

The Structural Approach to Character Development

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As we look at today's youth, we are confronted with a sobering realization: they do not have the virtues we once could assume. If we go back in time half a century, as we handed something to a student we would hear a polite "Thank you." "Yes sir" and "Please" were part of every student's everyday vocabulary. If the teacher was cleaning a blackboard or carrying books they could expect to hear from students a kind, "May I help you." Honesty, responsibility, kindness, and a host of other virtues were almost universal.

Today's youth are different. Not only is simple politeness missing; many students of today do not ascribe to the basic virtues of honesty, respect, caring, or hard work.

The lack of virtues among today's youth has been analyzed and discussed in many forms. The best documentation of the erosion of character virtues is presented by Thomas Lickona in his book, *Educating for Character. How Our Schools can Teach Respect and Responsibility*. We can attribute the lack of common virtues to many things including TV, family mobility, divorce rates, diminished church influence, single parent families, and the necessity of both parents working full time. The most important single factor is the large amount of time today's youth spend unsupervised. Unlike previous generations, students spend far more non-school hours than not out of the watchful eye of caring, concerned, older others. We are reaping the harvest of creating the unsupervised generation.



COOPERATION

The tragedy of Columbine High School and the aftermath numerous copy cat school murders is a wake-up call for the nation. There will be a strong movement to make the acquisition of common virtues a part of the curriculum in every classroom.

If we project to a future in which the children of today become the parents of tomorrow, and then picture the type of values and virtues they will instill in their children, we realize nothing less than the basic social fabric of civilized society is at stake. The conclusion: not addressing in our classrooms the lack of virtues in today's youth is simply not acceptable. For many students the virtues will be acquired in school or not at all.

What are the common virtues almost everyone would agree should be the outcome of civilized socialization? Long and short lists have been generated, and the virtues have been categorized in various ways. My favorite way to cut the pie is as follows:

21 Character Virtues		
Relationship Virtues Caring Cooperativeness Courtesy Helpfulness Honesty Kindness Respect Understanding	Responsibility Virtues Citizenship Fairness Leadership Responsibility Trustworthiness	Personal Virtues Courage Good Judgment Impulse Control Integrity Pride in Ones Work Perseverance Self Discipline Self Motivation



FAIRNESS

Although different sets of virtues and different ways to categorize them can be argued, it is hard for anyone to make the case that students (or those with whom they deal) would be better off if they were dishonest, uncaring, unfair, irresponsible, unmotivated, or used poor judgment! Schools have been reluctant to enter the field of character education for fear that parents would object. However when parents are asked, they almost universally applaud any attempts by schools to foster the common virtues.

The need for character education is clear. The support for character education is almost universal. The question, then, becomes how -- how can schools best foster the acquisition of character virtues among students?

Let's distinguish two approaches to fostering the virtues: 1) Curriculum Approaches and 2) The Structural Approach. Curriculum approaches take the form of separate lessons on the virtues and/or using existing curriculum as a vehicle for teaching the virtues, as when the teacher focus on the virtues displayed or not displayed by a character from history or literature. The Structural Approach provides opportunities to acquire the virtues because of the way the content is taught, as when students are asked to use Paraphrase Passport while discussing a topic. Because of the structure, students learn to listen to and respect points of view different from their own. In the Structural Approach, rather than being taught lessons about the importance of respect, students practice respect.

The Kagan bias is clear. We prefer the Structural Approach. We have nothing against including character education as curriculum, but we put our faith in the long-term impact of structuring for character rather than teaching about character. There are five major problems with relying exclusively on the curriculum approach to teaching virtues:



HONESTY

Disadvantages of the Curriculum Approach

1. Transference Gap
2. Lack of Redundancy
3. Preparation Time
4. Competing Curriculum
5. Standardized Testing

Disadvantages of the Curriculum Approach

1. Transference Gap

Years ago I was involved in teaching students about conflict resolution. At that time I took a curriculum approach. We identified eight modes of conflict resolution, created a mnemonic device to help students remember the eight modes of conflict resolution (STOP HACC = Share, Take turns, Outside help, Postpone, Humor, Avoid, Compromise, Chance), and taught students about each mode and situations in which to use each. The students readily memorized the eight modes of conflict resolution and could respond with advantages and disadvantages of each. What we noticed, however, was practically no transference to real life. Students who had just the hour before gotten high marks on the conflict resolution test in their classrooms would go out onto the playground and get into fights!

There was what psychologists call a transference gap. Whenever the situation of acquisition is too different from the situation of performance there exists a transference gap. The academic learning of the modes of conflict resolution was too removed from the heated moment of actually being in a conflict. So no transference occurred. This problem, lack of transference is endemic to the curriculum approach. Teaching students about honesty does not necessarily make students more honest; learning about the virtue of responsibility does not a more responsible student make.



INTEGRITY

2. Lack of Redundancy

If we want to teach so it "takes," we must teach, reteach, and teach again: Teach many times, and in many ways. All teachers, however, are faced with an overwhelming amount of curriculum ideally they would cover. If they are to take time to teach a virtue, they will not have time to go back and teach lessons on that virtue again and again all school year. So, the curriculum approach presses toward a one-shot approach to teaching the virtues. But this one-shot approach is exactly the way to ensure that the virtues are learned and forgotten. For example, if I learned a lesson about honesty in the fall, how much impact will that lesson have on my day-to-day level of honesty in the spring?

3. Preparation Time

In addition to an already busy schedule, does the average teacher have time to prepare well-designed, impactful lessons on each of the virtues?

4. Competing Curriculum

Imagine for a moment I am an elementary teacher responsible for math, science, language arts, social studies, and other academic content. I realize the importance of and accept the mission of also teaching the virtues. We are coming close to the end of the school year. There is some science content I have not covered. There are also some virtues I have not covered. In the crunch, which curriculum will be set aside?

5. Standardized Testing

To an unfortunate degree we teach that which will be tested. All teachers are under pressure to raise or maintain high scores on standardized tests. The tests cover academic content but do not cover the virtues. What then will be taught?

The Structural Approach

In the Structural Approach, we foster the acquisition of the virtues not by teaching the virtues but by structuring the interaction of students with each other and with the curriculum so that the virtues are acquired as part of any lesson, regardless of the content. For example, if students use a RoundRobin, regardless of the academic content they are learning, they also learn to take turns, a form of respect. In contrast, given the exact same content, if the students are called on by the teacher one at a time or if they are told to discuss the topic using unstructured group discussion, they will not necessarily learn to take turns and honor the contribution of each.



LEADERSHIP

Many Kagan structures go directly to virtue acquisition. For examples, below are listed some of the many virtues acquired through the structures include:

Circle the Sage: Leadership, Helpfulness

Paraphrase Passport: Caring, Impulse Control, Respect, Understanding

Pass-N-Praise: Kindness

Folded Agree-Disagree Line Ups: Courage, Respect, Understanding

Estimate and Prediction Line Ups: Good Judgment

Expert Group Jigsaw: Cooperation, Helpfulness, Leadership

Talking Chips: Impulse Control

Team Pair Solo: Cooperation, Helpfulness, Leadership, Self-Motivation, Pride in One's Work

Gambit Chips: Courtesy

Three Step Interview: Understanding, Responsibility

Team Statements: Citizenship, Cooperation, Integrity, Respect

Spend-A-Buck: Fairness

Advantages of the Structural Approach

Why do we put faith in structuring so virtues are acquired in the process of instruction? The Structural Approach for the most part side-steps the problems of the curriculum approach.



RESPECT

1. Sidestepping the Transference Gap

Because the virtues are acquired in the process of actual interaction, in the structural approach the transference gap is radically reduced. Instead of learning about caring and courtesy, students are practicing caring and courtesy as they interact. This classroom practice makes it far more likely that students will practice caring and courtesy in their interactions outside the classroom.

Reading about, discussing, and even writing about a virtue increases only slightly the probability that the virtue will be practiced. The act of writing about a virtue is quite dissimilar to the act of practicing the virtue in life -- a large transference gap is created. In contrast, practicing the virtue in class increases dramatically the probability that the virtue will become part of the repertoire of a student because there is little difference between practicing the virtue in one setting or another -- little transference gap is created.

With cooperative structures, students develop their character virtues in the context of learning the normal curriculum. As students use Team Pair Solo, students work together first as a team and then as pairs before solving similar problems on their own. In the process, they are helping, coaching, and sharing information. Those who know, practice leadership skills. Students are motivated to learn because they will be held individually accountable in the third step of the structure. If, for example, students use Team Pair Solo to learn how to solve problems converting inches to centimeters, they are practicing Cooperation, Helpfulness, Leadership, Self-Motivation, and Pride in One's Work. Even if not a word about those virtues is spoken, those virtues are being acquired.

All of us have been part of a group in which everyone is talking but no one is really listening. If, however, Paraphrase Passport is being used, before stating one's own point of view, the speaker must paraphrase the prior speaker to that speaker's satisfaction. In the process, participants are held accountable for listening. Again, even if not a word is said about the virtues, students using Paraphrase Passport learn Caring, Impulse Control, Respect, and Understanding. In the Structural Approach students are not being lectured about the virtues, they are practicing them! Having practiced them often, the virtues become habitual.

The choice is clear: Do we adopt a curriculum approach and have students learn about the virtues in the same way they *learn about* the events of World War I, or do we adopt the structural approach and have the students *practice and acquire* the virtues? The analogy between the acquisition of virtues and the acquisition of language is strong. Learning the rules of grammar and memorizing vocabulary lists does not lead to fluency; communicating and negotiating meaning in the language does. Learning and acquisition are different. The curriculum approach, because of the transference gap leads to learning; the structural approach, because of the lack of transference gap leads to acquisition.

2. Redundant

Because the virtues are practiced on a daily basis as part of each lesson, in the structural approach there is a great deal of redundancy of learning opportunities, greatly increasing the probability the virtues will be acquired and retained, rather than learned once but then forgotten.

3. Preparation Time

The structural approach side-steps teacher prep time. Teachers invest once in learning the structures, but then use them naturally as part of any lesson. They do not have to prepare special lessons for each of the virtues because the virtues become part of every lesson. The structural approach is an integrated approach: The virtues become the way we are in the classroom.



4. Competing Curriculum

Because the virtues are not taught as separate curriculum, in the Structural Approach the virtues are not set aside in favor of academic content. Rather than forcing a choice between science and helpfulness, the students learn helpfulness *while* learning science.

5. Standardized Testing

Tests drive curriculum to a large extent, but only to a small extent do they drive the choice of instructional strategies. As a teacher, I will be certain to emphasize that which will be on the standardized tests -- my evaluation depends on it. And if the virtues are not on the tests, they will not be emphasized. But if I use a range of structures on an ongoing basis, no matter what content I emphasize, the virtues will be acquired.

6. Breaking the Replacement Cycle

The most important advantage of the structural approach to the virtues is that it breaks the education replacement cycle. Education is plagued with fads. We replace one educational innovation with another. For a few years we all jump on the cooperative learning bandwagon, scrambling to design cooperative learning lessons. Then we learn about the power of multiple intelligences and abandon cooperative learning lessons in favor of multiple intelligences lessons. A few years later we abandon multiple intelligences lessons, replacing them with brain compatible lessons or whatever new innovation is popular.

This replacement cycle is created by a lesson-based curricular approach. If we believe the way to implement an innovation is to design complex lessons, those lessons are destined to have a limited half-life. Why? Because educational innovation will always continue and when the next popular innovation comes along, we cannot be doing complex lessons to implement the new innovation and also do complex lessons to implement last year's hot innovation. So one innovation replaces another.

The structural approach breaks this replacement cycle. Instead of doing cooperative learning lessons, teachers learn structures which make cooperative learning part of any lesson. When a new innovation comes along, teachers do not stop using the effective structures; rather they add structures to their repertoire so they make cooperative learning, multiple intelligences, and character development part of each lesson.

Ten years from now if we take a curriculum approach to character development we will be saying, "Character development is something we did years ago, now we are focusing on É" If instead we adopt the structural approach, we will be saying, "We make character development part of every lesson by using a range of structures which foster the acquisition of the virtues."

As an educational community and as a society, we cannot afford to find some ten years from now that character development has become just one more passing educational fad. Structures break the replacement cycle because they are tools for a lifetime.