What should students learn in the 21ˢᵗ Century?

The Value of Character Education

CENTER FOR CURRICULUM REDESIGN

Invited White Paper

by

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I. Should compulsory education curricula include character?

What do we mean by character? Typically one thinks of a combination of behavior, attitudes, dispositions, values, etc.

Asked whether character education should be included in the curricula in addition to knowledge and skills, my answer is definitely yes for a number of reasons. I will give you four decisive ones:

Firstly, knowledge and skills are not enough—they are mostly tools that can be used indifferently for either civilized or barbaric purposes. Knowledge and skills need to be directed by shared values for the sake of higher levels of civilization.

Secondly, we should remember that the risk of a return to barbarism is always at hand. We must also be conscious of what anthropologists always remind us: there persists an evident disagreement between our rational capabilities and our emotional ones. We carry the weight of our emotional baggage that derives from the Paleolithic era—this is a biological inheritance, which comes from small groups of hunter-gatherers who were struggling for survival. So the inherited anthropological constants are: insecurity, fear, intolerance of diversity, conformism, closed groups, gregarious instincts, willingness to obey (which is dangerous when associated with aggressiveness). Ninety-eight percent of our history is made of this: only in the last 10,000 years there has been an enormous cultural evolution with the growth of rationality. But rationality is a thin layer, only the surface of a solid bulk of instincts and impulses built and consolidated in the course of evolution. The clearest demonstration is revealed to us by the rapid barbarization, the loss of what we refer to as "humanity", of prisoners in extreme conditions such as concentration camps or gulags[1].

Conflicts between individuals and between populations are still on the agenda when resources are limited, when populations fight for the possession of the territory or for dominance over others or when individuals seek to move up the social hierarchy at all costs.

These are good reasons for recommending character education in an effort to contain violence and aggressive instincts in favor of behavior based on their control, respect for others and for diversity, looking for the solution of conflicts by peaceful means guided by rationality.

Thirdly, for psychologists and social psychologists, the emotional intelligence[2] and the social intelligence[3] should be specifically trained and educated. The main emotional skills are: self

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[1] see the book by Primo Levy, *If This is a Man?*

[2] see the work of Daniel Goleman

control, self discipline, listening skills, seeing things from a different perspective, assuming the role of the other, acceptance of delayed gratification, etc. These skills lead to the civic virtues that are keys to liberal democracy; but we must not forget that families are the first school for emotional intelligence. The first three years of life are key for the impact of this early learning for lasting consequences. Experience in childhood sculpts the brain. Depending on the social environment, family teachings and values can be positive or negative: in the worst conditions they can create strong emotional blocks and prejudices that are difficult to overcome rationally later on. Emotional illiteracy can have troubling consequences in interpersonal relationships and can create serious problems in dialogue and cooperation, even where there is no real reason. In my experience as an entrepreneur, when people collaborate in a team, the level of IQs and skills is evidently important but how well they accomplish their tasks largely depends of the degree of emotional intelligence they share. The ability to harmonize among themselves is what makes the difference. Emotional literacy programs at school will help young people to better fulfill their roles in life, becoming better parents, better citizens, better workers and leaders.

It is also known that we learn better when there is a match between our emotions and deep motivations, and moreover in learning processes the quality of interaction with others is fundamental. Intelligence and emotions cannot be separated because they are inextricably connected with each other. These are other good reasons for recommending character education in the curricula of compulsory schools.

Fourthly, according to some sociologists (such as Edgar Morin), the main educational goal in a society that tends to globalization should be the awareness and the teaching of the human condition: reminding us that we are crumbs in the cosmos, that we are physical, biological, cerebral, cultural beings.

The history of mankind will always include individual conflicting interests, rivalries, social conflicts, etc. Racism and exasperated nationalism are not historical fossils: they are ready to renew themselves and rise again. The planetary community has its enemy in ourselves. Beyond the still prevailing national identity there is a need to develop not only a European identity but, better still, a planetary one—thus becoming citizens of the world. In fact, we have a common destiny and common interests to pursue: peace, the respect of the environment, sustainable development, the growth of human capital, innovative research, etc. Today, we face the challenge of complexity and the school cannot ignore this: the school should reinforce and motivate the values of civilization that we have reached and extend them. Here too, character education is fundamental.

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[3] see the work of Greenspan

II. But which aspects of character should school curricula refer to?

For Amartya Sen, character should be ideally educated so that "every individual should be able to take control of his own life, participate with others in the decision processes that can change it, and should envisage alternative futures for himself consistent with his ambitions and preferences".

The European Commission has planned a project (2004) to promote "active citizenship for democracy". It asks for "direct citizen participation in civil society, community life and political life characterized by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with the principles of democracy and human rights."

I want to mention a specific aspect of character education: some people believe that schools must build character with the purpose of success in private life (family and social relationships) and in work (in competitive comparison with others). The latter is certainly to be considered, but not to be over-emphasized for two reasons:

Few people are very successful and a model that excludes the large majority is not ideal for everyone.

The insatiable hunger for success determines anxieties and unpleasant temptations (often dishonesty) and easily leads to frustration. Is not the crisis of 2008 the sign of the failure of a certain type of savage capitalism, for which success is the only end?[4]

I believe that the education of character should refer to a model aiming at a good balance between ambition and personal integrity based on correct self-analysis of points of strength and weakness compared to others. More than success at any cost with a generalized other, it seems important to me to be successful with ourselves and realize a sort of harmony between our potential, our ambitions and our values and live with satisfaction and well-being in a rich context of relationships and fulfillment (family, friends, colleagues).

It is questionable whether the school curricula should refer to all the aspects of character including the most private and intimate ones (that is the moral aspect of the character), or rather be limited to citizenship education (the public aspect of the character). It is evident that the education of the private aspects of one's character deals with the most complex components of single personalities: their particular systems of values and ingrained attitudes inherited or re-

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[4] See Cosmopolis, Cronenberg's recent movie.

elaborated from their history, experiences, and social environment. I believe that public schools must not penetrate nor aim to plagiarize or bend at their will this private and complex sphere of one's personality: public schools should be secular, open to everyone and should not teach moral, religious, nor metaphysical or dogmatic or overly-comprehensive doctrines, or an overload of questionable political ideologies. Instead, character education for citizenship (the public aspect of character) can more easily be part of a school curriculum as a basis for living together in a community. Schools can educate the character to a sense of responsibility, to live with others, to understand citizens' rights and duties.

We certainly are all different and the differences must be respected, but we have learnt that we can all be equal in rights and duties and it is on these assumptions that the school can legitimately concentrate on character education for citizenship.

III. But one might ask:

- *How is the compulsory school today?*

- *How can it educate character for citizenship?*

The following analyses are mainly focused on southern European countries, which I know better[5]:

1. How is the school today? This is the first question.

We can generally say that society, in times of globalization, has changed dramatically: the impact and potential of ICT, families are no longer a unique and stable model, more and different jobs during a lifetime, more mobility, an ageing population, migrations with continuous comparisons and confrontations of civilizations and values, etc.

Many today believe that investment in the education system is high enough (about 4% of GDP) and that its results are insufficiently effective: international surveys confirm low levels of learning at the end of schooling, high dropout levels, students' boredom and their loss of curiosity, a low level of shared ethical values and a lack of attention to the values of citizenship.

The main novelty is that the school has become a school for all (no one should be left behind). The school has therefore changed its nature and the kind of users; the school population today is very diversified. But in general the school has not revised its missions and its organization (in particular curricula contents, teaching methods and the training of teachers and principals).

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[5] Take note that each country has specific traditions and cultures, different levels of human capital and different school systems. Each country must find the solutions, which are appropriate to its history.

So schools must meet the challenge: not only knowledge, not only skills but also education for active citizenship. School cannot operate divorced from real life.

2. But there is a second question: How can schools educate character for citizenship?

There are a few essential conditions, which are heavily interconnected:

- *Firstly:* A review of curriculum content for the XXI Century, looking at key competences that will last for a lifetime.

- *Secondly:* New teaching methods (and greater personalization of teaching)

- *Thirdly:* Different training of teachers and principals.

- *Fourthly:* Re-organization of compulsory schools, especially in relation to time spent in school environment.

Element 1: New curricula for the twenty-first century

As far as education of character for citizenship is concerned, for some the declaration of human rights and the constitution are texts of civic education that should be known and studied as a discipline and their assimilation should be checked by tests at the end of compulsory education.

For others, civic education should not be a specific discipline, but one should plan a certain amount of compulsory hours necessary for the study and group discussion with teachers of these texts. Yet everyone agrees that these civic values and their good motivations should be embedded in all disciplines by all teachers. In order to avoid that they do not remain abstract (or hypocritical) values, they must also be demonstrated concretely in the organization and work of all the personnel of individual schools. Schools should be a concrete example of the practice of civic principles and rules, because they are the first institution young people meet outside their family. This unfortunately does not happen often enough, because in most cases schools and their personnel are not evaluated, not rewarded, not sanctioned.

Element 2: New teaching methods

Concerning teaching methods aimed to educate to citizenship, dialogue, discussion and interaction between students and teachers within small groups are commendable (cooperative learning, project work, analysis of past and present social problems etc.). The dialogues of Socrates are the ideal teaching model. "The disciple who does not ask does not learn", says the Talmud. Taken into consideration the variety of the school population, teaching should be more

personalized (in particular for the weakest and for the most talented). One should always take account of:

i.   the individual differences in talent;

ii.   the individual differences in the social environment in which one has grown up; and

iii. the different rhythms of students' intellectual development.

iv.   All this, we repeat, requires a strong personalization of teaching.

Element 3: New training for teachers and principals

School personnel must always remember that students learn easily all that responds to their own motivations and interests and that the quality of interactions with others (peers and teachers) is just as essential. Teachers and principals must understand the importance of training emotional and social skills so as to educate for citizenship. Unfortunately, in general, there is little in the standard education of teachers to prepare them for this kind of teaching.

Element 4: Re-organization of schools, especially in relation to an extension of time spent in the school environment

First of all, we should demystify the potential of the self-organisztion of education for young people in compulsory schools and avoid the risk of a foolish zapping. A school for all and highly personalized teaching require, in my view, a different organization and a substantial increase of time spent by students in the school environment. We suggest an extended school time in the afternoon: we definitely exclude extra time for teacher lessons, but we recommend a time of aided socialization with co-educators (not teachers, for example people such as university students or educated pensioners). A time for "growth", for personal development, full of stimuli and opportunities for engagement, not imposed but optional, in a safe environment, a time to cultivate their interests (sports, volunteer work, ICT, games, art activities, discussions and insights, laboratory work, etc.). This is a time for "growth" with the aim to help students to become responsible adults, making it very clear that the young can never be considered State or family property.

The enemy to defeat is empty time: empty of content and meaning, sometimes at high risk, a time that is often occupied by media, such as TV and Internet, which very often are "pirate educators" and expressions of economic powers that are indifferent to civic and educational dimensions and that consider young people mainly as potential consumers.

IV. Conclusion

According to Popper, the merit of liberal democracies lies in the sophisticated system of rules and procedures that:

a) aim to resolve conflicts without violence; and

b) allow the citizens control of the strong powers, as well as their replacement.

For Popper, liberal democracies protect from dictatorships and popular judgment operates as a people's court. He underlines the fact that liberal democracies are the most open to self-criticism and the most inclined to reform themselves.

All these aspects are matters of education for citizenship.

A certain degree of competition is essential to avoid stagnation, because competition is the driving force behind all forms of evolution and innovation, but it needs to be controlled by rules and procedures so to limit extreme outcomes.

In order to favor a good degree of social cohesion (avoiding the risk of anomie and a "beehive society") it is necessary that schools be committed to character education for citizenship. This entails educating the emotional and social intelligence of each student, making sure that they recognize a public set of rules and share public core values. Schools should promote these values, explain all the good reasons in their favor and, last but not least, schools should consistently embody them in their own organizational procedures and above all with the behavior of the teaching personnel.

I would like to repeat that a school overloaded with ideological content easily overflows into indoctrination and propaganda. For this reason a certain neutrality in schools is desirable, but not to the point of reticence with respect to constituent values of our civilization.

I quote the philosopher Savater: "school curricula cannot and should not be neutral regarding the refusal of torture, racism, terrorism ... about the defense of the social guarantees of health and education because they are not partisan options but civic conquests which we cannot deny without running into barbarism. Even the democratic system and our constitutions are not natural and spontaneous among men but have been conquered at a high price, both intellectual and political... They should not be sanctified. But what happens when there are no free elections and religious tolerance should be explained… all this without hiding from the students the limitations of democracy, but inspiring them with a prudent confidence in the corrective

mechanisms that the system provides if the participation of citizens in the public sphere is continuous and careful."

If the goal of character education for citizenship were shared by us as a priority, we should note the fact that today's schools neglect it. We should also register uncertainty and insufficient pressures on this matter behalf of our intelligentsia. After the war, because it was often deployed on opposite sides during the Cold War, its contribution has certainly not helped the process. But one cannot hope schools alone, with the present recruitment and training of personnel, can face such a complex and important task without strong support from the world of culture and policymakers.