

THE EXPERTISE OF MORAL CHARACTER

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**Presented By**

**Darcia Narvaez, Ph.D.**

**University of Notre Dame**

For the past several years my colleagues and I, in partnership with the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, have been developing a model for character education in the middle grades that we call “Community Voices and Character Education.”<sup>1</sup> Our work has been guided by four considerations. First, we adopt a skills-based understanding of moral character. This is not a new idea. Plato, for example, in *The Republic*, repeatedly draws an analogy between the training and practices of the just person and the training and practices of skilled artisans and professionals. A just person is one who has particular, highly-cultivated skills that have been developed through training and practice.<sup>2</sup>

Second, like Plato, we believe that character development is a matter of nurturing skills towards high levels of expertise. Our work is guided by recent advances in cognitive science regarding the nature of expertise and its development.

Third, the pedagogy driving our model holds several educational advantages. Here I mention just three. (1) Our model assumes an active cognitive approach to learning, which is

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1 The project director is Connie Anderson at the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning. The University of Minnesota was subcontractor for design and evaluation. My role is project designer. My colleagues in this project are Leilani Endicott, Tonia Bock, and Jim Lies. The project is funded by grant #R215V980001 from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

2 “Then this turning around of the mind itself might be made a subject of techne...what are commonly called excellences of the mind...are not in fact innate, but are implanted by subsequent training and practice;” (*Republic*, book six, part seven, 518: d-e).

central to best practice instruction. (2) Our model opens character education to greater accountability in that skills are teachable and their progress can be measured. (3) Our model insists that character development be embedded within standards-driven academic curriculum, for this is the only way character education can be sustained.

Finally, we contend that a curricular approach to character education must be in collaboration with “community voices.” The implementation must reflect the commitments of the local community and the needs of its citizenry. The issue of “whose values will be taught?” is best approached by embedding educational goals within the value expressions of particular communities.

All four of these orienting assumptions have guided our work in Minnesota. I would like to flesh out some of these ideas by briefly addressing five questions. (1) How do children learn? (2) How are experts different from novices and how did they get that way? (3) What do people of good character know? (4) How do we nurture good character in schools? (5) How can a program be sustained?

### **1. How Do Children Learn?**

One approach to instruction essentially assumes that the child is passive in her own learning. The child’s job is to attend, receive, store, and recall. In this approach, the teacher “pitches” information and the student must “catch” it. Learning is a matter of catching what the teacher pitches. This conception of learning is inaccurate. Children learn from their interactions with people and objects (Reed & Johnson, 1998; Piaget, 1970); they formulate a set of individualized representations of the world (Piaget, 1952); they construct networks of conceptual associations or schemas (Rumelhart, 1980; Taylor & Crocker, 1981). With experience, schemas increase in complexity (Schank & Abelson, 1977) and if a person becomes very good at

performing and solving problems in a particular area, we call that person an expert.

## **2. How Are Experts Different From Novices?**

Experts are different from novices in three significant ways. First, there are differences in the size, complexity, and organization of knowledge schemas (Chi, Glaser & Farr, 1988; Sternberg, 1998). Those with more complex schemas in moral judgment are able to say more about a moral dilemma and recall more from a moral story (Narvaez, 1997; Narvaez, 1998).

Second, experts see the world differently (Neisser, 1967). Their deep and vast pattern matching capabilities allow experts to notice things that novices miss. For example, among auditors, those with more complex moral judgment schemas are more likely to find questionable entries in financial statements and they are more likely to report them (Poneman & Gabhart, 1994).

Experts also possess well-developed sets of procedural skills. Unlike novices, experts know *what* knowledge to access, *which* procedures to apply, *how* to apply them, and *when* it is appropriate (Abernathy & Hamm, 1995). More generally, experts approach problems conceptually. They look for the underlying grammar or structure in a problem, while novices get bogged down or distracted by surface appearances (Novick, 1988). For example, expert classroom teachers can recognize the pre-conditions for misbehavior and have a set of tools they can employ to circumvent it. In contrast, the novice teacher often misses the cues until the classroom is well out of hand (Berliner, 1992).

Expertise is a notion that has gained prominence among educational researchers. Indeed, some contend that intellectual abilities are best viewed as forms of expertise (Sternberg, 1998; 1999). Children move along a continuum from novice-to-expert in each content domain that

they study. We adopt this perspective for moral character.

How do experts become experts? To develop expertise, one must master the defining features and underlying structures of the domain and focus on them during extensive practice. These conceptual tools and general principles enable them to detect meaningful patterns and solve problems (Abernathy & Hamm, 1995). Further, their practice is focused, extensive and coached (Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Roemer, 1993).

### **3. What Do People of Good Character Know?**

In Minnesota, we spent several years in consultation and collaboration with educators to construct a framework for character development that draws on reviews of research (Bebeau, Rest, & Narvaez, 1999; Rest, 1983; Narvaez & Rest, 1995) and builds on the foundations I have just outlined (Narvaez, Mitchell, Endicott & Bock, 1999). Persons of good character have better developed skills in four areas: ethical sensitivity, ethical judgment, ethical motivation, and ethical action. Each of these four processes has seven skills, along with suggestions for subskills (Narvaez, Endicott & Bock, in press). The skills and subskills are the schemas that students need to build for good character and for good citizenship. For example, experts in the skills of Ethical Sensitivity are better at quickly and accurately ‘reading’ a moral situation and determining what role they might play. Experts in the skills of Ethical Judgment have many tools for solving complex moral problems. Experts in the skills of Ethical Motivation cultivate an ethical identity that leads them to prioritize ethical goals. Experts in the skills of Ethical Action know how to keep their “eye on the prize,” enabling them to stay on task and take the necessary steps to get the ethical job done. Our model is appropriate for understanding character development because it provides a wholistic, concrete view of the moral person. Yet identifying the skills, or the curriculum, is not enough for a successful character development program.

#### 4. How Do We Nurture Good Character in Schools?

What not to do. Like many experts, some teachers forget what it is like to be a novice (Hinds, 1999; Whitehead, 1929). Some educators believe that presenting a list of virtues is nearly as clear to the students as it is to them. Although the label, ‘honesty,’ is convenient for the adult in chunking all sorts of experiences in memory, a child has few experiences to draw on. Labeling a complex set of behaviors with a single word or story does not help the novice or the child. A story’s moral theme that seems so clear to an adult is not the theme many children take away (Narvaez, 2002; Narvaez, Bentley, Gleason, & Samuels, 1998; Narvaez, Gleason, Mitchell, & Bentley, 1999). For example in one study, third graders on average extracted the intended theme only 10% of the time (Narvaez, Gleason et al, 1999). Research shows that knowledge application is necessary to build expertise.

What educators should do. Here are three recommendations.

1. *Educators must take on the responsibility of intentional character skill instruction* instead of a hit-or-miss approach.

2. *Educators must provide authentic learning experiences based on levels of apprenticeship.* Four levels of learning or apprenticeship are suggested (Narvaez et al, in press): (1) Pattern detection by immersion in relevant examples, (2) Attention to critical detail, (3) Practice procedures, (4) Integrate knowledge and procedures. Educators must present the defining features of each skill—of showing respect, of showing care, of persevering. Teachers need to make sure students have many opportunities to build their own understandings or schemas from practice while teachers guide them through the terrain of the domain. As apprentices of good character, students need to be immersed in authentic learning environments,

taking on increasing responsibility, refining their sensibilities and strategies as they gain more experience (Marshall, 2000; Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, & Goldsmith, 1995). In schools that create “just communities”—where virtually all school decisions are made by the student-faculty collective, the defining features of democratic decision making are laid out and practiced. Students develop skills for participatory democracy, commitment to collective norms and personal responsibility (Power, Kohlberg, & Higgins, 1989).

*3. Educators must arrange learning experiences in a variety of collaborative community contexts.* Schools can provide opportunities for skill development by encouraging broad engagement with the community so that students can learn, apply, and hone their ethical competencies in real-life settings. The elders, leaders, and all citizens in the community are “funds of knowledge” and can be partners in coaching the students in their skill development. For in reality, students are apprentices to the community.

## **5. How Can a Program Be Sustained?**

I present the ethical expertise model to teams of educators and ask that they include in their implementation design the following characteristics critical to sustainability.

*1. Integrate ethical skill development into standards-driven instruction.*

*2. Teach character across the curriculum in every subject and activity.*

*3. Involve the whole community in adapting the model to local structures.* The full spectrum of the community must be involved in the adoption and adaptation of a program. In fact, each implementation of the model is unique because it is locally envisioned and locally controlled.

What about student outcomes? Our post-test data are just now being organized. But in a pilot study comparing participating classrooms with non-participating classrooms, we found

significant increases only in the participating classrooms for prosocial responsibility, ethical identity and prosocial risk-taking (Narvaez et al. 2000).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Moral character is best thought of as a set of teachable, ethically-relevant skills. Ethical skill instruction should be embedded in standards-driven pedagogy. Ethical skills should be taught across the curriculum. With such an education, students will develop schemas of goodness and of justice. They will learn routines of helping and of reasoning. They will learn skills of leadership and of commitment. With these skills they can take responsibility for ethical action in their neighborhoods and communities. They will be energized by memories of personal ethical action. With these skills, students are empowered to be active citizens who will make the fate of the nation their own.

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