A Critique of Character Counts! as a Curriculum Model for Explicit Moral Instruction in Public Schools

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Introduction

Character Counts! is a "nonpartisan, nonsectarian coalition of schools, communities, and nonprofit organizations working to advance character education by teaching the Six Pillars of Character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship" (www.charactercounts.org). The coalition is a project of the Josephson Institute of Ethics, a nonprofit organization begun in 1987 whose aim is to "improve the ethical quality of society by advocating principled reasoning and ethical decision making" (ibid.). The institute conducts programs and workshops for legislators, community leaders, the media, law enforcement personnel, and businesses. It also promotes a "youth-education initiative" (ibid), and it is this project, especially the materials and activities developed for schools, which is the focus of this critique.

Character Counts! is strong in numbers as well as influence. There are 457 member organizations nationwide, including the NEA, the AFT, the American Association of Community Colleges, and the YMCA of the USA, as well as hundreds of school systems and Chambers of Commerce (ibid). One may infer potential political influence from the fact that the Josephson Institute prepared a "White Paper on Character Education" for the U.S. Presidential transition team (www.charactercounts.org/WHPaper12-23-00.htm). This document proposes policies for operationalizing the campaign proposals made by then-candidate Bush concerning character education. Five general "commitments" were gleaned from Mr. Bush's speeches, fact sheets, and executive summaries. The first commitment pertains directly to character education in school settings. "Increase character education funding to at least $24 million per year" (ibid.). Among the suggestions proposed by the Josephson Institute are to create a full time director of character education within the Department of Education. This position would have oversight responsibility for "design and implementation of a comprehensive and integrated program including a structure for awarding grants that includes accountability standards and evaluation requirements" (ibid). Another structure is proposed which would provide guidance for schools as they implement programs based on core elements of character. One may infer that these core elements are the Six Pillars of Character. Moreover, these programs will incorporate "character development outcome goals and strong accountability provisions" (ibid). Further, the White Paper advocates establishing "quality standards for effective character education and specific measurement tools to assess the effectiveness of funded programs" (ibid). And there is a caveat. Character education should be the responsibility of "an experienced administrator who knows how to deal with the fact that many educators embedded in the administrative bureaucracy have a bias towards 'values - neutral' approaches such as values clarification and may be uncomfortable with abstinence programs and faith-based organizations" (ibid).

It is possible, even likely, that "Character Counts!" may become the reigning paradigm for explicit moral curricula in public schools, and so it is imperative that this program be examined rigorously.

An Overview of the Character Counts! Curriculum

The Character Counts! web page offers for purchase a wide range of curriculum materials, products, and guides for setting up character development programs in a range of settings. The present inquiry will focus on materials designed for use in classrooms. These include *Character Education in America's Schools* (Terri Akin, Gerry Dunne, Susanna Palomares, Diane Shilling, 1995), *Good Ideas to Help Young People Develop Good Character* volumes I and II (Steven Nish, ed., 1996-1998), and the videotapes "How to Build Character in Children," "What You Should Know About the Six Pillars of Character," and "Strategies for Ethical Decision Making" (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 1996). The *Good Ideas* volumes contain lesson plans for preschool - twelfth grade, and the *Character Education* volume provides lesson plans designed for elementary schoolers. The videotapes provide the rationale behind Character Counts! and are aimed at adults who wish to initiate programs.

Character Counts! Rationale

The Introduction to *Character Education in America's Schools* asks the rhetorical question "Why Educate for Character?" (p.v). The answer reveals a dim view of contemporary American social life: "Because many homes do not" (ibid.). The authors briefly identify the home as "a big part of the problem" (ibid.), and they list some statistics - half of all children live in nontraditional families, including single parent homes and blended families. The claim is made that "statistics link the decline of the traditional nuclear family with rising teen pregnancy, school drop-outs, divorce rates, unemployment, poverty, and just about every other ill in our society" (ibid.). The authors believe even traditional families in which both parents work allow too many hours without parental supervision, during which their children spend lethargic hours watching sex and violence on television. These "stretched-to-the-limit working parents are not finding the time - or perhaps the will, or the skills" to be moral guides for their children (ibid.). The authors conclude that "somebody's got to do it" (ibid., p. 2), and so schools must step into the breach. They must do this by "teaching values deliberately - through the curriculum" (ibid.).

Character Counts! Content and Goals

The content of the Character Counts! curriculum consists of a list of core values which are to be deliberately taught, with the goal of developing good character in children. The core values are identified in the curriculum - trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and civic virtue and citizenship - were first proposed in the "Aspen Declaration on Character Education" (www.charactercounts.org/aspen.htm). This document was generated by a "diverse group of ethicists, educators and youth - service professionals" (ibid.) attending a conference sponsored by the Josephson Institute in 1992. The core values identified were assumed to "transcend cultural, religious, and socioeconomic differences" (ibid.). The Aspen list is referred to as the Six Pillars of Character in Character Counts! curriculum materials.

Character Counts! takes its working definition of character from Thomas Lickona's work *Educating for Character* (1991, Bantam Books). Good character is involves knowing, desiring, and doing the good and is exemplified by habits of thinking and feeling and doing (sound familiar?). Michael

Josephson expands on this definition by saying that "character is how you act when you think no one is looking . . . how you act when you think the other person can neither help you or hurt you" (How to Build Character in Children" 1996). Schools are advised to foster these habits by developing and making public a philosophy statement describing character expectations for all members of the school community, establishing clear academic and behavior goals for students, providing a discipline policy supporting the character goals, encouraging student participation in service projects, and providing a range of extracurricular activities (p.5), 1995). Teachers foster habits of good character by modeling the Six Pillars of Character, by explicitly stating character goals and using a vocabulary of character, by creating a cooperative and accepting learning environment, by using class discussion when problems arise, by teaching decision-making and conflict resolution skills, and by using academic subjects as a vehicle for reflective examination of moral issues (ibid., p. 7).

Michael Josephson states the ultimate goal of Character Counts! this way: "In essence the goal of character education is to build in the young the attitudes, habits, instincts, and predispositions toward doing what is right because it is right and not because it is advantageous" (1996).

Character Counts! Psychology of Learning

The view of the child as a moral agent is implicit in the emphasis on rules, sanctions, expectations, the importance of adult modeling, the kind of language used to describe the adult-child relationship, and the cumulative effect of the lesson plans themselves. Children are seen as plastic and impressionable, and they require a great deal of shaping from their environment. The White Paper says "Character education works best when it is pervasive, when core values are conscientiously and competently taught, enforced, advocated and modeled (p. 5). *Good Ideas* includes two pages of school wide activities which are designed to create and reinforce a pervasive awareness of the Six Pillars. These activities include having a Pillar of the month or week, including character messages on the morning announcements, installing a quotation of the week on the school marquee, lining hallways with character quotations and slogans, designing rules based on the Six Pillars, publicly recognizing students who model the Six Pillars, organizing service projects such as clothing drives, and selling paper character word links to form a chain of character as a fund-raising project. It is important to note that, according to Michael Josephson the goals of Character Counts! arise as a critique of values clarification and moral relativism (1996). Character Counts! is about "civilizing young people" and "understanding and living up to moral duties" (1996). Consequently, specific objective values must be identified. Children must be led and reinforced to recognize the good, to desire it and to habitually act upon it. Temptation is everywhere and so the will must be strengthened.

Interestingly, the work of Lawrence Kohlberg is called upon to provide a view of moral development. His work is not described in detail; rather a precis of his three general stages of development is provided in *Character Education in America's Schools: . . .* "elementary-age children are primarily concerned with their own survival - avoiding punishment and obtaining rewards by obeying the rules. Older children are motivated by the desire to gain approval from others (principally peers) and avoid disapproval. Only at the highest level of moral development are rules interpreted in terms of self-chosen principles"(p.2). One may infer that this reference to Kohlberg is used as information in creating effective reinforcement of children's behavior. Very few of the lesson plans presented make use of Kohlberg's method of reasoning through moral dilemmas as a way of developing moral judgment.

A Critique

Character Counts! falls into the venerable tradition of character education. Henry Giroux and David Purpel describe three general approaches to moral education: character education, values clarification, and the cognitive/developmental approach (*The Hidden Curriculum and Moral Education,* 1983). Character education is the oldest model, and proceeds by identifying a set or moral virtues which are ingrained from an early age through the formation of habits. Character is shaped through the use of modeling and external reinforcement and is assumed to be ultimately reliable and predictable. Character Counts! shares some weaknesses with character education as a general approach as well as some weaknesses particular to its rationale and lesson plans. In order to highlight the problems with this approach, the following discussion will contrast character education with Robert Coles' research on the moral life and the moral intelligence of children.

There are three major areas of concern, as well as several secondary concerns. The view of the child as a moral agent is not richly developed or complex and rests primarily on a model of immaturity and behavioral methods of compliance to a predetermined set of moral behaviors. A theory of learning is not clearly developed. It must be inferred from the collective lesson plans and activities as well as the referral to Lawrence Kohlberg's work. There are, thus, some confusing implications. A clear and complete theory of moral philosophy is lacking as well. A program of explicit moral education should attend to these matters in a more thoughtful way. A fourth area of concern, which goes beyond a critique of the Character Counts! materials is the implicit political view which positions nontraditional families and the public school bureaucracy as adversaries.

The Moral Agency of the Child and Learning

The most serious criticism of Character Counts! is that it fails to the child seriously as a moral agent. The quality and potential of children's thinking and the seriousness of children's authentic moral dilemmas and judgments take a back seat to the a priori Pillars of Character in which must be instilled at all cost in the uncivilized young. Let us look at the moral situation of a first grade child whom Robert Coles views as heroic - an example which challenges both Kohlberg's view of the young child's capacity for moral judgment and the view of the child as uncivilized. Ruby Bridges, as a solitary child of six, integrated her local elementary school in New Orleans in 1961. She was protected by Federal marshals from hostile, threatening crowds of adults as she made her way to school every day. Coles, in his role as a psychiatrist and social scientist, came to know Ruby and her family very well over the course of several years. Coles asked Ruby, from her vantage point as a ten year old, to look back at her first grade experience.

> "I knew I was just ruby," she told me once, in retrospect— "just Ruby trying to go to school, and worrying that I couldn't be helping my momma with the kids younger than me, like I did on the weekends and in summer. But I guess I also knew I was the Ruby who had to do it - go into that school and stay there, no matter what those people said, standing outside. And besides, the minister reminded me that God chooses us to do His will, and so I had to be His Ruby, if that's what He wanted. And then that white lady wrote and told me she was going to stop shouting at me, because she'd decided that I wasn't bad, even if integration was bad, then my momma said I'd become "her Ruby" - that lady's just as she said in her letter, and I was glad; and I was glad I got all the nice

letters from people who said I was standing up for them, and I was walking for them, and they were thinking of me, and I was their Ruby too, they said." *(The Moral Life of Children,* (1986), p.9)

A representative lesson plan from *Character Education in America's Schools* is entitled What Is Responsibility?. The teacher is directed to select either *The Little Engine That Could, Horton Hatches the Who,* or *The Wizard of Oz* to read to the children. After the story is read the teacher should ask questions such as "Who acted responsibly?" "How would you feel if you were _____?" "How do you feel about the characters who were irresponsible?" The teacher should also prepare a banner that reads "Responsible Action Is:" Children are directed to think of a story they like in which a character acted responsibly. They may draw a picture of the action and complete the sentence "Responsible action is . . ." (pp. 58-59)

Implicit in this comparison are two different views of the same age child as the moral agent. Coles describes Ruby as a "self-observer" (Coles, p. 9). He asks, "Was she not, utterly, and daily, a moral figure? A person able to find a measure of moral transcendence: comprehending, through language, the essence of what a human being can manage to be?" (ibid.) In this vignette, Ruby understands responsibility through the daily moral challenges of her real life. She can easily complete the sentence "Responsible action is . . ." from her own experience. She does not need to read and discuss *The Little Engine That Could* in order to get a story. Ruby clearly receives moral guidance from the adults around her, and she enjoys the letters of support. But the adults take her seriously as a moral agent. She is encouraged to be the Ruby who must "go in that school and stay there" (ibid.)

One could make an extended comparison of Coles accounts of the moral lives of against the didactic, behavioral approach inherent in the Character Counts! lesson plans and recommended school and classroom activities. But the single comparison is representative, and illustrates the point. Unless the children in Atlanta and Athens and Augusta are vastly different from the many whom Coles interviews, one must assume that they, like Ruby do interpret their world and their own actions in moral terms already. What they require is protection and guidance from adults who understand their lived experience and who take it seriously and are willing to have serious conversations about it.

A related criticism is that in its heavy reliance on external reinforcement, mostly in the form of social approbation for good deeds, the moral life risks trivialization: it becomes a series of unconnected acts responding to the word of the week or the citizen of the week. The moral life may become synonymous in the child's mind with obeying rules and vying for the monthly trustworthiness award. A system of character awards may also unintentionally foster self promotion and a boastful attitude. The Character Counts! lessons repeatedly require children to recount something they did which exemplified a pillar of character.

It must also be noted that a general problem with external reinforcement is the difficulty in sustaining a behavior once the external reinforcement is removed. If a goal is to live the good for its own sake, it is hard to see how a heavy reliance on external social reinforcement promotes this internalization. The psychology of the conscience and the insights of sociobiology concerning altruism ought to be a rich source of information, but these areas seem to be outside the world of discourse of character education. It is puzzling that Kohlberg's work is referred to, since his theoretical assumptions are quite different from those of the character development tradition. It may be that a piece of his theory

is used to justify the view of young children as uncivilized; i.e., incapable of principled moral reasoning. But this connection is not explained.

Justifying Explicit Moral Education

The arguments used for involving schools in explicit moral instruction have enormous social and political significance. In all the sources used in this critique, the argument is made that the United States is experiencing a moral decline. Moreover, this decline is linked with the decline of the traditional nuclear family. Certainly a criticism can be mounted against this facile generalization simply on the basis of erroneous social statistics and faulty reasoning. But the more interesting question is why such an argument is presented. Why is it necessary to demonize parents? Why are single parent families and blended families and families with two working parents singled out? Why, in fact, is it necessary to justify moral education using this particular argument?

The nontraditional family is not viewed as the only source of moral decline. The values clarification movement and those "educators embedded in the administrative bureaucracy (who) have a bias towards "values neutral' approaches (oo p.2) are also to blame. One is compelled to wonder why the issue of blame has to enter the argument at all. It seems a divisive way to begin an enterprise of character education which, by its own account, requires close cooperation between home and school. One is almost compelled to look for a political agenda underlying this choice of a justificatory argument.

Problem of the Good

The Aspen Declaration claims to have solved the problem of a conflicting plurality of goods by using a multi-voiced collaborative process of consensus. The claim is made that universal values have emerged from this process. However these values must still be interpreted in the context of real life, and the problem of controversy surrounding "which values to teach" has not been solved realistically - only linguistically. The Aspen Conference has not solved the problem of pluralistic competitive goods because the consensus on virtues is still a consensus on a set of abstractions, moreover, it is arguable that the list is still incomplete - what about the virtue of tolerance, for example? Ironically, the criticism mounted against values clarification as being devoid of content applies to the Six Pillars of Character as well.

While Character Counts! gives lip service to discerning the good, the lessons and school wide activities proposed do not in any systematic or serious way involved children in developing such a view. A view of the good life and the good society has not been articulated by the program. The good life, it may be inferred, is the exercise of the Six Pillars of Character. But what does that mean? What, for example, is meant by citizenship? In *Good Ideas*, volumes one and two, there are 8 lessons dealing with citizenship. Of those eight, one organizes students to collaboratively create an egg crate which will protect the egg when dropped from a height - an interesting thing to do, but the extension to the idea of citizenship is tenuous. Another lesson suggests inviting a community leader to be a guest speaker. Another identifies Cities of Character on a map. Compare this approach to the idea of citizenship expressed by the ten year old Ruby, who thought she had to act on behalf of other children.

Some Additional Concerns

The White Paper prepared for President Bush (one wonders if a White Paper was prepared for the Gore transition team) assumes an adversarial position toward public education administrators, who

are assumed to have a "bias towards 'values neutral' approaches" (p. 11) to moral education. Therefore, it is recommended that federal grants for character development programs be tied to "quality standards for effective character education and specific measurement tools to assess the effectiveness of funded programs" (p. 11). The ways in which these standards and measurement tools might be played out to measure the goodness of children borders on the absurd. It is a punitive approach rather than a cooperative approach that assumes that teachers and administrators are themselves moral agents whose goals include fostering children's moral development. It also reduces the notion of moral development to a series of standardized assessment tools.

Michael Josephson mentions the work of Thomas Lickona as foundational for Character Counts! but beyond the mention of his work, there are no explicit connections made. Lickona is in the character education tradition, but his *Educating for Character* gives a much richer account of that tradition. One is tempted to ask Character Counts! why Lickona's book isn't simply distributed, letting teachers operationalize the ideas contained therein.

Summary

Ruby Bridges has been used in a somewhat iconic way in this critique. It is because she represents a vastly different view of the moral life of children. Her account of herself challenges both Kohlberg's view of the moral capacity of the young child as well as the social/behavioral view implied in Character Counts! Quite frankly, the language of children as recorded by Coles in his investigation into their moral lives moves one to tears. It is inspirational. By contrast, listening to Michael Josephson explain character moves one to boredom. There is a message here.

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