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# To Promote Character Education, Use Literature for Children and Adolescents

WILLIAM D. EDGINGTON

Character education has become the fastest growing school reform movement in the United States. Surveys conducted in the last few years indicate that Americans tend to place character (values) education as the highest priority in school restructuring programs (Jones, Ryan, and Bohlin 1998), and there is nothing to suggest that the nation's concern is temporary. Over half of the states in this country have legislation either mandating or encouraging character education, and thirty-seven states have received federal grants to develop character education initiatives (source: National Conference of State Legislatures). Clearly, the trend is to rely on the public schools to educate for character.

Although the subjective nature of character education prohibits an all-encompassing definition on which all can agree, Thomas Lickona's (1998, 78) definition seems to be palatable for most: "Character education is the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue"—virtue in the form of core values or values on which a society depends to persevere.

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*WILLIAM D. EDGINGTON is an assistant professor of social studies education at Sam Houston State University, in Huntsville, Texas.*

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For example, Gibbs and Earley (1994) identified core values as compassion, courage, courtesy, fairness, honesty, kindness, loyalty, perseverance, respect, and responsibility. Those attributes are congruent with the type of values or character traits that Americans seem to demand be present in schools. Teachers in the schools agree. In a survey of over 280 teachers, preservice and those already in the classroom, over 75 percent believed that character building should be part of public school education (Mathison 1998). Yet, of those who claimed to be supporters of character education, 65 percent were unsure of how to put it into practice. A typical comment across the country is, We think we *need* to do it, but we're not sure of *how* to do it.

## The Use of Literature in Character Education

Actually, teachers in the United States have been transmitting values to children for as long as there have been schools in this country. The method has been a very simple one—through literature. Books such as the *New England Primer*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes* are examples of literature used as an instru-

ment to transmit core values to children and adolescents in the early days of education in America. The method remains viable and practical today. Proponents of character education (e.g., Bennett 1995; Lickona 1991; Wynne and Ryan 1997) have advocated literature as an essential vehicle for the transmission of core values, as do such educators as Andrews (1994) and Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown (1996). The primary reason given for using literature in character education is the relevance to the lives of the children that literature can afford. Because many researchers emphasize that values are present in literature and in a variety of genres (Edgington, Brabham, and Frost 1999), finding literature to help in values instruction is not difficult. The challenging aspect is determining how to incorporate the literature into a lesson or unit. Once they have accomplished that, however, teachers find that it is a natural and comfortable correlation.

## Character Education Approaches and the Use of Literature

In the last thirty years, four approaches to teaching values have been used in schools: values inculcation, values clarification, values analysis, and moral rea-

soning. Each has a specific purpose behind its implementation and has supporters and detractors when it is being considered for use in character education. Although none of the approaches was designed specifically for use with literature, all have the potential of being powerful modes of instruction when paired with literature. Literature in every genre—fiction, nonfiction, historical fiction, information books, poetry, folktales, or picture books—can be used in character education for prekindergarten through high school audiences. Practically any piece of literature at one's disposal can be workable. To illustrate, I use one book, *Voices of the Alamo* by Sherry Garland, to examine approaches for application. *Voices of the Alamo* focuses on the area in and around San Antonio, Texas, and on the people who played an important role in the Texas Independence movement. The author uses a timeline format with first-person narration and presents striking illustrations.

#### *Values Inculcation*

Values inculcation is the most traditional approach used in character education. Simply stated, it is the act of transmitting to students a predetermined set of values. Values inculcation may be accomplished simply by having the students read a book with characters possessing worthy values or character traits that can be noted by the students alone or with the teacher's help. The teacher can stress the values and their importance either through reflection or class discussion.

Valuable character traits are obvious in *Voices of the Alamo*. As the students read about the events surrounding Texas Independence, they can identify such values as courage, perseverance, loyalty, and responsibility. They can recognize courage in the willingness of the defenders of the Alamo to fight in the face of overwhelming odds and certain death and see perseverance in their refusal to surrender. The students can cite values from the reading and then discuss their importance and application in their own lives. Values inculcation

through literature helps students identify, comprehend, and apply core values.

#### *Values Clarification*

A values clarification approach to character education involves having students come to terms with their individual values preferences. They are given opportunities to cite their preferences, reflect on them, and then confirm or change their value choices. In contrast to the values inculcation method, the teacher makes no effort to determine whether the preferences are correct. Instead, the students articulate their preferences and reflect on their choices. Raths, Harmin, and Simon (1978) present values clarification through a seven-part process:

1. Encourage students to make choices, choices that are made freely.
2. Help students to discover alternatives when they are faced with choices.
3. Help students to weigh the alternatives with care, reflecting on consequences.
4. Encourage students to reflect on what they prize and cherish.
5. Provide opportunities for the students to affirm their choices to others.
6. Encourage students to act and live according to their choices.
7. Help students to become conscious of patterns of behavior in their lives.

Opportunities to articulate preferences and reflect on choices typically come in the form of such activities as open-ended questions, rank-order lists, and forced-choice lists. Then, through the teacher's questions, the students clarify their personal values and see how those preferences correlate to societal values.

With *Voices of the Alamo*, students can participate in an activity and answer appropriate follow-up questions. An example of an open-ended question is, If I were Santa Anna and Texans were entering the area illegally, taking Mexican land, complaining, and threatening me, how would I feel? As a rank-order activity, students could follow these directions: List, from most important to least important, the considerations that Texans should ponder when they con-

template breaking away from Mexico. For a forced-choice activity to promote values clarification, the students choose two reasons from a list of five to explain why Clara Driscoll wanted to preserve the Alamo. Having the students perform the activities does not end the lesson. The questions that follow the activity are paramount to the process. Teachers should make no judgments on the choices but let the students explain their choices. The teachers continue with questions designed to enable the students to reflect on their preferences. Such questions—Why is that important to you? Do you think that your decision(s) would work for everyone? Is that more important to you than \_\_\_\_\_? —help students reflect on their preferences after they have articulated them. Student then reaffirm or change their preferences, which gives them autonomy in their value formation. When used with values clarification methods, literature helps students define their values preferences and compare those with the core values of society.

#### *Values Analysis*

Use of a rational and logical approach to a values decision is the premise behind values analysis. The students examine the alternatives and the potential consequences that may stem from them. When faced with making a values decision, they use reasoning and decision-making skills not only to make their decisions but also to justify them. With assistance from their teacher, the students proceed through the following essential phases of values analysis:

1. Identify the values issue.
2. Clarify the values question.
3. Gather and organize the evidence.
4. Assess the accuracy of the evidence, and its relevancy to the values issue.
5. Identify potential solutions.
6. Consider possible consequences of each solution.
7. Choose among the alternatives.
8. Take appropriate action. (Welton and Mallan 1999)

Stories and fables provide the catalyst for a values analysis activity, and

### Virtues and Dispositions of Democratic Citizenship

1. Promoting the general welfare or common good of the community;
2. Recognizing the equal moral worth and dignity of each person;
3. Respecting and protecting rights possessed equally by each person;
4. Participating responsibly and effectively in political and civic life;
5. Taking responsibility for government by consent of the governed;
6. Becoming a self-governing person by practicing civic virtues; and
7. Supporting and maintaining democratic principles and practices.

teacher-guided questions help students pose their alternatives and consequences and reflect on their choices. As in values clarification, teachers must not make judgments about the students' choices but can help them through the decision process.

*Voices of the Alamo* may be used in a values analysis activity to help students in their decision making about values. In the middle of the reading, the teacher can ask students about the Mexican army's demand that the citizens of Gonzales turn over their cannon. After they discuss the alternatives that Sarah Seely DeWitt and the others faced and the consequences of those choices, they can decide on a course of action. For another discussion, the teacher can remind the class that General Sam Houston, who realized that the people of Texas wanted to seek revenge and fight Santa Anna after the fall of the Alamo and the massacre at Goliad, was worried that his army was not ready and that the time was not right. After considering possible alternatives and consequences, the class can determine a course of action.

Once a values decision has been made, the teacher may help the students examine the decision and the important issues leading to the decision as it relates to society's expectations and demands. In the values analysis approach to using literature in character education, the children, either in a group or individually and under the teacher's direction, engage in a systematic and logical process to make a values deci-

sion. Their discussion includes a review of the alternatives to a particular situation and possible consequences of those alternatives.

### Moral Reasoning

Moral reasoning, based on Kohlberg's premise that the ability to make values decisions is a developmental process, is another approach to character education. In that process, the teacher also does not voice a judgment about the choices or decisions that students make or the values that shaped the choices. Moral reasoning revolves around the concept of a developmental sequence of five stages. According to the theory, students are stimulated to move to the next, more-complex stage of moral development when they are exposed repeatedly to higher levels of moral reasoning (Kohlberg 1976). When using that approach, teachers provide children with a real or hypothetical situation and ask them to make a values decision and explain their reasoning for making that choice. The important part of moral reasoning is not the answer given but the reasoning behind the answer. After the students announce the initial choice, the teacher asks pertinent follow-up questions, changing the circumstances slightly, to help students solidify or alter their position.

To produce a moral reasoning activity, the teacher needs to present the students with a scenario in which a decision must be made and give them opportunities for explanation and alteration. A teacher could develop a moral reasoning activity based on a scene from the last hours of the siege, as described in *Voices of the Alamo*. William Barret Travis drew a line in the dirt with his sword and said, "Cross this line if you will stand and fight with me, but know that you will surely die." In a discussion about whether the men should cross the line, the students could consider the following questions:

- What if there were a chance that they would not die; would that change things?
- What if there were a chance that the Mexican army would simply take them prisoner; would that make a difference?
- What if they knew that they would

be heroes for hundreds of years if they crossed; would that make a difference?

- What if they knew that they would be regarded as cowards for hundreds of years; would that change things?

When using literature to teach moral reasoning, teachers need to give students the opportunity to explore the perspectives of the people in the story and to explain the reasons for their actions and responses to new situations. Like values clarification and values analysis exercises that use literature to aid in character education, moral reasoning activities may include components that help students to examine their values in relation to the core values stressed in society.

### Conclusions

Because character education is now a fixture in the national and state educational landscape, teachers are expected to make societal character traits a part of their curriculum. Ready-made kits and programs are available to help in that endeavor, but teachers have available an equally practical mode of instruction—the use of literature for children and adolescents. Used to transmit values in this country for well over two hundred years, literature provides an important component to education: relevance to the lives of the students. When literature is coupled with practical modes of values instruction, it provides a more powerful mode of character education than a simplistic "trait-of-the-week" strategy.

What makes the use of literature in character education attractive is that it is applicable to every grade level. For a high school government class, a teacher may use *Animal Farm*. An eighth-grade American history class could explore *The Fighting Ground*. *The Golden Goblet* would fit with a middle school world cultures class. A fifth-grade class could discuss *Pink and Say*; and a third-grade class studying communities could explore *Officer Buckle and Gloria*. Such books as *Teammates* and *Baseball Saved Us* could be used in a high school American history class. The use of children's literature to promote character education is a productive strategy for

reading and language arts classes as well as social studies.

According to Aristotle, morality and character are not random acts but habits, which have been described as habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of action (Lickona 1991; 1998). If the goal of character education is to help students know the good, desire the good, and ultimately do the good, we must find ways to achieve that end that are authentic, meaningful, and relevant for our students. One way is to use literature to cultivate character education.

*Key words: character education and literature, literature and core values, literature for character education*

#### RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

*The Fighting Ground* by Avi. (New York: HarperCollins, 1984). The author relates twenty-four hours in the life of Jonathan, a thirteen-year-old New Jersey boy anxious to fight in the American Revolution. When he sneaks off to join in the fighting, Jonathan discovers that war and glory are not what he imagined them to be. Chapter Book.

*Voices of the Alamo* by Sherry Garland. (New York: Scholastic, 2000). The book contains the tale of the thirteen-day siege of the Alamo in 1836 and the drama of the people who shaped the land and history. Picture Book.

*Teammates* by Peter Golenbock. (New York: Voyager Books, 1990). The book features the relationship between Jackie Robinson and his Brooklyn Dodgers teammate Pee Wee Reese and the idea that being team-

mates can mean more than simply playing on the same team. Picture Book.

*The Golden Goblet* by Eloise Jarvis McGraw. (New York: Puffin Books, 1961). Living in ancient Egypt, young Ranofer is enslaved to his greedy half brother, who Ranofer believes is stealing from the tombs of the pharaohs. To win his freedom, Ranofer calls on the courage that he never knew he possessed. Chapter Book.

*Baseball Saved Us* by Ken Mochizuki. (New York: Lee and Low Books, 1993). Japanese Americans in a World War II internment camp create a baseball field. A young boy relates how baseball gave them a purpose while they were enduring humiliation and injustice. Picture Book.

*Animal Farm* by George Orwell. (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1996). The book contains Orwell's thinly disguised commentary on the rise of communism in the Soviet Union and the political ramifications of socialism. Chapter Book.

*Pink and Say* by Patricia Polacco. (New York: Philomel Books, 1994). Two young men, an African American and a white, meet during the Civil War and find themselves dependent on one another. Picture Book.

*Officer Buckle and Gloria* by Peggy Rathmann. (New York: Scholastic, 1995). When he goes to schools to discuss safety tips, nobody pays attention to Officer Buckle. The children sit up and take notice, though, when his dog, Gloria, surprises them. Picture Book.

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