Bringing out the best: Promoting students' character development

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As I was preparing to give my talk on character education at the Grit and Imagination Summit this past August, a Joni Mitchell song played over and over in my mind. "I am on a lonely road and I am traveling, traveling, traveling…" The chorus is especially catchy. It begins:

> "All I really, really want our love to do
>
> is to bring out the best in me
>
> and in you too"
>
>   -- Joni Mitchell, *All I Want*

I was puzzled. I love this song. But why this song now? I realized that the chorus captures the essence of character education and what most of us want to achieve as educators: to bring out the best in ourselves and in our students.

It is hard to imagine a more important aim of education than the cultivation of character. Character strengths (such as kindness, courage, perseverance, teamwork, and creativity) allow us to respond effectively to challenges, pursue and achieve goals, develop and sustain close relationships, and participate in and contribute to society. Interest in character education has grown in recent years. In the United States, many states now require or strongly encourage their schools to focus on character education.

These are exciting developments. They fit well with the belief held by most parents and educators that schools should teach more than academic skills, that they should also promote students' social and emotional development. As Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote as a college student almost 70 years ago:

> **"**Intelligence plus character–that is the goal of true education. The complete education gives one not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate. The broad education will, therefore, transmit to one not only the accumulated knowledge of the [human] race but also the accumulated experience of social living."

Yet, most character education initiatives are too limited to profoundly affect students' lives as King envisioned. Many programs focus on a handful of strengths through brief programs and activities that are often isolated from students' regular activities at school. To live up to its promise, character education must:

1. *Celebrate and nurture a wide range of strengths, especially those that are important to students.* Most programs use a top-down approach, emphasizing 4-7 pre-determined strengths. This approach can help students to focus on building a few key strengths (e.g., kindness, fairness, self-control, responsibility) that are essential to learning and to a positive school climate, but the approach ignores numerous strengths that are essential to society and to students' social and emotional well-being. By emphasizing a "bottom up" approach, educators can incorporate students' values and experiences and recognize the diverse variety of human strengths that are valued across time and across cultures. Some first steps are to ask students to reflect on people (especially close friends and family members, or other role models) they most admire or want to be like (e.g., Linkins, Niemiec, Gillham, & Mayerson, 2015). Invite students to describe the positive

qualities these people seem to possess and the actions and behaviors that exemplify these qualities. Collaborate as a group to generate a long list of strengths that are admired and valued. We find it helpful to compare this list to other existing lists, especially the 24 strengths catalogued in Peterson and Seligman's (2004) *Character Strengths and Virtues*. Acknowledge that any single list is likely to be incomplete. (Chris Peterson often mentioned that the Character Strengths and Virtues framework was a work in progress). Such activities help students develop a rich strengths vocabulary that will assist them in noticing and appreciating strengths in themselves and in others. This bottom up approach helps to create a school climate that celebrates the diverse range of positive qualities that our students are developing and that are important in life.

2. ***Emphasize character development as an ongoing, life-long process.*** In everyday conversation, many of us discuss intelligence and character in ways that imply these personal qualities are fixed and stable (e.g., "Such a smart person"; "So kind, she has a heart of gold"; "What a creative mind"). As educators, we are increasingly trying to teach our students that academic abilities and intelligence are not fixed, but can be developed through effort and practice and appropriate guidance (Duckworth, 2015; Dweck, 2006; Education Week Research Center, 2016). These lessons are equally relevant to character. We find it helpful to describe character strengths as goals that guide our thoughts, actions, and behaviors. Moving towards these goals requires continued effort, as well as guidance and support from others. We can improve knowledge, skills and behaviors related to strengths throughout our lives. Even when strengths are well-developed, continued action and practice are required to sustain them. We don't consider someone kind if

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they have shown kindness for 10 years and then stopped for the last 2. One way to promote an ongoing process of strength development is through *Strengths Action Plans* (Linkins et al., 2015). Students select a strength they would like to develop or exhibit more in their lives. Students identify upcoming opportunities related to that strength and create (and implement) a specific plan of action. This can become an ongoing activity, similar to the character development plan described by Benjamin Franklin in his autobiography (Franklin, 1996).

3. *Weave character education into the everyday fabric of the school.* The most effective approaches to character education go beyond isolated curricula (or posters or assemblies) to embed initiatives into a school culture over many years. Through daily interactions with their students, teachers can model strengths, reinforce what students are learning in character education programs, and provide ongoing opportunities for students develop strengths. Teachers can emphasize strengths relevant to learning (e.g., curiosity, persistence, problem-solving, creativity) and to working together with others (e.g., integrity, fairness, teamwork, leadership). Teachers can also highlight strengths that may be especially relevant to work in specific disciplines. For example, discussions of literature can focus on the strengths exhibited by characters and on additional strengths that might have been helpful or made the story turn out differently. Science provides numerous opportunities to emphasize critical thinking and problem-solving. Social studies can emphasize perspective taking, empathy, and justice. Art and music provide opportunities to enhance appreciation of beauty and excellence.

4. ***Empower students to bring out the best in others.*** The vast majority of character education initiatives emphasize the individual. From the students' perspective, the focus is usually on developing or using one's own character strengths. To achieve its greatest benefits, character education must also provide students with the knowledge and skills to celebrate and nurture character development in others. It should empower students to "bring out the best in me, and in you too." Strengths spotting (or noticing and appreciating strengths in others) is an important step along this path. One exciting approach, developed by my colleague Mark Linkins and teachers in a school in Newark, New Jersey, begins with teachers. Teachers introduce the *Badge Project* by giving each other character strengths badges (index cards work well). On one side they list a strength. On the other, they list a behavior they observed that is related to the strength. Students become curious about the badges their teachers are wearing and the teachers discuss the badges with their students. After a couple weeks, students are asked to notice their peers' behaviors related to strengths. Each student observes (and is observed by) a few peers. Students create badges that are shared anonymously. Through this activity, students develop an appreciation and awareness of the wide variety of strengths exhibited by their peers. Interviews with students and teachers suggest that these kinds of activities improve students' appreciation of each other, improve students' relationships with each other, and improve school climate. They also help students to recognize and appreciate their own strengths. A participating student describes the power of this community approach to character education.

> "Let's say I'm in a car. I'm driving and I'm driving and driving and I run out of gas. And of course I need gas, metaphorically, to keep going. But that's where your friends come in. When they're on their

path to excellence, they have to stop and help you. Maybe encouraging words, encouraging character strengths…"

VIA Institute on Character (2012)

We can teach our students to work with others (in and outside of school and long after they have graduated) to create communities that recognize and nurture the development of character strengths in all of their members. Ultimately, the great promise of character education is to empower our students to create a better world.

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