

# Character Education

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## Framing the Issue

Although discussions of character education within teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) have been extremely limited, questions about human character date at least to antiquity, with Socrates, Aristotle, Xenophon, Plato, and Plutarch among its early recorded philosophers. Following the European conquest of North America and the establishment of the United States, every generation has believed that its youth are in a state of crisis and in need of moral intervention (Hunter, 2000), with schools often assigned this role (Purpel, 1997). In the United States, discussions about the role of character have taken place since at least the mid-17th century, when Massachusetts enacted the General School Law of 1642 (The Governor and Company of Massachusetts Bay, 1642), which aimed to help parents foster civility, piety, and religion, with negligent parents fined and their children placed in apprenticeships designed to teach the moral and legal principles of society (Ryan, Sweeder, & Bednar, 2001).

Beginning in the 1830s, a period of European immigration, especially to what is now the Midwest, took place. Schools became critical institutions through which immigrants were expected to become socialized into a common national culture (Leming, 2001). Textbooks were the primary means by which character and a new national identity were modeled and promoted. The McGuffey Readers were ubiquitous in schools and used for over a century thereafter to acculturate young people to explicitly Christian values, accompanied by stereotypical images of race, class, and gender. The readers depicted the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant as the ideal toward which Americans should aspire. In this fashion, immigrants and their foreignness, including their languages, were portrayed as being of a lower order than the culture into which they were being assimilated.

The values emphasized in US K-12 (kindergarten to 12th grade) schools were based on the Puritan traditions of obedience, hierarchy, and hard work, all tied to the increasingly industrialized society that depended on workers who were compliant and industrious. These values were especially important to the socialization of the increasing numbers of immigrants who came to the United States in the late

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19th century, whose diverse cultures and myriad languages created a conflict between the Christian orientation of earlier character education movements and the increasingly multicultural makeup of the new population. As is often the case, multicultural society was viewed as a threat to tradition and stability, even in a relatively new nation still building its heritage. Nativism and xenophobia thus affected immigrants and their cultural and linguistic ways from early on in US history. Character education within the K-12 curriculum thus became inextricably tied to efforts to incorporate new cultures, along with indigenous cultures, into the newly established order.

*Fin-de-siècle* moral instruction became increasingly detached from its religious roots and was conceptualized as amenable to development, rather than something that was fixed by nature. The early 20th century's character education efforts were influenced by the United States' nativist response to World War I. Among the consequences was the repression of second language instruction in schools and the creation of the national origins quota system, which favored Anglo Saxons and English-speaking people in immigration (Higham, 1988). This institutionalized attempt to assimilate newcomers was realized in efforts to limit the linguistic and cultural diversity that followed from indiscriminate immigration policies and thus establish a more clearly defined national character via public education.

A major intellectual movement attributed to educational philosopher John Dewey created a fissure in beliefs about educating for character that remains in effect over a century later. This movement replaced religion's role in education with a reliance on experience-based reason. By separating morality from religion, Deweyan progressivism invited relativism into debates about morality that ran, and continue to run, in opposition to character educators who insist on an absolute moral code grounded in religious scripture (Lickona, 2001). Definitions of moral behavior in this situated, relativistic conception were more reliant on the circumstances of individuals than on existing rules grounded in religious teaching (Hunter, 2000).

The conflict between these contradictory belief systems—that there are universal, eternal moral truths that should be taught by elders to youth, and that each individual should construct a personal moral code in relation to life's experiences and social exposures—remains central to 21st-century disputes about character and character education, and is relevant to notions of character in confronting the potentially different moral codes and ideologies imported through immigration.

The belief that morality relies on universal codes suggests that immigrants should cast aside beliefs and cultural practices, including those tied to their linguistic customs, established over time by cultural experiences and related spiritual and political systems and adopt, through didactic instruction, those held by the guardians of what they believe to be traditional American culture. Assuming in contrast that the beliefs of outsiders are legitimate in their own right suggests the need to teach for character through the inductive reflection on experience that might lead to a different moral code for each individual student, perhaps to the extent that extant traditions and customs themselves might eventually be cast aside in favor of more currently culturally relevant beliefs.

## **Making the Case**

The schism between the dominant, traditional view of character as eternal and immutable and the progressive view of character as an elastic, relational, and relativistic aspect of human development is evident in an initiative funded by the US Department of Education late in the 20th century and extending into the 21st (Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2004, 2005). This program funded character initiatives at a point at which the nation was in one of its many cycles of belief that it was experiencing moral decline. Relatedly, cultural heritage advocates asserted that the nation had declined into ultraliberalism and relativism (Nash, 1997), as exhibited by such developments as multicultural education, advances in the civil rights of LGBTQ people, and the New Latinx diaspora. This wave of immigration from south of the US border produced such animosity that Latinx immigrants became conflated with 9/11 terrorists in many people's minds as threats to US security, in spite of clear evidence that the attackers originated primarily from Saudi Arabia.

Smagorinsky and Taxel (2004, 2005) focus on two primary approaches to character education. The first and most dominant in character education publication and exposure is based on the belief in an authoritative creed of objective values that is didactically transmitted. This approach relies on the notion that values are taught by strict parents and teachers to receptive children. The second assumes that character education consists of reflective consideration of life's experiences so that youth may develop codes of conduct that both suit their individual needs and contribute to a just and diverse community. These two approaches are grounded in the historical notions of character reviewed above.

The cultural heritage approach advocated by today's most influential character education proponents rejects the challenges that immigration often brings to established values. In the Department of Education proposals studied by Smagorinsky and Taxel (2004, 2005), character qualities are often associated with one's social and economic class. Poverty—the condition that often affects immigrants in both their home country and their destination—is associated with viciousness, savagery, and evil, making those in poverty dangerous to society's more virtuous affluent citizens. Further, according to this conception the more distant from white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant values one is, the less character one possesses. This value is extrapolated to mean that immigrants are by nature of low character until they undertake a process of assimilation, without which they serve as a threat to their more moral neighbors. When the inevitable poverty of those who immigrate is tied to notions of their character, people of immigrant status and ESOL classification are viewed not as different but as morally deficient. This perspective tends to invoke a long-lost, better time when people were civil and morality reigned, a time that needs to be recovered through character education so that a strong, unified, pious society may be restored to order. Although no evidence exists that such a time ever occurred, its mirage invites a retreat back in time to the chimera of a long-lost moral society.

The second approach, grounded in Deweyan progressivism and relativistic in its assumptions, makes a distinction between socializing people to established

conventions and developing a moral code. Critics from this perspective believe that the cultural heritage approach conflates the two. Rather than viewing morality as a set of rules transmitted from adult to child, those who advocate this approach believe that ethical behavior follows from judgment of situations, often through discussion and reflection on personal experience and second-order experiences such as the consideration of current events and historical scenarios. This approach is thus constructivist in orientation. That is, it does not view morality as comprising fixed, objective, universal rules, but as codes of conduct developed through engagement with real-world problems and people's affective responses to experience.

In contrast to the focus on the virtuous individual, this approach considers the community of practice to be the central unit of action such that character education contributes to a just and democratic society. This society is inevitably diverse, meaning that immigrants from non-Western societies have just as strong a voice in discussions of morality as do those from established communities.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

TESOL educators and administrators advocating for English learners in state systems of K-12 education need to be aware of the different approaches to character education and their implications for learners and diversity. Each viewpoint yields a different approach to education based on different conceptions of character. The cultural heritage perspective's didactic assumptions suggest the need for teachers to instruct youth in established codes of conduct through transmission-oriented pedagogies such as lectures and authoritative texts. The progressive view suggests the need for discussion of controversial situations and the construction of moral codes that are viewed as always under development.

Relatedly, the role and duty of the immigrant in the cultural heritage perspective is to assimilate as rapidly as possible to US norms, including those associated with language and its uses. Immigrants should reject the customs from their former national homes, including their home languages, and embrace the value systems of their new host communities, even when economics isolate them in segregated communities on the margins of the established centers of commerce and education.

The progressive approach in contrast would focus on the existing community and how it would both assist with immigrant adaptation and also challenge the community's assumptions about cultural life. Newcomers' language use, rather than being eliminated and shunned, would be regarded as a resource through which the community might learn and prosper. In other words, the progressive vision of good character would focus on how extant community members would help immigrants adjust, rather than making immigrants with limited English proficiency and different cultural practices wholly responsible for adapting toward the norm.

School administrators working with English learners, high immigrant populations, or both may be limited by the overriding values of the communities that they serve. Introducing a relativistic conception of character in a community whose

dominant culture is grounded in scriptural notions of eternal truths might produce backlash and ultimately dismissal from residents who have no investment in a post-modern world. And those in a pluralistic community might be caught between tensions available through both diverse perspectives on morality and a concomitant belief that diversity requires assimilation to dominant norms. These tensions reflect broader disputes in education over the value of inculcation and the premium on open-ended inquiry, a disagreement that became explicit with John Dewey's formulation of a progressive approach to education and its challenge to orthodox teaching approaches. How TESOL administrators manage these tensions, especially with the arrival of new immigrant groups who may embrace religions and scriptural traditions that teach different conceptions of morality, will challenge their wisdom and political deftness and have consequences for the community's many and varied traditions.

**SEE ALSO:** Agency and Marginalization; Communities of Practice; Critical Pedagogy; Diversity in the Classroom; Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Stereotypes in Teaching English; Respect and Politeness in Different Cultures; School Cultures; Social Justice; White Privilege in Classrooms and Institutions

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