Character Education: Implications for Critical Democracy

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Abstract: *The character education policy of a school board in Ontario, Canada, is interrogated from a critical democratic perspective. Character education is the deliberate effort by schools to teach values to students. An analysis of 181 documents shows that the policy advocates a traditional approach to character education by promoting a set of values it deems universal. Suggested teaching methods include direct instruction, modeling, practice, and serving others. I argue that the policy's traditional approach limits opportunities for students to learn to value diverse perspectives, consider the complexity of morality and decision-making, and develop a disposition towards critical thinking and a view of themselves as social actors. I conclude that this policy and other traditional approaches to character education must be abandoned if public schools are to reflect democratic commitments to equality, diversity, active participation in decision-making, critical-mindedness, social justice, and the common good.*

Formal character education is becoming commonplace in schools in Canada, England, and the United States. Character education is the intentional effort by educators to teach values to students. Character initiatives have been reintroduced in public schools in response to concerns about moral decline, school safety, social cohesion, civic engagement, and academic achievement (Winton, 2008).

Not everyone embraces character education, however. Character education is criticized for placing responsibility for societal issues on individuals rather than on political, economic, or cultural institutions (Kohn, 1997; Purpel, 1997). Character education is also viewed as an effort to create a more compliant and obedient workforce (Purpel, 1997) rather than a genuine effort to affect students' character. Finally, character education's assumption that there is a direct connection between what students see, hear, and do and what they learn is also criticized (Davis, 2003).

These critiques are directed at a particular approach to character education: the traditional approach. In fact, character education can take a number of forms

(Davis, 2003; Howard, Berkowitz & Schaeffer, 2004; Nash, 1997). The purpose of this paper is to determine the approach to character education promoted by Character *Matters!*, the character education policy of a school district in Ontario, Canada, and to identify implications of this approach for critical democratic education. Examination of Character *Matters!* is appropriate and since the Ontario government cites this policy as a model for school boards and has mandated that character education be implemented in every public school in the province (McGuinty, 2003; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006).

I begin by introducing my notion of critical democracy. I then briefly review various approaches to character education, introduce the context of Character *Matters!*, and describe the study's methodology. Next, I present the findings of my analysis and show that Character *Matters!* advocates a traditional approach to character education. Finally, I consider the implications of this approach for critical democratic education and argue that traditional approaches to character education must be abandoned if public schools are to reflect democratic commitments to equality, diversity, active participation in decision-making, critical-mindedness, social justice, and the common good.

Democratic Education

Preparing students for democratic life is a widely shared goal of public schooling in democracies around the world. There are, however, multiple and contested understandings of democracy (Cook & Westheimer, 2006; Parker, 1996). Some adopt a liberal understanding and define democracy in terms of individual and civil rights and representative government (Parker, 1996) while others define democracy as choice, and increasingly, as consumer choice (Apple, 2006; Osborne, 2001). Unlike these conceptions of democracy, a critical democratic perspective understands democracy as an ideal that is committed to equity, diversity, social justice, reasoned choices, and public participation (Solomon & Portelli, 2001).

Different understandings of democracy give rise to various conceptions of democratic education. From a critical perspective, democratic education aims to "foster the development of critical, engaged citizens committed both to creating a robust participatory and pluralistic democracy and to pursuing justice" (Glass, 2005, p. 83). This goal reflects the overlapping themes and principles of equality, equity, inclusion, power, diversity, participation, mutuality, discussion, debate, critical-mindedness that are common across various critical definitions of democracy (e.g., Apple, 2000; Cook & Westheimer, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 1998; DeJaeghere, 2005; Parker, 1996; Solomon & Portelli, 2001).

Critical democratic education encourages students to be open to different viewpoints, to value different perspectives, to take difference seriously, and to

recognize how a single issue may be understood in multiple ways (Solomon & Portelli, 2001). These attitudes are fostered by including multiple perspectives in the curriculum and discussions and by using culturally sensitive pedagogies (Hahn, 2001). Critical democratic education encourages students to respect an individual's or group's right to be different from the norms and values of the community as long as others are not harmed (Sehr, 1997). Further, critical democratic education draws attention to the contributions and ways of living of various groups in society and encourages students to value diversity and difference. Critical democratic education teaches that all individuals have equal standing (Gutmann, 1995).

Democratic educators with a critical perspective pay attention to both the explicit and hidden curricula and choose teaching approaches that recognize students as people who have contributions to make to the inquiry undertaken in classrooms (Osborne, 2001). These educators also demonstrate concern for human dignity and the rights of individuals and minorities (Beane & Apple, 1995).

Critical democratic education also attempts to teach students "how to engage together in respectful discussions in which they strive to understand, appreciate, and, if possible, resolve political disagreements" (Gutmann, 1995). These dialogues encourage and allow an open flow of ideas so that students can be as fully informed as possible (Beane & Apple, 1995). Controversial issues are discussed and recognized as an important way to expose students to ideas and values that they might not normally consider (Osborne, 2001). Similarly, the inevitability of conflict in democratic societies is understood, and students are encouraged to engage with conflict (Bickmore, 2006; Glass, 2005).

Critical democratic education prepares students to think critically (Glass, 2005; Osborne, 2001; Solomon & Portelli, 2001) and encourages a social outlook geared towards examining "commonsense" realities and power relations (Sehr, 1997). Students are encouraged and prepared to "evaluate and participate in the life of the present with the aim of shaping the future" (Osborne, 2001, p. 44).

Finally, critical democratic education aims to foster students' commitments to community (Osborne, 2001; Solomon & Portelli, 2001) and the common good (Beane & Apple, 1995; Sears, 2004). Inherent in these commitments is a belief in the importance of active participation in community organizations as a way to engage with conflicts about different beliefs about what is in the community's best interest (Glass, 2005). Critical democratic education encourages students to explore tensions between individual interests and the needs of fellow citizens (Osborne, 2001) and provides students with opportunities to participate in decision-making in schools.

Character Education

The current character education movement in Canada appears, at least on a rhetorical level, to share some goals with critical democratic education. For example, Ontario's Ministry of Education claims that its "Character Development Initiative challenges students to think critically about their world, anticipate problems, contribute to solutions, and develop higher levels of social responsibility" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 5).

Importantly, there are various models of character education that reflect different underlying assumptions. All of these models make "an explicit claim to mould character" (Davis, 2003, p. 34). Three "major approaches" are identified by Howard et al. (2004, p. 190): the cognitive-developmental approach; the caring approach; and the traditional character education approach. I review each briefly below.

Traditional character education, the most prevalent approach, places a primacy on behavioural habits and advocates the explicit teaching of specific character virtues. These virtues are purported to be "objectively good human qualities" (Lickona, 2003, p. 18) that transcend "cultural differences, ethnic differences, and socioeconomic differences" (DeRoche & Williams, 2001, p.5). Teaching and learning strategies associated with the traditional approach include direct instruction, teacher modeling, rewards, highlighting virtuous heroes in literature, and repeated practice of desired behaviours.

Traditional character education is criticized for perpetuating the status quo through its focus on *individuals* (Kohn, 1997). Advocates claim that traditional character education programs are needed to combat moral decline in society (DeRoche & Williams, 2001; Lickona, 1993). DeRoche and Williams (2001) list the following "social ills" as evidence of this decline in the USA: dysfunctional families; drug use and abuse; irresponsible sexual behaviour; sexually transmitted diseases; violence in families and schools; youth suicide and homicide; emphasis on sex and violence on television and in the movies; distasteful song lyrics; and a sense that youth are disrespectful, irresponsible, and lack civility. In linking these societal issues with individuals' character, traditional character education advocates avoid asking how economic, political, or cultural factors may create or contribute to these phenomena. Instead, they impart the responsibility to individuals and allow political, economic, and cultural institutions to remain unchallenged (Purpel, 1997).

Traditional character education also supports the status quo by promoting the Protestant work ethic and perpetuating classism (Kohn, 1997; Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005). In the current neoliberal context the Protestant work ethic links individual effort with material success. It suggests that individuals who do well

in the economy have earned it through their hard work and good character. Moreover, it constructs poor people and others in socially disadvantaged positions as responsible for their 'failures' since they lack the necessary aspects of good character to achieve success. Thus, these are the individuals who are constructed as the most deficient and in need of character education (Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005).

The second type of character education in fact includes a variety of approaches based on the work of Dewey, Kohlberg, and Piaget; these cognitive-developmental approaches emphasize experience, developmental processes and critical thinking (Howard et al., 2004). Unlike traditional character education, proponents of cognitive-development approaches believe that definitions of values are unstable and vary between contexts. Kohlberg, for example, believed individuals move through six stages of moral development (Crain, 1985). Students' progress through these stages can be encouraged through moral dilemma discussions and opportunities to act as moral agents.

Cognitive-development approaches are criticized for their moral relativism, and Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning in particular has been criticized for its claims of universal stages of moral development, gender bias, and for ignoring care as a basis for morality in addition to morality focused on justice and rights.

The impact of this final criticism is evident in a third approach to character education: the caring approach. This approach views caring relationships as the foundation of character development and believes it is a caring individual's attention to the feelings and needs of another that acts as the stimulus and basis for moral action and reasoning(Noddings, 2005). The caring relation is complete once the cared-for recognizes the caring and responds to it. Noddings (2005) urges educators to recognize that "although no individual can escape responsibility for his own actions, neither can the community that produced him escape its part in making him what he has become".

The caring approach requires that schools be organized in ways that facilitate and support the development of close, personal relationships. This may include smaller classes, less emphasis on standardized curricula, and more time given to discussing students' interests. Moral education occurs through teachers demonstrating caring, engaging students in dialogue about moral life, supervising students' practice in caring, and confirming students' best selves (Noddings, 2005).

Methodology

The focus of this study is Character *Matters!*, York Region District School Board's (YRDSB) character education policy. The YRDSB serves York Region,

a large geographical area (1,776 square kilometres) located just north of Toronto, Ontario, Canada that has a culturally and economically diverse population of almost one million residents (York Region, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

Character *Matters!* states that it "is committed to **high academic achievement** as well as **personal, interpersonal and citizenship development**" (emphasis in original, Havercroft, 2002, p. 2). The policy also promises that "[b]y incorporating character education into existing curriculum in an intentional and systematic manner, our schools can help foster the democratic ideals of citizenship, justice, thoughtful decision-making, and enhanced quality of life" (YRDSB, n.d.-g).

Data & Analysis

One hundred eighty-one documents were analyzed to determine the approach to character education advocated by Character *Matters!* The documents include texts produced by the YRDSB that explicitly focus on Character *Matters!*; *The Attribute*, "a character based e-newsletter" produced by the YRDSB (YRDSB, 2005, December 14); documents linked to the Character *Matters!* website or cited in documents available on the website but not published by YRDSB; and texts that are not explicitly connected to Character *Matters!* but are related to it through policy webs (Joshee & Johnson, 2005). The broad range of documents examined reflects the conception of policy as a field of activity (Hogwood & Gunn, 1990).

To begin the analysis I created two main categories: assumptions and teaching methods. Within each of these two categories I created subcategories to reflect the assumptions and teaching strategies of the traditional, cognitive-developmental, and caring approaches (Howard et al., 2004). These initial subcategories included: the assumption of universal values; the importance of context; direct teaching; role modeling; narratives; rewards; discussion; cooperative learning, etc. As I read through each document I highlighted phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that reflected the assumptions, and teaching methods of the three major approaches to character education and placed them (with the assistance of a qualitative software program) into the appropriate subcategory. The number of subcategories increased throughout the analysis as I identified assumptions and teaching strategies that were not included in Howard et al's (2004) classification of character education approaches but were evident in the documents (e.g., language, reflection, leadership, the assumption that behaviour reflects character).

After multiple readings of each document I then examined the data in each subcategory to ensure it was placed appropriately. Next, I grouped the subcategories according to the approach each one most closely reflected, and I

considered the amount and variety of data in each group. This process was not always straightforward since some strategies are advocated by more than one approach (e.g., modeling is a strategy identified by traditional character educators and caring theorists). In these circumstances I considered the context in which in the strategy is discussed to determine whether it was advocated as a method reflecting the assumptions of the traditional, cognitive-developmental, or caring approach.

Findings: A Traditional Approach

Character *Matters!* advocates a predominantly traditional approach to character education. This is evident in its underlying assumptions and in the teaching and learning strategies it advocates. I present these assumptions, strategies, and other findings and consider their implications for critical democratic education.

Universal Values

Character *Matters!* asserts that universal values exist. *Policy #380.0* (YRDSB, 2003), states "The principles and attributes of character education are universal and transcend religious, ethnocultural and other demographic distinctions" (p. 1). Ten of these (so-called) universal values[1] form the basis of Character *Matters!:* respect, responsibility, honesty, empathy, fairness, initiative, perseverance, courage, integrity, and optimism. (YRDSB, 2003).

A few documents acknowledge that individuals may hold other values and position these values as existing in addition to and *in subordination* of universal ones. The *First Annual Review* (Havercroft, 2002), for example, states that "[t]he ten Attributes of Character *Matters!* transcend differences and express our common humanity" (Havercroft, 2002, p. 5). Similarly, an article linked to the Character *Matters!* website, claims that "[t]he common values that hold our nation together do not infringe upon cultural uniqueness. Character education can enhance the values taught in each culture" (Coyne & Coyne, 2001, p. 59).

The assumption of universal values denies the possibility of legitimate value differences between individuals and groups. Instead, this assumption implies that everyone should share the values system advocated by Character *Matters!* (since it reflects *universal* values) and constructs those who do not as morally ignorant, morally underdeveloped, or perhaps even morally bankrupt.

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[1] Note that Character *Matters!* uses the term attributes rather than values. These attributes are, however, called values or virtues in other character education initiatives and are commonly described as such in academic, government and professional publications. Throughout this article I use the terms *attributes* and *values* interchangeably.

While the policy expresses confidence about the existence of universal values, it is ambivalent about whether or not these values are defined similarly. The claim that community members identified the policy's ten values suggests that these individuals also share an understanding of their meanings. However, the policy provides definitions for each one. This implies that Character *Matters!* does not assume that everyone defines the attributes similarly. Further, in providing definitions Character *Matters!* makes a claim about how the values *should* be understood (Bacchi, 2000).

On the other hand, the values' definitions are vague. Respect, for example, is defined as "We respect ourselves and treat others with courtesy, dignity, and positive regard. We honour the rights of others. We respect their belongings, the environment and the world around us" (YRDSB, n.d.-a, p. 1). In using the term respect to define itself, little clarity is provided. Similarly, responsibility is defined as "We are accountable for all our actions. We follow through on our commitments" (YRDSB, n.d.-a). This definition assumes a common understanding of accountability – a complex term with multiple meanings (Vibert, 2005).

The question about whether or not people define values similarly is an opportunity missed for furthering students' understandings of diverse perspectives and the need for on-going discussion. Rather than acting as if value differences do not or should not exist, differences could be explored through dialogue. Such discussions could also help students learn how to arrive at consensus as they work together to develop individual and collective definitions in their classrooms and schools.

Direct Teaching

Like other traditional approaches, Character *Matters!* assumes that character can and must be explicitly taught. *Policy 380.0* (YRDSB, 2003) states: "Good character is a cornerstone of a civil, just and democratic society; it can be both taught and learned". This statement is repeated often (e.g., Havercroft, 2002, 2004; YRDSB, 2002, n.d.-b, n.d.-g) and reflects the related assumption that character can be learned by students via direct instruction. The *First Annual Review* (Havercroft, 2002) declares: "The pre-skills, skills and attributes of Character *Matters!* need to be overtly modeled, taught and practiced by all members of the learning community" (p. 5).

The underlying belief that character can be taught is evident in Character *Matters!*'s central commitment to teaching its ten character attributes. The policy suggests a number of ways the attributes can be taught directly (e.g., posters, announcements, and a monthly focus on individual attributes), and the

Attribute provides teachers with lesson plans and resources for teaching specific attributes.

Unlike traditional character education advocates, Dewey (1916/1966) did not believe that values could be learned through direct instruction:

> [l]essons about morals signify as matter of course lessons in what other people think about virtues and duties. It amounts to something only in the degree in which pupils happen already to be animated by a sympathetic and dignified regard for the sentiments of others. Without such regard, it has no more influence on character than information about the mountains of Asia. (p. 354)

Importantly, direct teaching about values *may* persuade students to behave in ways that suggest they have internalized the values when they are actually doing so to avoid punishment or to please those with authority (Dewey, 1959). Like other traditional character education programs, Character *Matters!* ignores this possibility and encourages the use of rewards to reinforce demonstrations of desired behaviours/'good character'.

Awarding students for demonstrating behaviours that meet the prescriptions of Character *Matters!* teaches that conformity and compliance are desirable. At the same time, awards teach that dissent is not welcome and that dissenters are people lacking good character. In fact, despite its claims to prepare students for democratic citizenship, Character *Matters!* does not include any explicit references to dissent or its role in a democracy.

Role Modeling

Character *Matters!* encourages adults to model good character and identifies modeling as a key principle (YRDSB, 2003). One document tells teachers to "[m]odel the character attributes. This is perhaps the strongest of all the awareness and implementation ideas. Overtly suggest students follow your lead" (Kielven & Turnbul, n.d., p. 5). The emphasis on modeling promotes and demands conformity from teachers, staff and administrators as well as students. MacLure (2006) argues that recent education policies exert a discipline "upon the bodies, work, and subjectivities of education professionals and learners" that betrays "a strong fear of uncertainty, and a firm interest in regulating the work of professionals and practitioners" (p. 1). MacLure (2006) links the interest in regulating teachers' behaviour to neoliberal interests and discourses of "accountability, effectiveness, 'quality assurance', [and] standards" (p. 1). Emphasizing conformity to a single standard of good character (i.e., a set of prescribed behaviours) contradicts democratic commitments to diversity (Portelli & Vibert, 2001).

Curriculum Integration

Rather than a separate curriculum, Character *Matters!* expects that "character education will be interwoven through every aspect of school life" (YRDSB, n.d.-g). Numerous documents suggest ways to use the curriculum to teach and reinforce students' knowledge of Character *Matters!*'s ten attributes. Suggestions include "character tree[s]", "biographies of great people", and "letters of virtue in tech studies" (YRDSB, n.d.-d).

In a few instances the policy encourages teachers to use current events as a way to teach character. Rather than using the study of current events to explore different perspectives and the complexity of social and political situations, teachers are told to encourage students to identify examples of good character manifested in these events. This is the focus advocated when teachers and students examine literature as well.

Using narratives to teach character attributes is a strategy emphasized by Character *Matters!* and is common in traditional approaches (Nash, 1997). *Questions and Answers* (YRDSB, n.d.-g) explains that "[a]n English teacher may pay special attention to the character traits of a character in a novel or may point out such attributes as initiative, empathy and fairness in a poem".

The curriculum could be used to encourage critical thinking instead of as a means to teach a particular set of values and behaviours. The values the curriculum promotes could be interrogated to consider whose interests they serve and whose interests they marginalize, for example. Students could also contemplate the how different voices and versions of truth might be represented and the implications of these different perspectives. Students could investigate how social and political structures and institutions discriminate against some groups while privileging others and then learn how to uncover and challenge these structures. Through discussions students would hear multiple points-of-view, develop communication skills, and examine their own beliefs (Hébert, 1997) as well as develop a disposition towards critical thinking.

Developing Character through Action

Character *Matters!* views moral action as a key component of character development. This assumption underlies caring and cognitive-developmental approaches as well. However, unlike cognitive-developmental approaches that believe character develops *through* moral action, Character *Matters!* and other traditional approaches view action as means of applying and automatizing skills and knowledge. The 2004 Board Report explains: "It is imperative that multiple opportunities be designed for all students to practice good character. All students

need to practice until the knowing becomes a habit and the habit becomes an integral part of the person" (YRDSB, 2004, p. 7).

Students are encouraged to participate in a variety of activities, but those that involve charity work, serving others, or have an explicit character education focus are advocated most frequently. Character *Matters!* considers service learning to be "one of the most meaningful ways to teach responsibility, empathy and understanding" and "a wonderful way to encourage our students to become caring and responsible members of our community" (YRDSB, 2004, October 4).

Similarly, Character *Matters!* encourages students to become involved in charity work. Students and teachers are honoured in the *Attribute* and at Board Meetings for collecting toys, food, and clothing and raising money for the less fortunate. Most charity initiatives are designed to assist people in countries other than Canada. While attention to systemic inequalities among and between countries is important, the emphasis on helping individuals in other countries draws students' attention away from the structural problems in their own communities and the systemic factors that help create them. Furthermore, while the policy constructs being charitable is an appropriate way to be actively involved, the relative absence of activities that challenge unjust social, political and economic policies and practices constructs these activities as less appropriate or desirable.

Character *Matters!* also encourages students to become actively involved in committees, student councils, and other leadership opportunities. Notably, many of the leadership initiatives involve students explicitly promoting character education to other students. For example, students at one school:

> chair a Character Education Committee and organize two student-led Character Forums each year. Members of the committee are also responsible for selecting, printing and distributing "Words of Wisdom" (student issues with positive messages) to the teachers for discussion with their classes. (YRDSB, 2004, February 20).

Character *Matters!* also offers limited support for student participation in activities that challenge injustice. Participating in walks against male violence and racism, breakfast clubs, and posting anti-racism posters are suggested as ways to integrate character education into a school's program (YRDSB, n.d.-e).

Decision-Making

Character *Matters!* promotes the development of students' decision-making skills by providing opportunities for them to make decisions; these opportunities, however, are generally limited to serving predetermined ends.

Organizing character-based conferences, choosing classroom rules out of a set of rules followed previously, and chairing character committees limit students to making decisions that support rather than possibly challenge the schools' interests. There are a few instances, however, where the policy offers support for student decision-making without these constraints. For example, the *Attribute* suggests a resource that aims to "establish a foundation for an emerging movement that promotes democracy in education by engaging students in researching, planning, teaching, evaluating leading and advocating for schools" (YRDSB, 2004, April 5b).

Opportunities for students to make decisions about goals rather than simply about the means of achieving them are essential if students are going to develop a sense of themselves as agents in their personal, social, and civic lives. These opportunities will help students understand that there are often competing opinions about what goals should be pursued and will help them learn how consensus may be reached or, alternatively, how power differentials affect decision-making processes.

Diversity

Character *Matters!* goes some way to foster students' commitment to diversity and recognition of its importance to democratic life although its narrow definition of diversity and its emphases on shared values, behaviour, and language undermine these efforts. The policy explicitly promotes *recognition* and *celebration* of diversity. For example, an *Attribute* article invites students to enter a contest "celebrating and promoting respect for our diverse community" in honour of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (YRDSB, 2004, November 15). Another article describes a student group that holds an event "to highlight and celebrate the diversity of all cultures and to promote unity of all" (YRDSB, 2004, March 22).

Beyond accepting and celebrating differences, there are two instances in which the policy encourages teachers and students to value diversity. In one instance the *Attribute* promotes a conference for educators that provides them with "sources 'to develop the skills, attitudes, knowledge and disposition' needed to create learning environments that value diversity" (YRDSB, 2004, April 5a). A second article provides a link to the web site of *The Harmony Movement*. This organization aims to help teachers "deal more effectively with racism and cross-cultural issues" and to empower students "to develop their leadership skills in the area of diversity and social justice" (YRDSB, 2004, September 20).

Character *Matters!*'s support of antiracism initiatives further reflects its concern with diversity. School-based and board wide conferences focused on antiracism are described in the *Attribute*, and one edition encourages readers to "commit to

making each day a day dedicated to the elimination of all forms of discrimination" (YRDSB, 2005, March 21). Further, units on antiracism and discrimination are suggested as ways to integrate character education in the curriculum (YRDSB, n.d.-d).

While the significance of these initiatives must not be overlooked, their focus and the policy's claim that "[i]n Canada and in York Region, all races, religions, and ethno-cultural groups are respected and valued" (YRDSB, n.d.-c) show that Character *Matters!* adopts a narrow concept of diversity. This concept is limited to differences in culture, ethnicity, and religion. Other forms of difference, such as differences in language, sexual orientation, ability, gender, and economic status, are not normally part of discussions about diversity in the policy. In fact, the only case in which a wide range of differences is recognized is in the claim that "[t]o be Canadian suggests that one hold a perspective that transcends boundaries of race, ethnicity and culture, socioeconomic background, ability, faith, gender, sexual orientation and age" (Hogarth, 2005, p. 4). This claim silences dissenting voices, denies different perspectives, and essentializes what it means to be Canadian. Diversity is also constructed as something to be transcended – something to get past – rather than something to be valued for itself.

Thus, while Character *Matters!* does encourage recognition and respect for a narrow concept of diversity and the elimination of racism, the policy seems much more concerned with emphasizing and constructing similarities between individuals. This interest is not only evident in the policy's emphasis on shared values, it is also apparent in the policy's concern that everyone use the same *language* when discussing character education. The *First Annual Review* includes multiple statements about the need to develop and use a shared language (e.g., Havercroft, 2002), and teachers and parents are told to "[s]peak the language of the attributes" (YRDSB, 2002, p. 21).

Efforts to standardize students' and staffs' language reflects Character *Matters!*'s interest in regulating students' behaviour so that it conforms to expectations linked to the policy's ten attributes. The *First Annual Review* explains that the attributes "mark a standard for our behaviour as adults and youth across the system" (Havercroft, 2002, p. 4). Principals and teachers are encouraged to "Correct gently against the character attributes" (YRDSB, n.d.-c; n.d.-f, p. 7), and administrators are told to use them as a "focus for discussions about expectations of staff and student behaviour" (Havercroft, Kielven, & Slodovnick, 2004).

Finally, the attributes' definitions provide guidelines for how to behave when dealing with individuals who are different from one's self. For example, fairness demands that individuals "treat each other as [they at YRDSB] wish to be

treated… interact with others without stereotyping, prejudice or discrimination…[and] stand up for human rights" (YRDSB, n.d.-a). Definitions such as this one fail to address issues of difference directly and imply that it is one's behaviour rather than sentiment that is important when dealing with dealing with individuals' with different perspectives.

Conflict

Character *Matters!* emphasizes conflict resolution and avoidance and pays little attention to teaching students how to live with, and benefit from, conflict. While prevention may sometimes be desirable, conflict is inevitable in pluralist societies (Bickmore, 2004), and it can lead to possibilities that might not have otherwise been imagined. More specifically, the policy promotes peer mediation and teaching conflict resolution skills, and suggests a number of resources and tips for creating a peaceful classroom. These resources define peace narrowly as "the absence of direct violence and conflict" (Joshee, 2004, p. 150) rather than adopting a proactive view of peace that involves understanding and addressing underlying structural causes of conflict.

An *Attribute* article describes a school that has established a Character Matters*!* room intended to assist "students having difficulty managing in the classroom" (YRDSB, 2004, June 1). Here students receive counseling and support from child and youth workers, parents, teachers and administration. This approach to managing student behaviour reflects traditional character education's view that behaviour reflects the qualities of *individuals* rather than classroom environments or other contextual factors. Additional strategies for promoting conflict resolution skills advocated by Character *Matters!* include conferences, commercial programs, guest speakers, and initiatives designed to reduce bullying.

I am not suggesting that anti-bullying initiatives and conflict resolution skills are problematic or unnecessary; instead, I am troubled by the policy's construction of conflict as invariably negative and something that must be avoided or dissipated. I do not believe promoting conflict avoidance will prepare students to challenge injustice and the status quo. Instead, passivity and disengagement will be encouraged and students will be have limited opportunities to develop understandings of themselves as social actors (Bickmore, 2006).

Students should be provided with opportunities to experience conflict so that they understand the challenges and opportunities it offers. One way to do this is through the introduction and discussion of controversial topics (Hahn, 2001). Another strategy, which *is* advocated by Character *Matters!*, is to promote cooperative learning. Cooperative learning allows students to experience the tensions between balancing individual rights and the common good and helps

students learn to deal with these tensions (Hébert, 1997). Group work also encourages the development of intense personal relationships. Prolonged and intense relationships with individuals from dissimilar groups help students develop cultural consciousness and competence (Hébert, 1997).

To summarize, Character *Matters!* advocates a traditional approach to character education. This is evident by its fundamental assumption that there are universal values that are common to everyone. Teaching students to act in accordance with ten of these values is a primary goal of the initiative. Character *Matters!* also advocates student participation in activities that support the school's interests and the status quo; these activities include helping the less fortunate and promoting character education to other students. The policy offers some opportunities for student participation in decision-making but these too are limited by boundaries imposed by the school or school board. The policy goes some way to foster a commitment to diversity through its efforts to recognize, celebrate, and value different cultures, its anti-racism and anti-discrimination initiatives, and its support for cooperative learning. However, the policy's narrow definition of diversity and emphasis on shared values, behaviour, and language contradict these efforts.

Implications

The traditional character education approach advocated by Character *Matters!* offers little support for, and in some instances directly opposes, principles of democratic education. This has important implications for the pursuit of a more democratic society. The declaration of universal values, for example, excludes and silences dissenting voices and different perspectives while constructing the idea that there is one best value system for everyone. I believe excluding and delegitimizing perspectives different from the perspective promulgated in Character *Matters!* will perpetuate student and parent disengagement from schools. Parent and community engagement with their local school boards and/or school councils is important since these boards are supposed to provide opportunities for democratic discussion of education and to represent local interests (Osborne, 2001). If multiple perspectives are not part of these discussions, education will continue to promote the interests of society's most powerful citizens.

Character *Matters!*'s emphasis on the promotion and adoption of a single set of values reflects, supports, and advances a number of neoliberal and neoconservative interests and influences on education. First, it reflects the current emphasis on common standards in education. In this case, the ten attributes of Character *Matters!* provide standards for good character in the same way that a common curriculum in math supposedly does. The call for higher and

common standards reflects neoconservative and neoliberal concerns about "value for money" and "high quality" in education (Lather, 2004).

The introduction of standards and the tests that are used to measure whether the standards are being met has served to deprofessionalize teachers and regulate what is taught in classrooms (Apple, 2006; Portelli & Vibert, 2001). This regulation addresses a mistrust of teachers and other "wasteful" public servants. Beyond controlling *what* they teach, efforts to regulate teachers are increasingly evident at the level of language (MacLure, 2006). This is apparent in Character *Matters!* in its expectation that all staff use the same language and behave in accordance with the policy's attributes (YRDSB, 2003). Each of these expectations "serves and reflects the current policy climate of aversion to uncertainty, diversity and the exercise of judgment" (MacLure, 2006, p. 8).

Related to the fear of uncertainty and diversity is the neoconservative desire to return to the "good old days" (Apple, 2006; Nash, 1997; Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005). In this idyllic past, not only did students learn important, traditional knowledge, but they also were part of a common culture that held traditional values in high regard. Character *Matters!* reflects and addresses this fear by encouraging students and teachers to focus on what is (or should be) shared rather than different between individuals. This focus implies that differences are less desirable or problematic and directs attentions away from equity issues (Joshee, 2004).

The construction of difference as problematic is also reflected in Character *Matters!*'s focus on conflict resolution and avoidance rather than efforts to help students learn how to work through and benefit from conflicts inevitable in pluralist societies (Bickmore, 2006). Emphasizing resolution also directs attention away from why conflicts arise and serves to reinforce the policy's efforts to discourage or downplay difference and dissent. It also keeps the focus of conflicts on *individuals* rather than examining other factors that contribute to conflict. The focus on individuals extends beyond dealing with conflict, however; it is a central component of the traditional character approach. The focus on good and bad character (as exemplified by good and bad behaviour) directs attention to what *individuals* do rather than investigating the impact of economic, political, or cultural factors. Focusing on individuals allows political, economic, and cultural institutions to remain unchallenged (Purpel, 1997).

Character *Matters!*'s construction of (some) adults as having good character and its suggestion that children either have poor character or no character at all perpetuates deficit thinking about young people. This deficit view is reinforced through the direct teaching approach advocated by Character *Matters!*. This approach expects students to learn and practice the ten attributes as directed and does not view students as having anything to contribute to their learning.

Rewarding students for demonstrating desired behaviours further reflects this negative view of students and positions them as "objects to be manipulated rather than as learners to be engaged" (Kohn, 1997, p. 158).

While Character *Matters!* does encourage students' active participation in their community, an integral part of democratic citizenship (Glass, 2005), most of the activities promoted support the schools' interests and the status quo. Charity work and supporting the state's interests are constructed as desirable and sufficient ways to be involved in civic life while critical examinations of policy, participation in policy development, political advocacy, and protest are not.

Traditional approaches to character education must be abandoned if public schools are to reflect democratic commitments to equality, diversity, active participation in decision-making, critical-mindedness, the common good, and social justice. Rather than imposing a static set of values to be learned, I believe teachers should engage students in on-going conversations about the complexity of values and morality. For example, a discussion about courage could explore if, how, and in what ways context affects understandings of what it means to be courageous. Other questions to consider include: how might courage be displayed differently by different people? Why might an act be deemed courageous by some and not others? How might an individual's courage affect others?

Values that underlie classroom, school, and state curricula and other policies should also be examined. Students and teachers can discuss whose values they reflect and whose interests they serve. Alternatives can be considered and critiqued to identify who will benefit from different options and who might be penalized. These conversations recognize the importance of values in individuals' lives and society more broadly without assuming that there are certain values with fixed definitions that those with good character possess. Instead, they leave the door open for new and multiple points-of-view and help students learn to live with the differences and conflicts that characterize democratic societies. They also encourage students to envision and work towards a more equitable society.

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