

THE FUTURE OF CHARACTER EDUCATION AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

The Need for Whole School and Community-Linked Approaches

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How we are preparing our youth for life and responsibility in the 21st century, and what kind of civic culture we are preparing them for? In a provocative essay, Lapsley (this issue) calls for a developmental-systems-contextual approach to building the character of youth. Murray (this issue), in an equally compelling essay, looks backward to the past for a set of guiding values from our Founding Fathers, and forward at the impact of changes in the values of the working and upper socio-economic strata. As we move ahead in changing contexts, can we restore our civic culture by grounding ourselves in the essential principles of honesty, industriousness, marriage, and religion, as Murray (this issue) suggests?

In an era of change, preparing our youth for an uncertain future is akin to building the airplane while it is in flight. But we have no choice; we do not have the luxury of putting development on hold until we figure out the destination and the kind of plane we need to

build to get there, and we cannot substantially control the changing conditions in the skies. So build and fly, we must.

The role of character education, particularly in schools, is an important aspect of this conversation. The airplane analogy is useful because whatever part we would like to assign to school-based character education—pilot, navigator, wings, flaps, seating, material that makes up the fuselage—it is clear that character education is not the plane. It is part of the plane, and it can only function in the context of the rest of that plane. So, the larger question, within which the fate of school-based character education is contained, is: what can and should schools be doing to make positive contributions toward the future direction of our youth and society?

The fields of social-emotional learning (SEL) and character education (CE) converge to suggest the conditions under which schools optimally promote students' social-emotional

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and character development (SECD) (Dunkelblau, 2009). SEL has long maintained that success in life requires students to not only know the right ways to behave, but also to possess and use the skills to enact desired behaviors effectively (Elias et al., 1997; Zins & Elias, 2006). This is an understanding that the CE field captured in the distinction between moral and performance character (Lickona & Davidson, 2005). Recent advances in SEL implementation research has shown that promoting SECD requires a combination of explicit skill instruction, clearly communicated values, a positive, safe, civil, supportive, and engaging culture and climate, and a coordinated developmental trajectory in which all these take place over time (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Elias, 2009).

WHAT KIND OF AMERICA DO WE WANT? WHAT KIND OF SCHOOLS TO CONTRIBUTE TO THAT AMERICA?

This conclusion is implicit when reading both Murray's (this issue) and Lapsley's (this issue) work in tandem, though not inevitably drawn from either one. From this conclusion, several insights and challenges emerge. First, "programs" to build social-emotional and character development are at best likely to be necessary but not sufficient to make a formative and telling impact. There will be some exceptions to this, of course, but this contention is supported by the strength and consistency of the research evidence to date. Second, for programs to have an impact, they must be continuous, coordinated, systematic, and developmentally and pedagogically appropriate. Third, their ultimate sustainable impact will derive from their congruence with their context and the extent to which adults and peers in children's lives support the skills and values being conveyed by those programs. For example, in environments in which bullying is condoned, nonviolent conflict resolution skills will be more difficult to learn. When education is not valued, or

beliefs are strong about limits in possible educational attainment and success, the habits of mind and heart devoted to school work, studying, completing projects carefully, responsibly working with others, and the like, are much less likely to be internalized.

Understanding the nature of the values differences within America today, certainly noted by Murray (this issue), is essential for adequately planning appropriate measures to promote SECD in our young people. Harding (2007) raised the intriguing question, "Is America Possible?" What kind of America do we want? What does it mean to seek identity in America today? The socioeconomic class structure picture painted by Murray (this issue) should be of great concern to all, regardless of their position in that structure. As Dewey (1916) said about schools, about which more will be said later, society is a unity: "I cannot succeed unless we succeed." This is an ethical position—indeed, a character position—that is not widespread and yet is essential for the American Dream to be fulfilled and for identity to become linked to the collective and the common good.

Consider these powerful words of Lyndon Johnson, spoken on Memorial Day, May 30, 1963, when, as vice-president, he was asked to make a speech in honor of fallen soldiers on the battlefield at Gettysburg. Johnson (1963) stated,

One hundred years ago, the slave was freed. One hundred years later, the Negro remains in bondage to the color of his skin. The Negro today asks justice. We do not answer him—we do not answer those who lie beneath this soil—when we reply to the Negro by asking, "Patience." It is empty to plead that the solution to the dilemmas of the present rests on the hands of the clock. The solution is in our hands. Unless we are willing to yield up our destiny of greatness among the civilizations of history, Americans—White and Negro together—must be about the business of resolving the challenge which confronts us now. Our nation found its soul in honor on these fields of Gettysburg one hundred years ago. We must not lose that soul in dishonor now on the fields of hate.

Until justice is blind to color, until education is unaware of race, until opportunity is unconcerned with the color of men's skins, emancipation will be a proclamation but not a fact. To the extent that the proclamation of emancipation is not fulfilled in fact, to that extent we shall have fallen short of assuring freedom to the free. (pp 1-2)

Over 4 decades later, too little has changed. There is more to America than Lapsley (this issue) and Murray (this issue) were able to convey in their brief essays. An increasingly multicultural nation will have a difficult time turning back to the values of the White, Christian, often slave-holding, Founding males as the sole, or even most essential, source of its value positions moving forward. Harding (2007) expressed it this way:

The American Dream cannot be fulfilled, cannot be deepened, until it enters into a creative, transformative engagement with the best dreams of humankind, seeking neither to submerge nor overwhelm nor stifle other human visions. Instead, only when we hear Hannah Arendt's hard-won testimony—"It is when we are in dialogue that we are most human"—do we begin to grasp our best possibilities. (p. 11)

Harding (2007) also states that the Dream of America begins with the realities in its many local communities. In suburban and well-to-do America, the issues are not largely material deficiencies, though that does happen. The larger issue is what Shriver (1972) referred to as "a famine of the spirit," a lack of strong values pervading our familial and communal lives.

If we look at history, we see that vision and conversation shape reality. Rosa Parks wondered what would happen if Blacks and Whites were together in public; Gandhi dreamed of a just society, engineered through nonviolent protest. In so many cases and so many contexts, and as we see playing out in the Middle East and North Africa today, vision and conversation—actual and virtual—shape reality. In our schools, among our youth, between educators and students, a new set of conversations

is required to give expression to aspirations and solutions.

Yet, the road is not easy. Inchausti (2004) anticipated the strong xenophobia we are seeing, perhaps as a final stand by the Old Guard, and we must understand why. Inchausti (2004) describes the presence of being caught in a cultural trance that we are not even aware of. It can be likened to "breathing smog" (Kloos et al., 2011)—it corrupts our lungs slowly, subtly, and we lose some of our capacity to breathe. Similarly, the cultural trance changes our understanding of what we see in front of us—it can turn interest and curiosity into fear and threat, the unknown into the undesirable. It stifles both vision and conversation.

We see this in our schools. We see an urge to control, in the form of prescriptive emphases on academic achievement scores and school takeovers, at the expense of true learning, dialog, conversation, exchange, exploration, creativity, and discovery. Part of the trance is about the worth of other groups, as well as their characteristics. We come to preserve these beliefs despite the facts, and eventually try to shape the facts to preserve our beliefs. Why? Because we have become cut off from the sense of greater possibility that comes from being part of a diverse, sharing community. We have stopped instilling the individual moral commitment to make communal contributions, and we have not faced and understood the new reality, as Friedman (2005) stated, that in a flat world, we need to engage, cooperate, and collaborate.

SCHOOLS AS THE CRUCIBLE OF DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY AND COMMITMENT TO THE COMMON GOOD

When the social fabric is asunder, thin stitching will not suffice to bind the rift. Programs are not sufficiently strong. To counter the wider cultural influences—even while looking to modify them at broader ecological levels—those working with youth need to provide

powerful socialization contexts congruent with positive messages of social-emotional and character development. This is an insight that Dewey (1916) made clear about a century ago. Dewey (1916) was not the first, but he was perhaps the most articulate, advocate of the imperative of viewing school as a microcosm of life's various influences and forces that afforded young people, from preschool through college age, with opportunities to learn essential lessons for life. These lessons were not learned by abstraction and deduction, but rather from a continuous process of engagement, reflection, and reconstruction of the knowledge and principles contained in educational experiences. These processes have powerful implications for the organization of pedagogy and of sequences of educational experiences, toward the goal of preparing students for their roles as effective citizens of their schools, families, workplaces, and civic contexts.

The SEL skills needed for participatory competence in a complex, global, and multicultural society, along with a set of values that serve as guiding principles amidst the diversity of perspectives one will encounter, are forged within schools of character. These are schools that stand for something, and do so in strong and visible ways. They may be in tension with aspects of their surrounding communities, and they should be in dialogue with those communities. Ultimately, students must learn to apply lessons of their classrooms and schools to the surrounding world. Clearly, their cocurricular and schoolwide experiences will have helped in that knowledge-translation process. But this wider level, what Kloos et al. (2011) refer to as the Neighborhood or Locality level within their ecological model, affords other challenges and other opportunities for further skill development and integration.

There is much more to understand in the external community and much less guidance and access there for creating that understanding. Skills related to learning "how to do" become paramount: fact finding, exploration, creative problem solving and nonviolent con-

flict resolution, perspective-taking, involvement in community service, service-learning, service delivery, collaboration and team work, understanding how adults participate in governing entities both local to the school (such as the community school board, the university or college board of trustees or board of governors) and beyond, including the neighborhood, the state, the nation, and internationally. These skills are needed by all individuals, at all social strata, to have a chance to be successful, autonomous, efficacious, effective, and confident contributors to society and the common good. The bar is higher than basic academic skills for minimal competence in the world of the 21st century and beyond.

Instruction in SEL skills and character virtues become secondary to their being embodied in pedagogical approaches that ensure the synergy of academic instruction and the constructive application of that knowledge for improving the public good and better honing knowledge for more precise application. Thus, political science, civics, social studies, and the like are not the only academic subject matter students must explore to discover ways that knowledge informs and prepares us for democratic citizenship and living lives of constructive character and positive moral purpose. Each academic subject area provides a different window or lens through which citizenship can be understood, and/or the skills for citizenship built. Experiences provide modifications based on our interactions. Within these experiences, there is a pedagogy: reflection, asking questions, making suggestions, reinventing, constructing, conversing, choosing, deliberating, debating, overcoming obstacles, planning and organizing, evaluating and reconsidering, are among the key elements. Through the successive application of this pedagogy, we bring our experiences together in a way that allows for broad input and participation, both of which are characteristic of democracy, and the creation of new futures. Or, as Harding (2007) has suggested, the recreation of old futures, such as allowing all groups of citizens to achieve, or at least approximate, the Dream

that animated the founding of America and that has fueled its extraordinary growth.

THE CHALLENGE FOR CHARACTER EDUCATION, SEL, AND RELATED FIELDS

The challenge for character education and SEL and related fields is to embrace their true importance to the social-emotional and character development of students. They must become integral to education and to the creation of school culture and climate. They must cast off any parochialism and embrace not the particularistic values that helped found America, but rather the wide set of universal values that have allowed America capture the imagination of the world.

This has been given clear expression by Shriver (2004) in a speech to the Community Action Partnership Convention:

In my vision of America, everyone is necessary, and everyone has the opportunity to participate. We must create:

An America in which the concept of 'working poor' is an anachronism.

An America that allows an individual to work full time and earn the money to raise a family and live in safe, decent, affordable housing.

An America where an individual is able to afford access to the highest quality of health care this nation is capable of providing.

An America that strengthens the social safety net for children, the elderly, and the most vulnerable among us.

An America of equal opportunity, and the strength to repair the errors of the past.

An America whose neighbors help neighbors, and we seek a balance in our lives between our commitments to self, family, community, nation and the world. (pp. 1-2)

In Shriver's (2004) vision of America, everyone is necessary, and everyone has the opportunity to participate. It is an America in which justice, freedom, respect, caring for self and others, and dignity are fundamental values. That they may be enhanced by marriage and religion is beyond dispute; that they are induced by marriage and religion is replete

with counterexamples. Embracing the challenge of diversity, the need of our youth to be educated in contexts that clearly stand for definable principles, and the commitment to prepare our all of our youth with the set of social-emotional competencies that they will need to succeed in school and life: these represent the future of character education.

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