused too much on students' academic achievements and overlooked the cultivation of their character. Gauld felt strongly that the American education system was failing young people, so he did something about it. In 1966, he founded Hyde School and based the curriculum on developing strong character in young people. This American middle school operates on the principle that if you teach students the merit of such values as truth, courage, integrity, leadership, curiosity and concern, then academic achievement naturally follows. Albert Einstein also clarifies people's misconception by concluding that it is character which makes a great scientist instead of intellect.

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\* Received 19 November 2009; accepted 4 February 2010.

In September, 2008, the first institute focusing on Character English was founded in Taiwan. The primary principle was to rebuild the values and emphasize English education. Teachers' practice inevitably has a strong influence on the moral lessons students directly and indirectly acquire in the classroom. To be guides for the young in morality and ethics, teachers must understand the complex moral role that they occupy as ethical professionals and appreciate the significance of their own actions and decisions on the students in their care. Teachers are referred to as moral agents whose influence extends to what they say and do without consciously intending to act as moral agents. The recognition that enhances awareness of teachers of their own ethical practice can be a powerful force on moral education as it evolves in schools.

In the best seller entitled *Lighting Their Fires*, Rafe Esquith shows that children aren't born extraordinary; they become that way as a result of parents and teachers who instill values that serve them not just in school, but for the rest of their lives. The well-known primary school teacher who is viewed as both a "genius" and a "saint" strongly believes that the essence of education is something about character. He writes in this book that if we want to cultivate outstanding students, we must face the importance of the following topics for discussion such as "character", "honesty", "merit" and so on.

The mission of another school of the United States ---True North Rochester Preparatory Charter School ("Rochester Prep") is to prepare all students to enter and succeed in college through effort, achievement and the content of their character. Their students will consistently exemplify the virtues of diligence, integrity, responsibility, compassion, perseverance and respect. Rochester Prep not only prepares students to succeed in college, but also prepares them to succeed when judged, in Dr. King's words, by the content of their character. Students also learn from an ethics curriculum that will help them use their knowledge and skills to do what is right. The school features a rigorous academic program that guides students to meet the highest standards and at the same time develops young men and women of character and integrity.

True character education is the hinge upon which academic excellence, personal achievement, and true citizenship dependency. It calls forth the very best from our students, faculty, staff and parents. Governors from the states of Colorado, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Mexico, South Dakota, and Utah endorsed the "Character Education Manifesto." It was the first document of its kind to define character education and to present to teachers and parents some guiding principles. Character education is about developing virtues — good habits and dispositions that lead students to responsible and mature adulthood. Virtue ought to be our foremost concern in educating for character. Character education is not about acquiring the right views — currently accepted attitudes about ecology, prayer in school, gender, school uniforms, politics, or ideologically charged issues. Education in its fullest sense is inescapably a moral enterprise — a continuous and conscious effort to guide students to know and pursue what is good and what is worthwhile.

Kevin Ryan, an American educator has developed six E's of character education: example, explanation, exhortation, ethos (ethical environment), experience and expectations of excellence over the years of study. The six concepts will help educators promote morality within each student and in the class and school environments.

*Example.* Example is probably the most obvious way to model character education. While I'm not suggesting that teachers be saints, they should take their moral lives seriously by modeling upright behavior. Students imitate their trusted teachers. One middle school social studies teacher emphasizes biographies in his curriculum. "When my students studied Harriet Tubman, I had them perform skits with Tubman as the central character," says the New Hampshire teacher, referring to the great abolitionist. "The skits taught them about courage and self-sacrifice. We then placed a poster of Tubman in the classroom so the students would remember her."

*Explanation.* We need to practice moral education by means of explanation — not simply stuffing students' heads with rules and regulations, but engaging them in great moral conversations about the human race. The very existence of this dialogue helps make us human. A private school teacher, tired and discouraged by the hostility of her sophomore students, explained the meaning of friendship to

them. "Many had never heard that values like compassion and trustworthiness are needed to be a true friend," says the Boston educator. She also had her students read essays on friendship by Cicero and C.S. Lewis. "My students began to understand what it means to be a friend," she says. Forty years ago, as an undergraduate at the University of Toronto, I sat dazed listening to Marshall McLuhan, then an obscure literature teacher, rambling about the medium being the message. I see now that his point is relevant to schooling and the moral education of children. Our continual explanation of the rules is one of the most important messages of school.

*Exhortation*. A child discouraged by academic, athletic or artistic failure often needs something stronger than sweet reason to ward off self-pity. So do students who passively attend school, flirt with racist ideas and get denied entrance into a college of their choice. Sincere exhortation is needed. When a fifth-grade class in upstate New York learned of its low scores on a statewide test, the teacher exhorted her students with pep talks. "I also led them in discussions about the qualities of a good student," she says. "My class felt that a good student achieved good grades. But I helped them understand that a good student is also someone who makes class contributions, does homework and assists other students." Use exhortation sparingly and never stray far from explanation. But appeal to the best interests of the young and urge them to move in the proper direction when the need arises.

*Ethos (or Ethical Environment)*. A classroom is a small society with patterns and rituals, power relationships and standards for both academic performance and student behavior. Moral climate influences classroom environment. Does the teacher respect the students? Do students respect one another? Are the classroom rules fair and fairly exercised? Does the teacher play favorites? Are ethical questions and issues about "what ought to be" part of the classroom dialogue? There is little doubt that the ethical climate within a classroom promotes a steady and strong influence in the formation of character and the student's sense of what's right and wrong.

*Experience*. Today's young people have smaller and less stable families than kids two generations ago. A modern house or apartment offers fewer tasks for children other than the laundry and dishes, the trash and a few other light chores. Without the discipline of work-related chores, students have difficulty building sturdy self-concepts. Today's young people also exist in the self-focused, pleasure-dominated world of MTV, promiscuity, drugs, or simply "hanging out." Only rare and fortunate teenagers have experiences that help them break out of self interest mode and learn to contribute to others. Many schools respond by providing students both in-and out-of-school opportunities to serve. Within such schools, students help other students; older children often help younger ones learn academic or physical skills. Students also help teachers, librarians or other staff members with routine clerical tasks. Out-of-school programs represent a larger departure from the ordinary. They enable students to provide services to individuals in need, such as a blind shut-in or a mother with a mildly retarded child. Other students volunteer in understaffed agencies, such as retirement homes or day care centers. School staff members serve as troubleshooters between students and the individuals or agencies in need of assistance. Such service programs teach valuable humanitarian skills. Through these activities, abstract concepts like justice and community become real as students see the faces of the lives they touch. Students begin to appreciate the need to couple moral thinking with moral action.

*Expectations of Excellence*. Children need standards and the skills to achieve them. They need to see themselves as students engaged in a continuing pursuit of excellence. When the faculty of the Dexter School in Brookline, Massachusetts, discussed ways to boost high standards, it created the motto, "Our best today, better tomorrow." That brought home the concept in a focused way to the students of this private boys' school. The teachers there encourage their students and help them to set reasonable standards and work toward their goals. These standards of excellence in school work and behavior will encourage students to develop qualities like perseverance and determination, and those virtues will affect every aspect of the children's lives as they mature. Academic studies change rapidly; what we discuss in class today becomes passé tomorrow. But the values, moral influences and noteworthy characteristics we model and discuss will outlast academic facts and figures.

Character education is not merely an educational trend or the school's latest fad; it is a fundamental dimension of good teaching, an abiding respect for the intellect and spirit of the individual. We need to re-engage the hearts, minds, and hands of our children in forming their own characters, helping them "to know the good, love the good, and do the good." Increasing societal concern about the perceived decline

of moral and ethical values in contemporary life is promoting renewed interest in character education. Bear in mind the famous saying by Marcus Tullius Cicero, "A man's own manner and character is what most becomes."

Now the focus is turned to the teacher himself. When Bill Gates announced recently that his foundation was investing millions in a project to improve teaching quality in the United States, he added a rueful caveat. "Unfortunately, it seems the field doesn't have a clear view of what characterizes good teaching." In my view, what makes a teacher good is his character, his understanding of his students needs, his interaction, his enthusiasm and his emotional and psychological correlations with his job. A good teacher is the one that can put the students on the positive track not the negative one. A good teacher is the one who bears responsibilities with honesty and sincerity, he is kind and warm-hearted for almost all the time and strict at some time. A good teacher is the one who plants the seeds of morals and values amongst students. Undoubtedly, preaching doesn't work well and a good example is more effective. As a model for the students, a teacher can have a direct impact on the growth of the students. He should be fully aware of this and set a good example for his students. To make his teaching effective, he is also supposed to be committed to teaching. The commitment weighs more than any other qualities. In his eyes, teaching is no longer a job to make a living, but a career that makes his life more meaningful. He even forgets the difference between in and out of the classroom. He is the one that enjoys every minute of his teaching and feels happy even with demanding work. Besides, the best teaching contains love, which is more powerful than anything else and can conquer anyone no matter what type of students. In other words, a caring teacher is in a favorable position at the very beginning for he works with people, not machines. Love is always the shortcut concerning teacher-student relationship.

As a college English teacher, it's quite necessary to be fully aware of the importance of our profession. Undoubtedly, it's challenging and demanding. Face to face with the bright youngsters, we are supposed to accomplish multi tasks throughout teaching. But what truly count are whether their minds are cultivated and whether their abilities are developed. As Richard Wolkomir, the American writer quotes, " We are like wheat, here on earth to ripen. We ripen intellectually by letting in as much of the universe's complexity as we can. Morally we ripen by making our choices. And we ripen spiritually by opening our eyes to Creation's endless detail."

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