The Failure of Modern Character Education

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Recently, in the United States the Institute of Education Sciences, the research arm of U.S. Department of Education, issues a long-awaited report on the effectiveness of seven of the nation's most popular and widely used character education programs. The study involved over 6000 elementary school students and followed them from the time they entered the 3rd grade until exiting the 5th grade. The researchers tested for twenty possible outcomes focused on academic and behavioral outcomes. The bottom line is that none of the programs worked.

To say that the programs' sponsors and the nation's advocates for character education are shell shocked would be a major understatement. The so-called "Character Education Movement," which was started a quarter of a century ago with high hopes, appears to be grinding to a slow trot. However, before these disappointing results were released, front-line educators' interest in character education was been submerged by manic efforts to improve academic achievement scores in mathematics, science and language. Politicians and power brokers, worried by the embarrassing academic achievement score of American students compared to those of our trading parents, sent a strong signal to the education community: "Get those mathematics, science and reading scores up or else."

Whether it is billions of federal dollars from *No Child Left Behind* or the billions of dollars of *Race to the Top* prize monies or individual state sources, the message to school administrators and classroom teachers has been clear: "What counts are test scores." The curricular casualties of the current educational climate are many, including the study of music, art, history, geography and physical education. A fragile flower like character education has little chance to survive in the U.S.'s current educational wars.

But still, why such discouraging results from the seven leading programs and the schools that made commitments to implement these programs? What hap-

pened to the impact of all those character building activities and games? What happened to all those social and emotional enhancing posters and slogans? What has been the result on teachers form all those after school, in-service education sessions on how to implement the various character education programs? Clearly, though, the thick net of evaluation tests and instruments did not detect much in their behavior or their results with students.

Missing a Concept of Character

Could it be that the entire character education movement has been dominated by a flawed understanding of what character is and is not? Could it be that what is being taught in the name of character education in U.S. schools has little to do with human character as it is known "on the street" and has been with us since the time of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle? And, could it be that the army of psychologists and measurement specialists who have been testing for "character" are like hunters armed with elephant guns stalking the tse-tse fly? Or, perhaps, stalkers armed with pee shooters hunting elephants?

The experimental method, which is at the heart of educational testing and evaluation, is a marvelous tool. And, it clearly works well in many educational settings. It can be quite useful in measuring which students learned how much from an arithmetic method or a particular reading program. It can show the reassures of an anti-obesity program in a quite concrete manner: pounds and ounces. But human character is different, and there's the rub.

A third grade girl may read a story of the courageous exploits of Harriet Tubman, the 19th Century, run-away slave, and experience a profound change in mind and heart. She may even forget the story, but maintains an understanding of what personal nobility consists, an understanding that may not be actualized until she is an adult. Or, a fifth grade boy, who has been unaffected by three years of the character education program, may be touched by the compassion of his teacher who goes out of her way to help him. Later as a college sophomore, he unexpectedly thinks of her kindness and decides to devote his life to teaching. Or, a pair of fourth graders energetically responds to Character Education Program X and they start competing hammer and throng for the gold stars, and hooks themselves to a diet of competitive rewards that head them straight for the executive suite at Hedge Fund USA. The point being labored here is that human character is not mathematics or reading. It rarely can be attributed to a particular program or measured by a test.

There are many competing definitions of "character." My dictionary offers, "The complex of mental and ethical traits markings often individualizing a person, group or nation." Another definition states that our character is the sum total of our unique cluster of virtues and vices. In the 6th Century B.C., Confucius is said to have captured both the meaning and the process of character education or formation in a short poem:

Sow a thought. Reap an action.

Sow an action. Reap a habit.

Sow a habit. Reap a character.

Sow a character. Reap a destiny.

Classically understood, character, then, is about habits, our dispositions to act in certain ways and our actual behavior. (Ryan and Bohlin 1999) Our characters consist of our habits, our virtues and our vices. Virtues and vices, once a stable of American schools, have given way in recent years to more trendy terms, such as social and emotional development and a plethora of social science constructs. As suggested by the Institute of Education Sciences' Report mentioned above, it does not appear that this new move has improved the character of America's young.

Lost in a Sea of Empiricism

Character education is just the latest victim of a flaw conception of what it is to educate a person. Modern education has been the product of two forces: first, the educationist's utilitarian understanding of an education as the transfer of skills and information; and, second, the modern state's technocrats that use the schools to shape the modern citizen. Typically, the two work hand-in-hand to deliver and control the education of the young. Both groups conceive of education as a *treatment* provided to the student which should have an approved outcome, whether it be the ability to read and manipulate various symbols so they can contribute to the state-provided economic system or to acquire and give allegiance to state approved patterns of behavior. Somewhere educational goals, such as Aristotle's goal of the human flourishing of the individual, have receded into the background. Under the sway of such a conception of the purpose of education, moral education, or character education as it has been called in recent years, becomes little more than a program of indoctrination.

On the other hand, the French philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) offered a more humanistic and traditional view of education and one that is more accommodating to the process of character formation. Almost seventy years ago, in his classic *Education at the Crossroads*, (Maritain, 1943), Maritain defined education of man as "a human awakening" to both his spiritual and material nature (p. 9). He went on to observe: "The ultimate aim of education concerns the human person in his personal life and spiritual progress" (p. 13). And further that "What matters above all is the inner center, the living source of personal conscience in which originate idealism, and generosity, the sense of law and the sense of friendship, respect for others, but at the same time deep rooted independence with regard to common opinion" (p. 16). Education "is to guide man in the evolving dynamism through which he shapes himself as a human person—armed with knowledge, and moral virtues—while at the same time conveying to him the spiritual heritage of the nation and the civilization in which he is involved, and preserving in this way the century-old achievements of generations" (p. 10).

While acknowledging the extraordinary human benefits which our unders-

tanding and application of the scientific method have wrought, Maritain addresses, too, the damages and continuing dangers of the hegemonistic takeover of education by scientific knowledge. (p. 5). In the world ruled by the scientific method, that which cannot be measured has no legitimacy. As a result, Maritain maintains that modern education, that is, scientific education, has been all but stripped bare of its ontological content (p. 4). Essential questions, such as, "What is man?" "Is there a soul or not? "Does spirit exist or only matter?" "Is man free or determined? "What is a noble life?" are rarely asked. If and when one such question is asked, the only approved answer is one that is observable and measurable. As Maritain stated, today's student may have a few answers to "What is man?", but rarely will he or she encounter the Greek, Jewish and Christian idea of man:

> "Man as an animal endowed with reason, whose supreme dignity is in the intellect; and man as a free individual in personal relation with God, whose supreme righteousness consists in voluntarily obeying the law of God; and man as a sinful and wounded creature called to divine life and the freedom of grace, whose supreme perfection consists of love" (p.7).

The modern student, then, inherits and inhabits a shrunken, mechanistic view of who he is and, therefore, what he ought to do with his life. It is this prevailing educational philosophy and the culture which is the soil into which the dubious seeds of the current Character Education Movement are being dropped.

The Wisdom of the State as Character Educator

At one time, it was widely acknowledged that states derived their authority to govern from God. In our modern world with many competing understandings of and claims on God, citizens are more comfortable asserting that the state derives its authority from the "consent of the governed." Certainly, this is the case in democratic states. Also, it is wildly acknowledged that the primary concern of civil authorities is to insure that personal rights are acknowledged, respected, and coordinated with other rights. Thus, it can be argued that the control of schooling, that is, the primary vehicle for educating the young in most modern states, poses a severe danger to the publics the states claim to serve.

Clearly, the state has an interest in an educated citizenry. It has an interest in ensuring that the young establish the attitudes and habits necessary to live together in civic harmony. But does it have the right to provide the answers to the essential questions cited above? Specifically, does a state-controlled educational system have the legitimate authority to answer education's most central and critical questions, "What is most worth knowing?" and "What should a person strive to be and do with his life?" Again, these are essentially religious questions.

For state authorities to provide the answers to these most fundament of edu-

cational questions, and therefore, to shape and control children's beliefs and world views, threatens the right to the free exercise of religion and the rights of parents to control the education of their children. The 20th Century witnessed two devastating examples of state control of education in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia where schools became explicit instruments of state indoctrination and oppression to religion.

While these examples are extreme, the potential for tyrannical state control of education is a global reality. More subtle, and perhaps more dangerous because it is quietly imposed by state commissions and unaccountable bureaucrats, is the type new curricula imposed a few years ago in once staunchly Catholic Quebec. Since 2008, a new religious curriculum, entitled "Ethics and Religious Culture" must be taught in all schools, state-run, private and religious (Benson, 2011). The alleged purpose of the course is "to sensitize students to the tenets of Quebec's rich array of religious beliefs –the major religions, plus native myths and even Wiccan beliefs– in order to facilitate the spiritual development of students so as to promote self-fulfillment." (Kay, 2011).

Recently, in the U.S. the Legislature of State of California overwhelmingly passed and the governor enthusiastically signed into law the *FAIR Education Act* (SB 48). The *FAIR Education Act* is the seventh sexual indoctrination law to teach the state's children to regard homosexuality, transsexuality (sex-changes operations) and bisexuality as good and natural. Among the bill's provisions are that textbooks and instructional materials must positively promote "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans" as role models and that children as young as 6 will be taught to admire homosexuality, same-sex "marriages," bisexuality, and transsexuality (Badash, 2011). These two state imposed curricula, courses from which in both cases neither student nor teachers are allowed to opt out, are examples of the growing confidence of state authorities to shape the education of the young. Schooling, then, is not only threatened by the dominancy of empiricism, as suggested seventy years ago by Maritain, but also by the current secular ideology of the state.

Conclusion:

The continuing failure school-based efforts at character formation result, as I have argued here, from three errors: a flawed understanding of the core concept, character; the failure to link character formation to deeper human issues; and the lingering legitimacy question of placing the control of the education of the young in the hands of the state. On the other hand, the true character education of children can only occur when it is linked to their deepest goals and purposes, when it is directed toward the acquisition of the virtues, and when it has the support and cooperation of those most responsible for their well being, their parents.

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Summary:
The failure of Modern Character Education

This paper argues that the recent negative findings concerning the efficacy of the seven leading character education programs in the United States is due primarily to three endemic causes. First is a narrow, positivistic notion of what constitutes human character. Second, efforts at the character education of children are embedded in an empirical conception of education which keeps character education isolated from the larger philosophical and theological questions which surround it. And, third, the wisdom and legitimacy of the current policy in the United States and elsewhere of turning over the education of the young to the modern state is questioned.

Key Words: Character education, modern education, failure modern education.

Resumen:
El fracaso de la moderna educación del carácter

Este trabajo defiende que los recientes resultados negativos sobre la eficacia de los siete programas más importantes de educación del carácter en los Estados Unidos, se deben principalmente a tres causas endémicas. La primera es una noción estrecha y positivista de lo que constituye el carácter humano. Como segunda causa, las iniciativas para la educación del carácter de los niños se insertan en una concepción empírica de la educación, que la mantiene aislada de las grandes cuestiones filosóficas y teológicas que la rodean. Por último, en tercer lugar, se cuestiona la sensatez y la legitimidad de la política actual en los Estados Unidos y en otros lugares del mundo de poner la educación de los jóvenes en manos del Estado.

Descriptores: Educación del carácter, educación moderna, fracaso educación moderna.