Finding Common Ground to Study and Implement Character Education:
Integrating Structure and Content in Moral Education

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Whereas interest in character education is high, the effectiveness of character education in shaping our youth seems to fall far short of its promise. Five sources of contention, hypothesized to be at the root of this problem, are briefly discussed: disparate models of the moral person; focus on different means of affecting character; disagreement about the source of moral formation; imprecise language; breadth of the domain of character. Then the problematic role of structure and content in the conceptualization and implementation of character education is explored in more depth. Four suggestions are made for resolving this apparent problem: philosophical justification of content; differentiating moral from non-moral domains of content; examining the application of content to behavior; using moral psychology to understand the complexity of moral agency.

One would be hard-pressed not to notice that character education is experiencing a renaissance of sorts, particularly but not exclusively in the United States. At all levels of public experience, the rhetoric of character education can be heard. Local communities and grass roots parent coalitions are imploring schools and civic leaders to support the development of character in our youth. Numerous states have begun to implement character education initiatives, some spurred on by Federal Legislation and funding (e.g., Utah, California) and others by local interest (e.g., Wisconsin). And, in his 1997 State of the Union Address, President Clinton emphasized the national need for character education as one of ten central points about education reform, "*Character education must be taught in our schools. We must teach children to be good citizens.*"

One is led, obviously enough, to query why such a groundswell of interest and support has emerged. Clearly there are multiple reasons for it. First, it is partially a reaction against the popularly cited statistics about the deteriorating state of youth in our society (Damon, 1988; Lickona, 1991; Wynne & Ryan, 1993). Second, it is a response to the declining confidence in the family to deal effectively with problems of youth misbehavior (Damon, 1995; Magid & McKelvey, 1987). Third, it is a product of more politically "ecumenical" approaches to the issue of character education. Groups such as the Character Education Partnership and the Communitarian Network have worked diligently to bring together multi-partisan coalitions that previously had focused largely on their differences, effectively precluding success in wide-scale implementation of character education.

This third point raises an historically contentious issue; i.e., the longstanding animosity between different schools of thought on the how to raise and educate future good citizens (Bennett, 1991; Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972; Piaget, 1965; Wynne & Ryan, 1993). Certainly this conflict is neither new nor unique to the United States, as the death of Socrates can amply demonstrate. Nevertheless, the futility of much of the efforts to make a national impact over the past century underscores the need to examine why so many well-intentioned educators, parents, and civic leaders fell so far short of their mark in trying to positively influence the moral formation of our youth. A comprehensive analysis of this dynamic is well beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, only a few insights will be offered. Then the discussion will turn to one focal point of contention; i.e., the role of content in moral or character education.

Sources of Contention

The competitive relationships between differing schools of thought about the moral formation and education of youth are borne from a variety of sources. Only five sources of contention will be highlighted here, far short of an exhaustive list.

First, differing approaches to the issue tend to disagree on the basic nature of the moral person; i.e., on the psychological characteristics of morality. This issue is particularly important because one's assumptions about moral nature define the outcomes that are to guide interventions. Is a good child a compliant, submissive, docile and obedient child? Or is a good child inquisitive, challenging, and as-

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sertive? To what degree is conformity to be valued? Are the key indices of success to be seen in the overt behavior of the child (such as cooperation, a lack of cheating, spontaneous helping, etc.)? Or are they to be measured by more intangible characteristics such as personality traits, reasoning capacities, and affective response tendencies? In another discussion, I have attempted to describe the *anatomy of the moral person* as a complex composite of these and other characteristics (Berkowitz, 1995), pointing out that the major flaw of most approaches is not incorrectness, but incompleteness.

A second point of contention has to do with the means of nurturing the development of whatever outcomes one endorses. Clearly this issue is largely derivative of the first point. Different methods are warranted for different goals. If, for example, one merely wants to control behavior, then more behavioristic methods (e.g., reward and punishment) would be warranted. Hence some models rely more on authoritarian external controls and standards (Wynne & Ryan, 1993) while others tend to focus on cooperative democratic methods that empower students (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Even here, as Peters (1981) has argued, the problem again may be more one of myopic incompleteness than of misguidedness. Based on an Aristotelian model, Peters argues that more externally oriented approaches may be more appropriate with younger children and more collaborative egalitarian approaches may be more appropriate as the children mature.

A third point of contention concerns the source of moral formation. Does goodness come from within? That is, it is a predisposition or principal potential of the human condition? Or is it something that must be imposed from outside, in essence to subjugate the innate antisocial nature of human beings? There are widely disparate perspectives on this issue and each different perspective greatly influences how one selects both methods and outcomes for a character education project. This issue will be expounded upon in a later section of this paper.

Fourth, to make matters worse, there is the ever present problem of language. Already the astute reader can note that I have alternated between the terms moral education and character education. These terms are not fully arbitrarily chosen, but there is indeed a degree of arbitrariness to them. At times they are chosen simply because of current fancy. For instance, in Great Britain currently the term of choice is *values education*. In the United States it is *character education*, although for many *citizenship education* or *civic education* is the preferred term. In Japan, a popular term is *moralogy*. Not too long ago in the US, the term of choice was *moral education* and before that *values education*. Sometimes the rubric is selected for its political impact, and sometimes, but rarely, it is even chosen for conceptual reasons.

A fifth and final point of contention has to do with specificity. Some would define the domain of character education as encompassing all values that a person holds and all behaviors that impact on others. This might include adherence to arbitrary institutional rules (e.g., dress codes, hallway modes of behavior, etc.) or even to matters of personal taste (e.g., hair styles, food tastes, etc.). Others rely on a narrower definition, limiting the domain of character education to only those issues for which there is a clear moral focus (e.g., behaviors in which there are intrinsic consequences to others). Whether one relies on a narrow or broad definition of the scope of character education, it is clear that different domains of social behavior require different pedagogical methods (Nucci, 1982, 1989).

As noted, these are but some of the reasons for the past failure of character and moral education approaches to be wide-ranging, integrative, and effective. One more issue will be addressed here, and in much greater detail. That is the issue of the role of content in character and moral education

Content in Character Education

Perhaps the most frequently raised challenge to proposed moral education programs is "*Whose values?*". Polls consistently reveal that the vast majority of Americans support (in abstraction) moral education in the public schools, but when a specific proposal is made in a specific community, it invariably raises concerns about the content of the intervention. Some mistake moral education for sex education. Others fear it will be a form of religious education, while still others fear it will *not*. Some fear moral education will be a form of totalitarian mind control. All of these concerns, and others, center around *what will be taught*; i.e., the content of the proposed moral education curriculum.

Three basic approaches have been identified in dealing with this issue (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972). First, there is the **Indoctrinative** approach which presupposes a justified content (e.g., code of ethical behavior, list of values or character traits) and proposes to *teach* that content by a variety of methods. Traditional character education approaches tend to fall in this category (e.g., Wynne & Ryan, 1993). The second approach is the **Romanticist** approach. The individual is assumed to have an innate tendency to develop into a moral agent; the role of education is to provide the nurturant context in which this natural "flowering" can occur. Imposing a specific content is anathema to the Romanticist approach. An example would be the values clarification approach (Raths, Harmin, & Simon, 1966). The third approach is the **Cognitive-structural** approach. It focuses on the construction of moral reasoning capacities, which are understood to be a product of the interaction of one's genetic, developmental, and biological endowments with one's experience with the physical and social worlds. Content is largely ignored as the focus is on reasoning structures and decision-making processes. Proposed curricula do not endorse specific content; rather they provide the opportunity to apply one's reasoning to a variety of contents. Here content is used as a catalyst for producing development. Kohlberg's Just Community schools are ex-

amples of this approach (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989).

Hence we have three quite discrepant approaches to the role of content in moral education. The Indoctrinative approach embraces the teaching of content; in fact, the acquisition of this content is the goal of Indoctrinative moral education, typically highlighting a list of values or virtues that serve as the core of the curriculum. The Romanticist approach avoids providing moral content; it considers content to be idiosyncratic and to be latent in the individual. The Cognitive-structural approach views content as a pedagogical tool; a means to an end. This difference lies at the heart of much of the perceived incompatibility of diverse approaches to moral education. A core issue in disentangling this issue is the concept of moral relativism.

All three approaches have been "accused" of promoting relativism and they tend to reciprocally "accuse" each other of the same failing. Kohlberg has claimed that the Indoctrinative approach is relativistic because of what he labels the problem of the "bag of virtues" (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972). He claims that such approaches always face the problem of justifying why they chose a particular set of values or virtues from a very large pool. He felt that such decisions were inevitably ethically unjustifiable. The Indoctrinative approach has labeled both the cognitive-structural and Romanticist approaches as relativistic (Gow, 1980). It is argued that by *not* advocating a specific content set, these two approaches covertly endorse an ethical position that there is *no* absolute right or wrong. For example, they argue that by using open-ended dilemmas to promote development, such approaches are subtly suggesting that the right answer to such dilemmas is ultimately unknowable (Sommers, 1992).

The problem with this seeming circularity is that content has been assumed to be either intrinsically non-relativistic or intrinsically relativistic. Kohlberg assumed that the incorporation of content *had to be* ethically arbitrary. Only structure (reasoning) could be universal; specific content could not. Indeed, the advocacy of content was seen to pervert the potential of peer egalitarian discussion for promoting moral reasoning development. There was an assumed trade-off: more content meant less stage development and vice versa. Character educators and values educators from the Indoctrinative tradition, on the other hand, assumed that a content-less program *must* suggest to the students that any answer to a moral problem is equally justifiable.

Herein lies not only the problem, but also the opportunity, for a solution. Kohlberg failed to accept that ethical philosophy can justify content as well as structure. And the Indoctrinative educators failed to accept the fact that open-ended discussion can be done in an ethically evaluative context.

It should be noted that these positions tend to represent the rhetoric more than the practice of moral education. Kohlberg (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989) recognized both the potential and inevitability of teacher advocacy of certain values and behaviors, and incorporated them into his "Just Community" school model. And many Indoctrinative model programs include peer discussion of moral concerns, and do not rely solely on adult advocacy.

Integrating Content and Structure into Moral Education

The critical issue in evaluating the relativism of a moral education approach is not *whether or not* it relies on a specific content. Rather it hinges on *how that content is justified*. For those educators who try to identify a content list for their moral education programs, there tend to be two major strategies. The first is to generate a local consensus. Typically this is done by committee. Such committees tend to vary on the degrees to which they are representative or expert; i.e., the degrees to which they profess to represent a cross-section of the community or to which they represent expertise in the area of moral and character education and development. For example, many school districts will form a representative committee, composed frequently of teachers, administrators, parents, students, clergy, and other stakeholders. They will be charged with generating a list of values and/or character traits around which the moral education program can center. Sometimes this process can be short-circuited by adopting the results of another community's deliberations, with or without editing.

This is by far the most popular approach. Recently the Wisconsin State Superintendent of the Department of Public Instruction, John Benson, appointed a state-wide representative committee, the Wisconsin Citizenship Initiative Task Force, charged in part to "*list, define, and recommend a core set of citizenship values essential to our society that need to be part of every child's school, home, and community experiences*." In the final report of the Task Force they list the core set of citizenship values as Courage, Honesty, Respect, and Responsibility (Individual and Civic).

Two examples of more expert committees are the Josephson Institute's 1992 Youth Summit Conference in the United States and the 1996 National Forum for Values in Education and the Community in the United Kingdom. The former generated the now fairly well known set of 6 values that have become the *Six Pillars of Character*, which are included in federal education legislation. Those values are Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring, and Citizenship. The UK committee generated a separate list of values for each of four domains: Society (e.g., truth, human rights, law), Relationships (e.g., others for themselves), The Self (e.g., each person is a unique being of intrinsic worth), The Environment (e.g., duty to maintain a sustainable environment for the future). They specifically concluded that whereas "*there could be no consensus on...the source of the values [nor]...how to apply the values...a consensus could be reached on the values themselves.*"

The second approach is to try to identify a "universal" set of values and/or character traits. Such a set is assumed to be ethically justified, usually based on philosophical analy-

sis. This is rarely done, however. One example where it was done was for the Community of Caring approach, which employed ethical philosophy to justify the five universally-accepted values of Care, Responsibility, Respect, Trust, and Family. Sometimes, however, the assumption of universality is more tenuous. For example, the 1992 Josephson Institute "Six Pillars of Character" were judged to be universally valid, based upon the diversity and expertise of the group formulating them, and upon the process of democratic discussion used to generate the final list. Clearly these six values of the Josephson Aspen Declaration (Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring and Citizenship) are quite parallel to those of the Community of Caring. This suggests two points. First, expert (and even representative) agreement typically leads to very similar conclusions about consensual values. Second, these similarities do not guarantee justifiable claims of universality. For instance, the most controversial of the Josephson values was Citizenship. This is so because it connotes for many blind loyalty to the community. If such loyalty is not subordinate to ethical values and principles, then one is considered to be universally required to adhere to even obviously despicable community actions and values. We need not look to such blatant examples as Nazi Germany for confirmation of this problem, but instead to our own backyards in Waco (TX), Tigerton Dells (WI), and many other local havens for racist and fanatic communities.

The problems of universality and cultural relativism are perhaps most evident in the report of the Wisconsin Task Force cited above. The Task Force claimed to be identifying "*universal values*" through "*consensus*." In the same paragraph they asserted both that "*there is a core set of citizenship values essential to our democratic society*" and that "*each community needs to identify the core set of citizenship values important to them.*" If the values are universal, then why should a new set be generated by each community? And if each community is given *carte blanche* to do so, by what criteria and processes do we preclude the government sanctioning of undesirable values such as child abuse, white supremacy, and terrorism? These are difficult questions and the are rarely answered or even addressed for that matter. Some counterarguments are as follows. First, the local process of creating and endorsing core values is a means of insuring participation and commitment from the local community. This is clearly a valuable goal. Second, local value generation will rarely differ from more centralized control of core values. This is empirically true, but though the risk is low in probability, it is very high in effect. Third, the building of communities is a greater good that needs to be integrated into this process (Etzioni, Berkowitz, & Wilcox, 1994). This Communitarian approach is certainly a viable and popular one, but not without its controversial aspects. It still fails to adequately address the problem of dysfunctional communities.

Religion and Content

One area where the issue of the relativism vs. universalism of content in character education is very prominent is in the role of religion in public education in the United States. This is a complex issue. First, at least in the United States, religion is highly restricted in public schooling. Hence a reliance upon overtly religious content or religious justifications for content could be quite problematic. Second, again most notably in this society, we live in a highly pluralistic world. Religious diversity is quite predominant and increasingly so. Third, and derivative of the prior point, it is unclear whether religion as a justification for moral content is representative of the local (religious community) consensus approach to moral content or of the universal philosophical approach.

When one is functioning *within* a homogeneous religious community (e.g., in a Catholic school), then the issue is moot. Religious moral content is both expected and accepted. When one is functioning in a religiously diverse context, however, the problem is often insurmountable. Some groups, resort to the political blueprints of our society (e.g., the Declaration of Independence) to avoid religious justifications. Others struggle with how to incorporate religion into the public schools. The Williamsville (NY) school district, for example, recently tried to eliminate all religious activities, events, references, etc. from the schools due to the increasing diversity of their community. They eventually had to switch their tactics and try a religious diversity curriculum instead, in which different faith traditions were given their own places in the life of the school. This becomes rather tricky as comparisons are inevitable and often evaluative. This is exacerbated by the tendency to confuse the moral and non-moral dimensions of religion, even though people intuitively treat them differently (Nucci, 1989).

One solution to the problem of religious content is to first differentiate those aspects of religion that are intrinsically moral (e.g., proscriptions about killing) from those that are matters of religious convention (e.g., dietary codes). Additionally, at least in secular and public schools, the moral values and rules of religions require philosophical justification, and cannot be justified merely on the basis of religious authority. This serves as part of the model more generically for dealing with the role of content in moral education.

Suggestions for Resolving the Problems of Content and Relativism

I will offer four areas of resolution that may aid in integrating content into character education without falling prey to forwarding an ethically relativistic agenda (Sommers, 1992). These four areas are Justification, Domain, Application, and Moral Psychology.

Justification

Ultimately, if one is to be truly moral about moral education, there must be a justification for content that transcends local "tastes". In most cases this is really not a functional need, but a theoretical need. That is so because most communities tend to be well-intentioned and end up with

highly similar lists of values, quite parallel to those in the Aspen Declaration or the Community of Caring. However this is not *necessarily* so. One can readily imagine a community that is relatively homogeneous and holds beliefs that are immoral (e.g., white supremacy, child pornography). The value consensus that such a community would likely generate would not fulfill philosophical criteria for ethical universality; criteria such as the Principle of Generalization (Would you want all people to act this way?), the Golden Rule, or the Principle of Reciprocity (If you were in the other party's shoes, would it still be a good moral rule?). Such rules must be differentiated from the criteria for identifying, for example, objective truth (e.g., formal logic, scientific methodology). Whereas, it is certainly not non-controversial, nonetheless it is probably the predominant position in philosophy that one must differentiate between fact and morality (between *is* and *ought*). Empirical evidence is relevant to questions of truth, but it is typically held that it is not a basis for moral prescriptions.

Hence, philosophically, the local consensus approach to justifying ethics is not acceptable, whereas practically it may very well suffice in most situations. In fact, as noted above, the local consensus model brings with it many positive side benefits, mostly relating to commitment and community building. It therefore seems imprudent to argue that a select set of "philosopher-kings" should pontificate about what ought to be the single set of universal values that guide all school curricula. On the other hand, it is patently unjustifiable to allow all communities to generate whatever set of value they see fit. The solution would be to allow communities to generate consensual guidelines, but to require justification of their validity beyond mere local agreement. The values must be put to some philosophical tests before they can receive the "stamp of universality."

Domain

Unfortunately, there is yet another distinction that we must address in attempting to generate an integration of content and structure in moral education. We have already alluded to this distinction a couple of places in this paper, but have not expounded upon it fully. Turiel and his colleagues (Laupa & Turiel, 1995) have attempted to differentiate **moral** concerns from other (**social conventional** and **personal**) concerns. They argue that the moral domain concerns matters of welfare, justice, and rights; matters that are intrinsically right and not alterable by consensus. Such matters are fixed and unalterable. The moral domain is contrasted with the domain of social conventions and the personal domain. Social conventions are "behavioral uniformities which coordinate interactions of individuals within social systems... Conventions are relative to the societal context, and may be altered by consensus or general usage within a social system" (p. 459). The examples given above about religious issues, killing and dietary laws, are respectively, examples of moral and social conventional values. The personal domain includes matters that are outside the authority of others. They are matters of personal preference.

Unfortunately, these distinctions are rarely considered by moral educators (Nucci, 1982). As a result, many so-called moral education programs actually include moral and social-conventional content. This is a problem because these social domains are justified differently, should be evaluated differently, and are often intuitively understood differently by both students and teachers.

Application

All to often, the eager character educator is left with merely a list of values or character traits that are to serve as the core of character education. Clearly, an effective program will need to be built on more than a skeleton such as that. The British National Forum for Values mentioned previously asserted that "*the statement of values should not be seen simply as an exercise in abstract moral reasoning...the values should be presented in such a way as to exhibit the relationship between values and behaviour.*" And in that spirit, for each of their four areas of valuing they offer "*Principles for action*" that are intended to offer guidance as to how those values should be manifested in action.

Other examples of attempts to add substance to the skeletal lists of values at the heart of most character education programs are fairly common. For instance, the Josephson Institute has continued to flesh out their *Six Pillars of Character* with detailed descriptions of the components of each. Wynne and Ryan (1993) offer a long specific checklist of behaviors that should be manifest in a school that embodies their concept of character education.

Moral Psychology

Moral psychology suggests that to function as a moral agent requires a fairly broad diversity of psychological characteristics. As I have detailed this analysis elsewhere (Berkowitz, 1995; in press), I will only describe it very briefly here. To be a fully moral person requires more than merely holding a set of values or character traits. I have intentionally avoided the terminological problems of even defining the relations between values and character. Others have attempted to do this, but for the sake of this discussion let it suffice to define values as affectively-charged beliefs and character traits as enduring tendencies to act in certain specific ways. Beyond values and character traits, one also requires moral emotions (e.g., guilt, compassion) and moral reasoning (i.e., the ability to figure out what is morally right or wrong in a given situation). It is the latter to which Cognitive-structural approaches to moral education are directed. Finally, one also needs, at least from adolescence on but likely sooner in a more rudimentary form, a moral identity. This concept refers to a self-reflective and evaluative sense of the self as a morally adequate person. Such a sense will guide the selection of goals and methods.

Given this model of the complete moral person, it should become somewhat clear that the values or character traits that we have been discussing are actually part of a much larger educational agenda. Whereas Kohlberg (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972) argued that including character and values in moral education undermined the universality of the enterprise, it should now be clear that (1) values can

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be justified as universal and (2) both reasoning and values are parts of a larger and more psychologically justifiable agenda for character education. Additionally, it should also be clear that omitting the intentional focus on fostering the development of moral reasoning capacities is likewise a perversion of moral nature. The most effective models of character education are those that recognize the complexity of human moral nature and attempt to be multi-faceted in their approaches. Excellent examples come from the Child Development Project (Watson, Solomon, Battistich, Schaps, & Solomon, 1989) and Tom Lickona (Lickona, 1991). In other words, by being less narrow, more philosophical and psychological, and less contentious, character education can not only avoid problems of ethical relativism, but be more effective in producing moral citizens.

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