# Character Education in Contemporary America: McMorals?

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Character education, the instruction of core ethical values and cultivation of good conduct in the classroom (McClellan, 1999), is increasingly being incorporated in public school curricula across the country. Over the last few years, schools in 48 states have introduced programs in character education as a means to nurture moral behavior among our youth (Gilbert, 2003). Public support for the addition of character education to school curricula is the strongest it has been since the 1950s (McClellan, 1999), and it is bolstered by a variety of statistics related to moral decline. An often-cited survey of 12,000 high school students conducted by the Josephson Institute of Ethics (2002) suggests that children are more likely to steal, cheat, shoplift, and lie to their teacher and parents than they were only a decade ago. Character educators contend that we are experiencing a national "crisis of character" that necessitates the inclusion of formalized curricula in character in public schools. Among the trends they identify are: rising youth violence, growing disrespect for parents, teachers and authority figures, the deterioration of language and increased levels of "self-destructive" behavior such as premature sexual activity, substance abuse and suicide are all presented by (Likona, 1996; Josephson Institute for Ethics, 2002).

In this era of purported moral decline, the federal government has taken up character education as a cause. Nothing can energize an academic field so strongly as a societal crisis revolving around the field's area of inquiry (Damon & Colby, 1996). So it is with character education. On January 8, 2002, President Bush signed into law the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB). Much has been written about the strict academic achievement standards imposed in NCLB and their effect within schools across the country. Less frequently noted, however, is the fact that NCLB has tripled federal funding for character education, to nearly $25 million. The funding is being used to both expand the implementation of character education programs, as well as to evaluate their effectiveness.

Thus, for many children, the "hidden curriculum" (Jackson, 1968) is being shifted

to a central, more structured place in their daily lives. In this essay, I will explore the extent to which contemporary character education programs are being provided through a "McDonaldization" model. My thesis is that federal sponsorship of character education programs through NCLB has the potential to lead us to what I define as an era of "McMorals." Increasing pressure to fit character education into the national standards movement in education and to employ and fund only "effective" techniques poses a great risk because it ignores the complexity of character development and the importance of acknowledging and working within situational constraints and cultural complexities that naturally affect the process of character development.

Ritzer (2000) defines "McDonaldization" as:

> The process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world. (Ritzer, 2000, 1)

He argues that the effects of McDonaldization on our culture have been profound, and that the fast-food operating principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control have become cultural values around which much of our lives are centered. The movement to integrate character education in public school in more formal ways is, in fact, characterized by many of the advantages common to McDonaldization in other industries, including: goods and services are more widely available; the availability of goods and services is not location dependent; people can get what they want instantaneously; goods and services acquire a more uniform quality; fast, efficient good and services are available to a population with less hours to spare; because of quantification, consumers can more easily compare competing products; and goods and services are of a more uniform quality (Ritzer, 2000, 15-6).

I must preface this analysis by noting that I am a proponent of character education. The literature on college students suggests they exist in a culture where "wrong is right." Surveys demonstrate that college students cheat regularly and that they perceive that faculty do not notice or do not care (McCabe, 1999). Similar trends have been documented at the high school level. A recent study of 4,500 students in public and private high schools across the country found that 72 percent reported one or more instance of "serious cheating" on written work (McCaffrey, 2001). As both an educator and a parent, I support the movement to put discussions of character at the center of our national educational agenda. Although the statistics on moral decline are questioned by some (Kohn, 1998; Hunter, 2000), it is essentially impossible to avoid issues of character in the classroom. Therefore, we must be explicit in our decisions about the ways in which we will provide it.

With this said, I write this essay from a position of great concern. In essence, the introduction of formalized character education into public school curricula alters the educational process. What are the effects of making the "hidden curriculum" visible? Much has been written and discussed about the curricular content of character

education programs. I will not address these concerns here. Rather, I will focus on the *process* by which we have chosen to provide instruction in character "for the masses." What are the long-term consequences of altering the processes by which our children learn character? Is it possible that the outcome of school-based character education instills our children with a view of character that is situation-specific? Does school-based character education supplant or support moral conversations in the home? What will the implications be as our schools increasingly provide character education through models that emphasize efficiency, calculability, predictability and control? These are some of the important questions I will address in this essay.

By incorporating funding for character education in NCLB, we have taken the amorphous concept of character and allied it with legislation that emphasizes achievement, quantitative outcome assessment and penalties for schools that fail to perform. There is a long history of measuring academic outcomes. Not so for the "hidden curriculum." We are entering new territory, and I am fearful that the temptation to simplify character will be too great. We are increasingly looking to schools to serve as "surrogate parents" when it comes to moral education (Wilson 1995: 2). The provision of funds for character education in NCLB, with it's orientation to "proven methods" suggests that the expectations for outcomes with respect to character education will be high. The character education "industry," as this seems to be what it is rapidly becoming, is increasingly orienting itself to a McDonaldization model. The development of character, when it is driven by principles of efficiency, control, predictability and calculability is a dangerous undertaking. Here, I will consider the many potential pitfalls we may encounter as we move into this uncharted territory.

## Efficiency

A primary principle of McDonaldization is efficiency: using the optimum method for getting from one point to the other (Ritzer, 2000, 12). The goal of efficiency is evident in contemporary approaches to incorporating character education into public school curricula. The increased demand for school-based instruction in character has led to the development of standard curricular packages offered by a plethora of organizations and institutes. As Rusnack and Ribich (1997) note:

> A teacher need only open the professionally assembled box and follow the study guide. Occasionally it is necessary to distribute a few pre-made handouts, sprinkle in some wholesome conversation about honesty, respect and responsibility, and reinforce the lesson with a scattered story or two about values. All is right with the world! It's quick, efficient, simple, and easy to use. (11)

Such "pre-packaged" curricula in character offer the advantage of making character education programs accessible to a wider audience. The development of character is a complex process, no doubt made easier by the provision of a common curriculum

which can be used as the basis for the creation of a shared language that is utilized throughout the school. Yet, as Likona (1993) argues virtually everything that goes on in the classroom affects the values and character of students.

Thus, one possible outcome is that formalized instruction in character education may intrude upon the "hidden curriculum," the more subtle instruction in values that teachers provide. Schools that emphasize instruction in a specific list of traits and values, for example, may experience a concurrent reduction in attention to issues such as role modeling and the creation of school climate which also serve to foster character (Milson, 2000). Likewise, "efficient" character education may destroy the complex interrelationship of factors that enhances moral development. This is not to say teachers will no longer serve as good role models, but rather that the shift to formalized character instruction will leave students with less time for informal observation and processing that are essential elements in character development. Even the most ardent proponents of formalized character education argue that isolated character education programs must be reinforced throughout the school because research demonstrates that curricular instruction in character does not build a child's deep understanding of values or provide occasions to act upon these values (Schaeffer, 2003).

Ironically, our current emphasis on efficient character education may ultimately encourage a kind of character development that is rooted in rote behavior. Some proponents of moral character argue that habit forms an important basis for moral behavior (Cole & Kiss, 2000). However, others have noted that morality is similar to language in that it changes with use, and there are many different languages or dialects that can be spoken (Shropshire, 1997). What are the consequences if the character education our children receive at school is never integrated into their daily lives? One possible response: they may come to perceive character as a commodity that is temporal and responsive to the setting in which they find themselves, rather than deeply engrained in their way of being. There are a plethora of examples in the media that might serve to reinforce this view, e.g., athletes and politicians who routinely practice dishonesty in their private lives but who retain their professional roles. These broader observations, concurrent with what Rusnack and Ribich (1997) refer to as the "character in a box" (p. 11) approach to providing character education may ultimately foster an alternative mindset among our youth: that ethics takes on a new, and different meaning outside school walls.

Another potential backlash related to the proliferation of efficient school-based character education programs is the possibility that formalized character education will be perceived as *the solution,* rather than as an important *part* of the solution. Programs funded through the NCLB legislation must incorporate a parental component. This becomes increasingly difficult, however, with the growing number of dual-career and single-parent families. While the involvement of parents is optimal, it is definitely *not* efficient. Thus, the school may come to supplant a portion of the parents' role, rather than support it. Parental approval of character education has been documented (Josephson Institute for Ethics, 2000), however, scholars of

character education have yet to examine the implications of these programs for both the quality and quantity of moral conversation at home. While the NCLB legislation stresses parental integration, busy parents may perceive that they have fulfilled their role by attending a school meeting on character. Potentially more detrimental than neglect, however, is inconsistency. What happens when parents actively disagree with a specific value or "lesson" that has been taught in the school setting and, in essence, contradict school-based instruction at home? The answer to this question is complex, and may certainly prove disruptive to 'efficient' instruction in character.

## Calculability

It is noteworthy that federal funding for character education has been incorporated within the NCLB legislation, with its primary emphasis on establishing standards for academic achievement. Concurrent with this funding, there has arisen a growing interest in assessing the effects of character education through formalized, largely quantitative evaluation studies (Berkowitz & Bier, 2003, 2004). NCLB prescribes that only programs that are based on scientific research will be eligible for federal funding (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). Researchers and educators in character education have responded promptly. The Character Education Partnership has received $350,000 in grant funds from the Department of Education to create an online resource for character education (Character Education Partnership, 2003). The web-based clearinghouse provides descriptions of curricula, assessment tools, and information on the latest research.

Few would argue against the need for scientific studies to assess the effectiveness of character education. This will be difficult, however, given the complex array of programs and varied effects they purport to yield. Congressional testimony in support of character education suggests it can be linked to: reductions in violence and school suspensions, increased academic achievement, school reform and an improved understanding of democratic values (House subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families, 2000). This despite the fact that:

> … educational experts have not yet been given the opportunity to develop these sound scientific conclusions. It is not even known where and how character education has found its greatest success. (*Congressional record* 2001 March 28: E475)

Others have concurred, describing evidence on the effectiveness of character education as "scant" and "anecdotal" (Hunter, 2000, 154).

If there is one point of consensus in the community of scholars researching character education it is this: character is a complex concept. Research designed to determine whether character education programs create fundamental changes in reasoning and behavior must then, in accordance with the goals of these programs, be multi-faceted. Simple measurements of behavioral disruptions, tardiness and school expulsions do not, in and of themselves, demonstrate changes in character.

Yet the vast majority of scientific research on character education outcomes has been quantitative (Berkowitz & Bier, 2003).

Policy makers in character education have expressed a particular interest in documenting the relationship between character education and academic outcomes (Fink & McKay, 1999; Schaeffer, 2003). This trend is clearly rooted in the theme of "calculability," as it will provide a potential mechanism for sustained federal interest and funding. There are inherent risks, however, in creating a link between character education and academic achievement in an NCLB framework that is founded on "scientific methods" and rooted in quantitative assessment. Several studies have documented that the burden to meet achievement standards has given rise to a new phenomenon in the classroom: teacher cheating (Kantrowitz & McGinn, 2000; Jacob & Levitt, 2002). While such cases are limited, it will certainly be ironic if formal assessment of character education outcomes produces similar results.

Assessing the effectiveness of character education is a complex process. It is difficult to know whether students who behave well in school will make the "right" choices in the world at large. To truly document the effects of character education on students' character, assessment must be longitudinal and it must examine behaviors that occur both in and out of school. Observations of "real world" behaviors will be necessary in order to fully understand whether the lessons of character taught in the classroom have been fully incorporated into students' behavioral repertoires. Although Fink and McKay (1999) note that 'paper and pencil' tests cannot be used to assess aspects of character, it is questionable whether federal or local authorities will be willing to make the financial and time commitments necessary to fully analyze the effects of character education in these ways.

Of course, my comments presume that the agenda for character education is, in fact, to produce such long-term and fundamental changes in character. There is an alternative scenario: that demonstrating short-term, immediate behavioral change (e.g., a reduction in school violence during the year) will be enough to sustain the character education movement. This seems possible since funding for character education has already been increased in the absence of hard data. While reductions in school violence are certainly worth pursuing, they are not indicative that character education is fulfilling its broader mandate. Perhaps we are simply deferring problems to other settings, or later time points. Despite these unknowns, the perpetuation of a "one size fits all" approach to implementing and assessing character education looms increasingly likely in an era where the future of character education is tied to academic achievement in a model that emphasizes quantitative results.

## Predictability

Our "McDonaldized" culture strives for predictability: the assurance that products and services will be the same over time and in all locations. "The success of the McDonald's model suggests that many people have come to prefer a world

in which there are few surprises" (Ritzer, 2000, 13). It seems odd to expect predictability in character. Yet despite the many organizations that offer curricular programs for character education in schools (Rusnak & Ribich, 1997), and the wide array of outcomes they arguably produce, the lack of variability among character education curricula is striking. The various templates through which programs in character education are provided all share one commonality: they reduce character to a set of limited principles or values that can be modeled and taught through classroom exercises and procedures. As we read through short lists of values and virtues and the processes for instilling them in our children and classrooms, the solution to our "moral crisis" is, on the surface, simplified.

> Community is different from consensus. To have community, there must be struggles, trials, successes and failures…These are the things that give values their depth and separate them from mere opinion, (Noblit et al., 1996, 206)

Since programs in character education are necessarily rooted in our culture, they are ultimately designed to legitimate it rather than transform it (Hunter, 2000).

Many public school character education programs operate using a system of rewards and punishments. Assemblies are held, and children are publicly acknowledged for positive behaviors. In the real world, however, the rewards of positive behavior are often intrinsic, rather than extrinsic. Likewise, "doing the right thing" (e.g., whistle blowing) often entails going *against* the prevailing organizational wisdom, rather than dutiful compliance with organizational mandates. Kohn (1998) argues that there is considerable body of research indicating that children who are rewarded for prosocial choices such as helping someone, are less likely than other children to repeat the behavior. In sum, our striving for 'predictability' in character may not necessarily produce consistent results because of our tendency to disregard the complex of interrelationship between moral thought social actions.

Again, however, we must return to a discussion of the goals of character education. Kohn (1998) notes that character education can essentially be narrowed down to a set of behavioral guidelines that is intended to create compliant children. He argues that the purpose of many character education programs is to drill students in specific behaviors. Thus, rather than providing them with opportunities for deep thought and reflection on moral choices, children are inspired to act in accordance with prescribed guidelines as a kind of "reflex" reaction to the training they have received.

If we emphasize predictability of outcomes in the development of character education programs, we can almost be assured that our children will not experience opportunities for moral growth through formalized character education. Our society is characterized by what Wilson (1995) describes as "moral dualisms": what we define as 'right' and 'wrong' is not necessarily what we put into practice. Outside the school setting, where social norms sometimes do not function as effectively as "school rules" to constrain behavior, children are left to make sense of which set of morals they should act upon and when. If they have not been given the chance to practice

moral decision making in the absence of institutional constraints, they may lack the ability to make "good choices" because their "bad behaviors" have simply been inhibited. Hunter (2000) notes the ultimate aim of moral education is to liberate students from the constraints of social order, rather than to teach adaptation or conformity. However, to a large extent, our public schools have always rewarded conventionality. The consequences of moral predictability are certainly advantageous for teachers and schools. But will they be beneficial to society?

## Control

Perhaps the most pivotal question in relation to the implementation of school-based character education is this: whose behavior is it intended to control? Our "McDonaldized" model for creating character has the potential to restrict conduct in many ways. Behaviors and interactions between students, teachers and families are all potentially affected. I will elaborate on the possible consequences for each of these constituent groups below.

The most obvious goal of formalized character education programs is to alter the thinking and behavior of students. Through McDonaldization, customers are controlled in various ways: they receive cues that indicate what is expected of them; structural constraints force them to behave in certain ways; and thus, they come to exhibit internalized taken-for-granted norms which they follow when they enter the fast-food restaurant (Ritzer, 2000, 113). In essence, these principles encourage a reduction in complex thought on the customers' part: I observe a prompt, and I respond automatically.

Standardized programs in character education employ these same strategies. Many pre-packaged character education curricula are accompanied by bright posters and educational pamphlets which can be posted throughout the school. A large sign, emblazoned with the word "respect" certainly provides a distinct behavioral cue. The Character Counts! program (Josephson Institute for Ethics, 2004) offers "gotcha tickets" which can be awarded to students as they are witnessed demonstrating behaviors consistent with one of the desired "pillars of character." Each of these tangible items is designed to reinforce values that are reiterated in the curriculum and to reward desirable behaviors in such a way that they become almost automatic.

The McDonaldization principle of control can also be applied to teachers who are charged with putting character education into practice in the classroom. As "employees," teachers in schools where formal character education curricula are implemented may be asked to both teach character education differently, and to document its effects. These added responsibilities may produce increased stress related to a lack of clarity regarding obligations, rights, objectives, status or accountability (Byrne, 1999). Likewise, teachers may experience at least some uncertainty in terms of their disciplinary role as the school moves toward a system

where responses to both good and bad behaviors must be standardized throughout the school to a certain extent, if the program is to be effective.

While the literature suggests that teachers tend to support character education, they also express different opinions about what it should include, and how it should be taught (Mathison, 1998). The effect of character education on teachers may ultimately be analogous to the infusion of technology in the fast food restaurant. At McDonald's, the cook is not charged with determining when the French fries are ready; rather the computer is programmed to lift them from the oil at a predetermined time. For teachers, the emphasis on standardization and measurable outcomes in character education may lead to reductions in autonomy. To a certain extent, control of the "hidden curriculum" is shifted to administrators who assume responsibility for imparting *THE* character education program to faculty. We know that worker deskilling in the industrial setting can lead to alienation and increased dissatisfaction with work (Braverman, 1974). It will be important to observe and understand the experiences of teachers implementing formal character education programs over time in order to ensure that they do not become estranged from this important part of their role.

People are the greatest threat to the predictability and control inherent in McDonaldization (Ritzer, 2000). While character educators describe their primary audience as children, some have acknowledged, "We do not have a youth problem in our country; we have an adult problem" (Hearing before the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families, 2000, 7). NCLB incorporates parental involvement as an essential element of effective character education, and consequently, many schools seek to foster the commitment of parents and to engage them in an ongoing dialogue on character. Is the goal of parent involvement policies, however, to include parents or to alter their attitudes towards character as well? If we truly have an "adult problem," it seems unlikely that school-based programs will be adequate to counteract the causes of moral decline. Yet it is plausible that the language of character provided in school-based programs will naturally find its way home and perhaps gradually, as this generation comes of age, into our social institutions in such a way that it will ultimately provide a framework for national conversations of character.

## Conclusion: McMorals?

The proliferation of character education may stem from the fact that it offers "something for everyone." The proponents of character education outline an expansive set of goals. On March 1, 2000, as he opened the Subcommittee Hearing on the "Role of Character Education in America's Schools," Congressman Michael N. Castle noted:

> … some children lack basic values that would not only help them to avoid unwanted pregnancies, drugs, alcohol and violence, but also teach them the importance of being respectful and honest. Today every teacher and every student can articulate the

> consequences of this neglect. The recent rash of school shootings is one example, but so is the low voter turn-out among young people and their lack of involvement in community organizations. As a result, many Americans are looking to character education as one possible solution to the problems that plague our classrooms and communities, (House Subcommittee on Early Childhood Youth and Families, 2)

Castle's comments demonstrate the range of expectations that character education programs are typically designed to fulfill. Recurring themes that emerge during Congressional consideration of character education include reducing school violence, providing discipline, increasing academic achievement and instilling the values of civic mindedness and citizenship. Thus, not only is character education charged with instilling moral habits, it must enhance classroom performance and be comprehensive enough to create good citizens and a sense of community. These goals are multi-faceted and complex however, policy makers continue to look to character education as a panacea for restoring social order.

The provision of funds for character education in NCLB, with its orientation to scientific methods suggests that the expectations for quantifiable outcomes in character will be high. Will we enter an era where educators are held accountable for the "character performance" of their students? In a time when schools must produce annual report cards to document academic progress, to what degree will character education become another important outcome to be measured? The contemporary shift to school-based moral education, coupled with the ongoing emphasis on standards and assessment in our national educational policy has created a ripe set of circumstances for the evolution of "McMorals": character development that is guided by the principles of efficiency, predictability, calculability and control. The extent to which this system will simultaneously foster critical thinking skills that form the basis for complex moral reasoning remains unclear.

A "McDonaldized" approach to character education, with efficient methods, calculable products, predictable programming and controlled results is imbued with great risk. Schwartz (1999) argues that our society suffers from a loss of family structure as a guiding force. We are increasingly turning to social institutions to replace functions once fulfilled in the family.

> The general wail of being overwhelmed and emotionally isolated transcends class, income and ideology… Several cultural trends are converging: the fear of family failure, disconnection and disorder, the recognition that extended family help and interaction has been greatly modified for everyone except first or second generation Americans in some poorer communities….The loss of neighborhood, city and even regional community remains mostly unmeasured, but I believe it has had a huge impact on American society. (Schwartz, 1999, p. 3)

Proponents of character education will no doubt argue that it is a vehicle through which we might re-establish important connections between family and school. Research has demonstrated that there can be positive effects when parents, teachers and students are jointly involved in conversations around complex topics such as

social justice and prejudice (Jennings et al., 2002). A consensus between parent, child and teacher on such issues is clearly optimal. Yet, legislators and policy makers appear to be more focused on reaching an agreement on *what* is taught in character education curricula, rather than *how* it is taught. In the end, the process may detrimentally affect the product.

My primary concern is this: recognizing that creativity is thwarted in systems characterized by repetitive and externally imposed demands (Ritzer, 2000), will standardized character education impose upon us a generation of children who prefer habitual moral action over thoughtful moral reasoning? Certainly, this is a potentially devastating outcome in an era where we face a growing number of issues characterized by high levels of moral complexity. It is these 'unintended consequences' (Hunter, 2000) of character education—its impact on the development of moral thinking and the quality of moral conversations in the home—that warrant our immediate attention. That character education can produce positive behavioral changes in school is good, but it is not good enough. If we fail to comprehensively assess whether formalized character education affects the ways in which our children develop character and make ethical decisions in the real world, we risk displacing parents from the process of moral education, and worse, creating a generation of children who lack the skills to process complex moral problems. While this is not the goal of character educators, it may become an inevitable consequence of a movement designed to rationalize and quantify character development.

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