

CATALYZING CHARACTER

VOLUME 1 | ISSUE 2

CHARACTER AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF REFLECTION

EMBRACING THE POWER
OF SONG IN CHARACTER
EDUCATION

BECOMING A COMMUNITY
OF INQUIRY

CAREER AND THE CROWDING
OUT OF CHARACTER IN
HIGHER EDUCATION

STUDENT KINDNESS:
A GLIMPSE AT META-DATA

PSYCHOLOGICAL
INTEGRATION AND
THE GOOD LIFE



BOSTON COLLEGE

Carolyn A. and Peter S. Lynch

School of Education and Human Development

DEAN

Stanton E. F. Wortham

FORMATIVE LEADERSHIP EDUCATION TEAM

Martin Scanlan

Chris Higgins

Samantha Deane

Melodie Wyttenbach

Ksenia Filatov

Harrison Mullen

Eric Roland

EDITOR

Samantha Deane

DESIGN

Ksenia Filatov

Catalyzing Character is published by the Formative Education Department within the Carolyn A. and Peter S. Lynch School of Education and Human Development at Boston College. This magazine is an initiative of the Formative Leadership Education Project funded by the Kern Family Foundation, and showcases thought leadership across the Kern Partners for Character and Educational Leadership (KPCEL) and beyond.

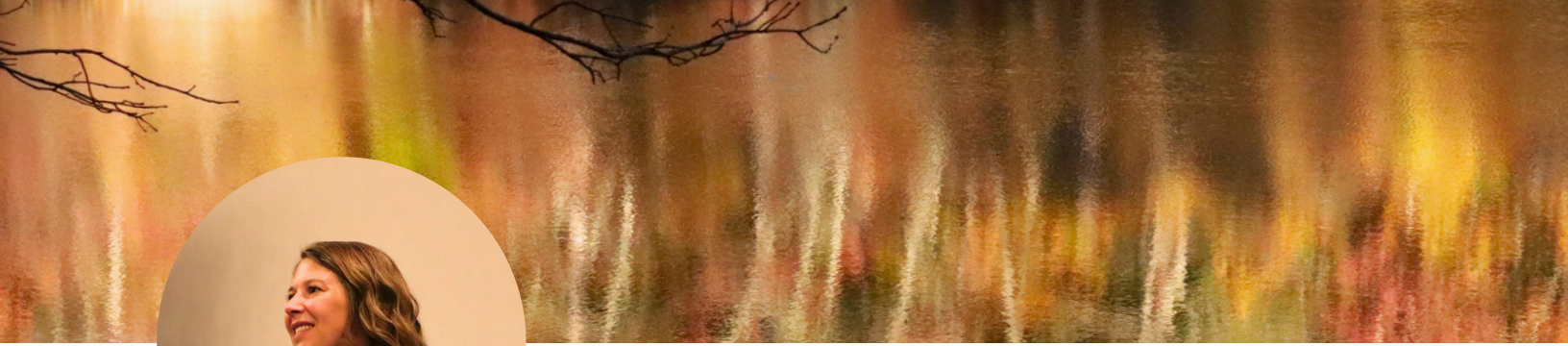
CONTACT US

lsehd-dfe@bc.edu

formativeleadershipeducation.bc.edu

CONTENTS

- 4** **EDITOR'S NOTE**
Samantha Deane
- 6** **VOICES FROM THE FIELD ON FORMATIVE LEADERSHIP EDUCATION**
Katelyn Preble
- 9** **EMBRACING THE POWER OF SONG IN CHARACTER EDUCATION**
Tiffany Thompson
- 14** **WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT? CHARACTER AND THE
TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF REFLECTION**
Matt Post and Scott Parsons
- 22** **BECOMING A COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY**
Lori Doyle, Ashley Betkowski, Nancy Winfrey, and Samantha
Deane
- 29** **STUDENT KINDNESS: A GLIMPSE AT META-DATA**
Steven Bourgeois
- 39** **CAREER AND THE CROWDING OUT OF CHARACTER IN HIGHER
EDUCATION**
Dustin Webster
- 43** **PSYCHOLOGICAL INTEGRATION AND THE GOOD LIFE: CHARACTER
EDUCATION FROM A SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY PERSPECTIVE**
Sieun Park



Cover photo: by Ksenia Filatov



Samantha Deane, Ph.D., is a philosopher of education, outgoing Director of the Formative Leadership Education project at Boston College, and currently a Senior Research Associate at the Center for Social Concerns, University of Notre Dame. She is the author of *Democratic Education in an Armed Society* (2023).

EDITOR'S NOTE

For educators, fall is a time of anticipation and beginnings. But it also brings comfort. Routines are redrawn, new students and teachers join us, and yet the familiarity of school supplies, the echoes of voices in the hallway, and the arrival of sweater weather welcome us back to the patterns and rhythms of the school year. In the fall, we encounter the balance of risk, return, and revival.

Risk, return, and revival are a useful set of ideas for catalyzing character explored in this issue. At the 2023 Kern Partners for Character and Educational Leadership (KPCEL) convening, the setting for the first group of articles in this issue, we probed together the ways in which creativity and artistic endeavors invite us to risk our stable notions and habits for more fulsome and fluid ways of knowing and being. In this spirit, Doris Sommer argues, in her book *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (2014), that art can train our faculty of judgment. She holds that “making and thinking about art” compels participation and reanimates our commitment to shared human flourishing. For example, leaders who think like artists invite bottom-up creativity and innovation (e.g. play), but at the same time risk failure. Antanas Mockus, former mayor of Bogota, puts it this way, “There’s a trap in this business of advising leaders to play games...because respectable officials want good results, and good results are not easy to ensure in games that are not daring enough to break bad habits.” (Chapter 1, Sommer)

Reflecting on risky leadership and character, I found myself musing about teaching. Are my courses daring enough to break bad habits? Does my teaching reanimate our commitment to shared human flourishing? When we are lucky, the educative encounter can feel like an aesthetic experience—that is, an experience so consuming and total that it awakens us to the common good. When class is going better than I planned, when everyone is engaged, and when ideas are taken up and integrated into practice, it feels as if something magic unfolds. Yet, in my ten years of teaching, I can count, on my hands, the few times a classroom felt like this. I suspect this is in part because the ability to be consumed is so contextual. Students and teachers have to be in the right frame of body, ready for the context, willing to trust peers, open, and alive.

The two articles on what it means to inhabit a community of practice explore these themes further. They query the balance of risk and trust that unfolds in and among colleagues who come together to explore the praxis of character education. And the issue's second set of articles suggest fruitful avenues for considering how one might take up the risk, that is return and revitalize, the practice of formative character education.

As you read and reflect, I invite you to consider: what risks must you take to catalyze formative character education and reanimate a shared commitment to human flourishing?

As one of many shepherds of the KPCEL network for the last few years, one thing I can tell you is that friendship makes the work of character education far more rewarding. My success in leading the growth of the KPCEL or inspiring new modes of practice is a testament to the friends who supported, critiqued, and participated in the work. Friendships are funny things; yes, that is how Aristotle put it. But academic friendships are even more so. In my tenure as a conference-going academic, I have not met another group of individuals who are so willing to share, collaborate, and get to work. In the three years with you all, I've encountered true friends of virtue.

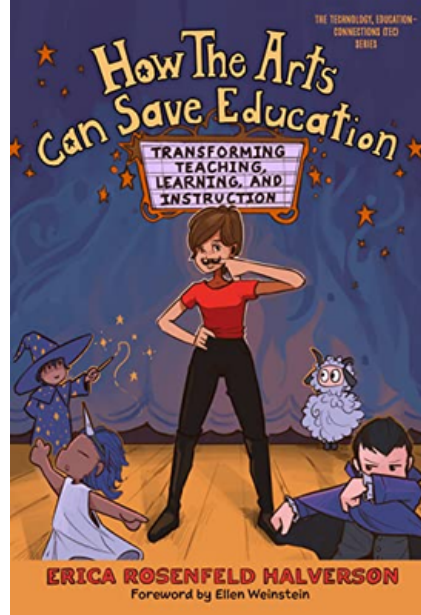
For this reason, I have no doubt that my transition to the University of Notre Dame is not a goodbye. It is merely an opportunity for all of us to do more good work together. ■

Voices from the Field: Community Formation at the 2023 KPCEL Convening

KATELYN PREBLE

Organized around the theme Formative Leadership and Character Education With and Through the Arts, the 2023 Convening emphasized the creative and communal act of character education. During the convening, the Formative Leadership Education (FLE) team conducted short interviews to gather your insights into catalyzing character in our schools and communities. I was struck by the network’s passion for arts education as a means to educate students of good character and the sense that the arts are an intrinsically formative experience. Many of you shared stories of finding solace in the arts, emphasized the joyous effect the arts had on your school community, and noted innovative modes for the use of arts in character education.

Photo of KPCEL 2023 Convening by Ksenia Filatov



Below: photo of keynote speaker, Erica Halverson, at the KPCEL 2023 Convening by Ksenia Filatov. Left: the cover of Erica’s book, “How the Arts can Save Education” (2021)



As I reflect on the 2023 convening and the growth of the KPCEL (in 2023 we were 120 strong; just one year later in 2024, we were 160 and growing), I am inspired by the ways you affirmed the holism of character education. Moreover, it became clear, during our gathering, that any endeavor to educate character must involve insights and practices from the arts, such as creativity, community, and collaboration.

The Energy of Our Community

One of the most unique characteristics of the KPCEL is the diversity of focus areas and career sectors. The network welcomes leaders from across the character education field: teachers, administrators, data analysts, professors, higher education leadership, and many more. This diversity is an affordance. For example, Steve Sosland, representing the Texas Tech University System, emphasized the expanding possibilities of the KPCEL community:

I think there are a lot of us who thought that we were alone in this work only to find out that there is a community committed to character. There is a major issue that's facing our nation, our world, and that is—how do we prepare the next generation for the complex world that they're going to lead? At the convening, we can find that a lot of us are on these parallel paths, because we are facing the same problem.

Steve was not alone in this excitement about the KPCEL community. Our interlocutors expressed a lot of admiration for each other, testifying to what they had learned from their fellow network members. Jose Rosario, from the Center for Urban Teaching, referred to the community as “people who are dedicated to doing the good work.” The “good work”, of course, is their commitment to bettering the lives of their students and the educational leaders of tomorrow. Emily Farkas, from Grand Canyon University, also felt this liveliness asserting the possibilities of character education as energizing:

The most exciting thing about character education is the potential that it can create a ripple effect of good in society.



Photo of KPCEL 2023 Convening by Ksenia Filatov

Growing Together Through the Arts

Photo of Melissa Forte at the KPCEL 2023 Convening by Ksenia Filatov

This “ripple effect of good” was also reflected in participants’ experience with the arts. Anna McEwan, from Samford University, recalled her experience using theater in her third-grade classroom. She emphasized the arts as an opportunity for her students to get to know who they are and who they want to become:

We did a play, Jason and the Argonauts. Jason was played by a little boy who had a learning disability. He did not behave well in class, but he grew into that part and his relationships with other children changed. From that moment on, every fall, I made sure that we did some kind of theatrical shared experience, because it changed the community of the classroom for the entire year. It was transformative for me as a teacher. I realized the power of the arts and what it did to the community.

Anna’s anecdote reveals the benefits of the arts to school, culture, and community. Throughout the interviews, participants shared how the arts function as an organic means to learn about and grow into the person you hope to become, and, subsequently, have a positive effect on your community. Melissa Forte, Lance Forman, and Robin Cayce from Lipscomb University showcased their films which feature morally demanding situations.



When asked to draw the connection between formative character education and the arts, Melissa said:

We create characters on screen that have complex lives like every human being does. And, I feel like it's a way for students to connect with situations through the characters they see. You encounter many different people from many different backgrounds and many different perspectives, and I think the better we are, as human beings, at being able to step into someone else's shoes or understand someone else's perspective, the more likely it is that our students will create kind and just communities.

KPCEL 2023 CONVENING

Formative Leadership and Character Education With and Through the Arts

April 18–20, 2023



Chris Stawski with the Kern Family Foundation agreed, explaining that the arts can help us build relationships and develop our moral code:

For the formation of character, storytelling can be a very powerful device, both in terms of framing one's personal narrative and identity formation, but also in relation to connecting with others, understanding their stories, and where they're coming from on their journeys as it relates to trying to do the good and be the good in their lives.

Chris and Melissa affirm that storytelling through the arts is a vital form of character education.

Growing Ourselves in the Arts

To explore the spirit of formative education, we asked interviewees to share their formative experiences in the arts. Many reflected on the arts as shaping their character development. For example, Michelle Staack with Great Minnesota Schools observed:

I grew up dancing and playing musical instruments, and I think that taught me, in terms of character development, a lot of discipline and creativity that I don't know I would have necessarily received from other parts of my upbringing.

Similarly, from Franklin Covey Education, Erin Fitzgerald expressed that the arts were integral to her development as a leader. In her interview, she articulated the spirit of the 2023 Convening:

In my formative years, the arts were very important. I was in choirs and theater, and it gave me a community. It also gave me an opportunity to lead. When you get a solo, when you are working backstage at the theater, when you get to have your first monologue—it's a different kind of leadership. I think that when we talk about leadership with kids in their formative years, everything is an opportunity to lead because the first people we lead in our lives are ourselves. So when we begin to start to lead ourselves, we grow the character and the skills we need to then go forward and lead others. And I think the arts really give kids an opportunity to find that in a different way.

Uniting formation, the arts, and leadership education, Erin emphasized how the arts can help students develop confidence in themselves as leaders.



Conclusion

The interviews reveal a palpable energy and excitement for the possibilities of the arts to catalyze character. Whether it was sharing a formative experience as a young child or discussing the benefits of taking time for art in adulthood, the arts invite a creative energy to the work of crafting a good life. If the arts offer diverse experiences that care for and develop each student as a whole and unique individual, then it has been character education all along. ■



Katelyn Preble is a senior at Boston College with a double major in Applied Psychology and Human Development and Transformative Education Studies. She is interested in special education curriculum and educational law and policy.



Photo of Tiffany performing at the 2023 KPCEL convening by Ksenia Filatov



Tiffany Thompson is a former CIA leadership analyst, award-winning songwriter, and founder of Artistic Leadership Productions, a team development and creative agency.

Embracing the Power of Song in Character Education

TIFFANY THOMPSON

Imagine starting every day by singing these words:

Strong hearts.

Wise minds.

They can seem so hard to find,

But if we keep on trying,

They will bloom in time.

What if you tried singing them right now? Just pick a few notes. If you give it a chance, you might find the words sneak past your inner critic and touch your heart. This is the power of art.

In the 19th century Leo Tolstoy described art as “a means of union... indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity.” Today, fostering communion and well-being among diverse people, and within oneself, continues to be crucial for human flourishing. Thankfully, arts-based education and alternate modalities are becoming more common in education institutions and learning programs. In a 2021 study in the Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies titled “Towards a Model of Leader Character Development: Insights From Anatomy and Music Therapy” researchers demonstrated that music impacts the physiological and affective systems by influencing the autonomic nervous system, which responds to rhythm, pitch, and dynamics. Music not only induces emotional reactions and improves mood. It impacts our capacity to pay attention, to be open, and to work with new ideas and people.

In an essay for Comment Magazine online, I explore how across the globe and throughout history, music combined with narrative has been essential to transmitting values and information across generations and geography.

In Africa, singing historians known as Griots are community leaders. In Europe, troubadours and bards educated royal courts. In Latin America, Corridoes and



protest music shape the political imagination of citizens. And in North America, we only need look to Alan Lomax, Lead Belly, Dylan, Tupac, Taylor Swift or Beyoncé. Music isn't just transmitting values, it shapes them.

It is against this backdrop that I developed a communal songwriting pedagogy aimed at unlocking connection, curiosity, creativity, compassion, and courage. Drawing from my experience as a CIA analyst, songwriter, facilitator, and recording artist, I created a three-part process that guides participants through solo reflection, small group sharing, and large group collaboration to create a song together. A fusion of music, creative writing, poetry and singing, communal songwriting offers a powerful modality for contemporary character educators who aim to nurture the whole person. It creates space for educators and leaders to invite the creative spirit of each participant to show up and express. Ideas begin to move from the head into the heart, the place where transformational character formation ultimately occurs.

Songwriting Pedagogy at 2023 KPCEL Convening

At the 2023 KPCEL Conference, I led ten of our community members through this communal songwriting workshop. The session encouraged reflection and engagement with the two themes highlighted in Stanton Wortham’s keynote and the community virtues that emerged during the conference’s interactive workshop:

- Themes: wise minds, strong hearts
- Virtues: diversity of thought, inclusion, spirit of generosity, openness

Part One: Introductions

The workshop began with a two-part introduction: share your name and one way you express your creativity or practice art. This establishes an invitational space where “closet artists” and “creative spirits” are welcome. Since we usually don’t talk about hobbies and art in the same spaces as moral formation or character education, investing time in creating a collaborative and inclusive atmosphere prepared participants for the deeper work ahead.

After the room buzzed with a bit of connection, I shared the customized prompt and asked people to silently reflect on and journal about their answer.

Ideally, digital tools are not used—unless for accessibility reasons—and pencils and paper are provided. In the case of our 2023 KPCEL workshop, the prompt was:

Pick a topic: wise minds or strong hearts. Bring to mind a personal story or moment where you experienced this topic in your life or through an exemplar. What colors do you see? What do you smell? How do you feel in your body? Be as sensual, descriptive, and detailed as possible.

Ideally, groups have about 15 minutes for this portion, but if time is tight, you can trim it.

Part Two: Connecting

Next, I broke the participants into small groups of two. Participants should be with people they don’t know well. They spent the first part of this time listening to each other’s reflections. After each person has been heard, the group begins to identify common themes or core differences in their experiences. These creative notes are fused into rhyming couples and delivered to me at the close of this section.

Here are a few examples from the KPCEL workshop:

*We must shine a light for courage
An unwavering beat to guide others to
flourish*

*We will stand with this power
We will serve at this formative hour*

*To flourish we are intentional now
Knowing this too shall pass somehow*

Part Three: The Song

After the small groups established the lyrical direction, I can layer it over a pre-written melody or go away to work on the song while the group takes a break. Because the KPCEL workshop was 45-minutes, I brought a structure and melody with me. [Listen to what we created here.](#)

Given the novelty of this learning experience, it is important to unpack the implications of this modality with the participants.

For KPCEL members, I asked a few key questions:

- How did you practice our community virtues today?
 - diversity of thought
 - Inclusion
 - spirit of generosity
 - openness
- How could you deploy something like this in your character formation programming? What are the challenges to weaving this type of arts education into core programming?

Following the event, KPCEL co-organizer, Dr. Samantha Deane shared, “One of the beautiful things about this pedagogy was it invoked an iterative and reflective movement between the private and the public. In other words, creating in this way forced me to share and then articulate with another person, my private experiences. It wasn’t just that my partner and I each wrote a line, we found ways to see the different sources of our experience (mine with breastfeeding and his with aging) as connected. This process likely requires different people to call on diverse virtues.” This is formative character education.



Recommendations for Applying this Pedagogy

For educators and leaders interested in trying this approach, trust me, you do not need to be a professional songwriter. (Though I bet more than a few of you are!) However, you do have to be ready to facilitate artful connection-making, what Tolstoy called “union,” and you must have the courage to teach collaboratively. Here are a few ways “non-songwriters” could implement this pedagogy:


1. Ask around your community to see if anyone is a songwriter. You might discover the music teacher at your school has a band or the principal releases songs on Spotify or the dean of the music department composes their own sonatas. Share this article with them and see if they are open to leading it with you.
2. Find instrumental tracks that elicit specific emotions and use those as backing tracks for lyrics.
3. Bring me and Artistic Leadership to your organization or school.

Trying new methods can feel risky, but I believe the real risk is leaving character education relegated to words and missing out on the music. ■

To learn more about Tiffany and how to collaborate, please feel free to [schedule a call today](#).

Photos of Tiffany's workshops by Bosh novART





What do you think about? Character and the transformative power of reflection

Photo by Ksenia Filatov

SCOTT PARSONS AND MATTHEW POST

Overview of the KPCEL Reflection and Contemplation Working Group

As theorists and practitioners dedicated to the cultivation of character, we spend a lot of time thinking, talking, and thinking some more about what we and others have said. To be sure, many of us also teach and help students cultivate the concrete dispositions and habits necessary to act virtuously. And when we talk, we typically talk about action and about how to bring theory to practice, but what about the activity of thinking itself? Because, honestly, if we are just doers, we wouldn't be coming together so often to talk about character; we'd just be doing it.

To say someone acts without thinking is rightly taken as criticism and how we think is as fundamental to who we are as what we do (on the importance of thinking to acting, see, e.g., Birmingham, [2003](#); Birmingham, [2004](#); Dewey, [1997b](#); Epstein, [2008](#); George, [2021](#); George, Urch, and Cribb, [2023](#); Grossman et al., [2021](#); Higgins, [2021](#); Lamb, Brandt, and Brooks, [2021](#); and Kinsella & Pitman, [2012](#)).

The KPCEL Reflection and Contemplation Working Group (R&CWG) isn't just about how we define reflection or contemplation as virtues and evaluate what is at stake in morally salient situations, it's also about how we in the character education movement think about what it is that we do, how we understand the challenges we face, the

failures we suffer, the successes we enjoy, and even, beyond this, how we're making use of any time when we're contemplative, whether while driving to and from work, or standing in the grocery store line.

As the theorists and practitioners of character education, we are first and foremost exemplars. As Aristotle (2017) said, humans are the living beings possessed of reason. He meant many things by this, but one of them is that we are always restlessly thinking and this thinking runs through everything that we do and are, and therefore how we think is never just a matter of theory. We can lie to ourselves, we can fail to do what we think is right, but these moments don't show that theory is irrelevant to action; they show that deficient action is connected to deficient thinking.

The R&CWG was one of the five original KPCEL working groups formed in 2021.



As Aristotle said, humans are the living beings possessed of reason. He meant many things by this, but one of them is that we are always restlessly thinking and this thinking runs through everything that we do and are, and therefore how we think is never just a matter of theory.

The group has kept its core members and has fluctuated over the last three years between 12 and 14 people. Made up of practitioners and theorists, its members work in higher education focusing on Formative Leadership Education.

We've focused on questions such as: What are the differences between various forms of reflection? How do contemplative practices contribute to our formation? When is a problem-solving mode the correct response to a difficult situation and when is it an expression of a need for distraction? What experiences could inspire leaders to cultivate contemplative forms of knowing? And how do we support leaders to make time for reflective practice? Is contemplation individualistic and isolating? How might contemplative knowing be supported by and supportive of community?

In this article, we offer insights into our journey as a community of inquiry. Not only are we making advances in the practice of reflection and the work of character education, but we suspect that our working group demonstrates how professional learning in the higher-education character movement might work. Big things can happen when individuals are provided the opportunity to pause and reflect together on the character of their work.

The Evolution of the Working Group

In the first year, the R&CWG focused its efforts on learning about reflection and contemplation. We studied four models of reflection: Schön (1983, 1987), Kolb (1984), Brookfield (1995), and Gibbs (1988). In the second year, we examined the question “What provokes reflection?” and then applied the theories of reflection to education.

For example, at the April 2023 KPCEL convening, the R&CWG facilitated several reflection strategies and activities for all in attendance. We had three activities, 10 minutes each, with several goals in mind:

1. To draw participants’ attention toward the importance of reflection and contemplation.
2. To not just talk about reflection and contemplation as a practice, but to engage meaningfully in the practice.
3. To invite participants to join the R&CWG.

We began with the concept of reflective journaling. Journaling has long been recognized as a key practice in character development generally and in linking reflection to character development specifically. See, for example, LaBell and Belknap (2016) and Moon (2003) on the potential of journaling for cultivating

character traits in teachers; Griffith (2023) on its potential effectiveness in cultivating phronesis when paired with ethical dilemmas; and Emmons (2007), Flinchbaugh et al. (2012), and Lamb, Brandt, and Brooks (2021) on the positive effects of gratitude journaling in particular for students (on its own and combined with other strategies), among many others.

All these studies concern the positive effects of reflective journaling as a habitual practice over time. In thinking through the first activity we wanted to do, the first challenge we faced was to figure out how to have a journal activity that was short, yet still meaningful enough to inspire participants to see the value of journaling.



Photo by MART PRODUCTION from Pexels

One of our members (full disclosure: it wasn't either of us) had the brilliant idea to make the first task a reflective journaling exercise on the nature of reflection itself. This way, participants could experience reflection while also seeking to find, for themselves, what the potential value of reflection might be. Drawing in part on Aristotle, who is of course an immense influence on character education, as well as on moral philosophy more generally, we opted to pose three key questions to guide the journal reflections:

1. What is reflection?
2. What causes reflection?
3. What is the purpose of reflection?

Part of the goal of the R&CWG is to consider new and relevant avenues of research and practice with respect to reflection and contemplation. With this in mind, for the second activity, we wanted to move beyond the individual to the group. To our knowledge, though there is notable research into the connection between cultivating character and seeing other people's perspectives (see, e.g., Farb, [2020](#); Grossman, Brienza, and Bobocel, [2017](#); and Lees and Young, [2020](#)), there has not been much work on reflection and dialogue (though Tsang, [2007](#) provides some insight into the reflection-dialogue space). This lacuna was not enough, though. We wanted to go further and think about truly untapped, but

important, areas in our work with others. We landed on the idea of an activity linking reflection, dialogue, disagreement, and character development. This was of interest to us for several reasons.

One, we wanted to draw on two distinct ways of thinking: writing and speaking (see, e.g., Grabowski, [2010](#); and Kravchenko, [2009](#)).

Two, people working in the field of character education often have disagreements, but we may not engage with them as much as we should. Since character education is still in some ways a nascent educational movement, we sometimes prefer to emphasize our agreements to present a united front, or else these disagreements lead to slightly siloed subgroups or subfields, for example, between researchers and practitioners or between those who prefer a philosophical approach and those a psychological approach (see, e.g., De Caro, Navarini, and Vaccarezza, [2024](#), for a summary of the debate between those who want to eliminate the philosophical understanding of phronesis because they think psychology is sufficient to study character and those who disagree).

Based on experience in the field, the members of the R&CWG thought that there were many disagreements that were as yet not discussed. But rather

than tell participants what we thought those disagreements were, we wanted to give them space to reflect upon them. If we are to grow as a movement, we need to identify, respect, and give more space for disagreements to be considered.

Three, disagreement is often the arena in which we become less reflective and more reactive. Thus, we wanted participants to reflect upon past disagreements.

Four, if we grow in character when we are challenged (see, e.g., Clarke, [2010](#); and Duckworth, [2016](#)), then we should not just identify key disagreements and attempt to reflect fruitfully on them, but also see how such disagreements might help us to grow in character.

Thus, we asked participants to reflect upon and discuss with one partner two questions:

- When has disagreement in the field of character education caused you to reflect?
- What is an occasion when disagreement provoked your moral formation?

For the third activity, we initially wanted to continue our pattern, moving from the individual to the pair and from the pair to the larger group, that is, from personal reflection to dialogue to multi-log.



If we grow in character when we are challenged then we should not just identify key disagreements and attempt to reflect fruitfully on them, but also to see how such disagreements might help us to grow in character.

For some of us, this had an appealing balance and structure to it. However, one of our members disagreed and helpfully proposed that we go back to our models, which suggest the power of integrating reflection more fully into our everyday lives and bringing reflection closer to action. As we noted above, reflective journaling is a well-researched practice, but it is only one practice and it requires us to take a real step back from action.

This member proposed that our third activity ask participants to note when reflection might occur spontaneously in their everyday lives. For example, how often might we have an exchange with a colleague at work that we find disrespectful, and then we fume about it internally while doing our groceries? What would it mean to take charge of those moments and repurpose them in a more deliberate and thoughtful way?

The third activity, therefore, drew on a similar set of reflective skills as the first activity; it gestured toward the kinds of things that could provoke reflection from the second activity; and invited participants to integrate what they had learned from the previous two activities into their day-to-day routines and habits. Such everydayness—what we do in line at the grocery store, driving to and from work, etc.—may seem banal, but it could be here in particular that the most transformative work occurs, in the details, in the little things.

Thus, our third and final activity asked participants to discuss with others: Within your routines (the drive to work, the wait in the line), what reflection practices do you cultivate?

Working the Pause

This year, the members of the R&CWG are writing a handbook on reflection and contemplation currently titled: *Working the Pause*. Edited by Samantha Deane and Scott Parsons, the book is the result of our working group's years-long collaborative study of reflection in character and leadership education.

When we began this journey with the working group, we were mired in the work of defining reflection. Coming from different intellectual traditions and personal backgrounds, we scoured through many sources.

We noticed that in many of our spiritual traditions, notions of reflection are aligned with the concept of prayer or meditation. In the philosophical archive, we saw that reflection is a species of the practice of philosophy itself. After all, the broadest definition of philosophy is the love of wisdom, pursued through contemplation (see Aristotle, [2019](#), [2016](#)). Finally, we found that in the practice of a skilled profession, like teaching or medicine, it has long been assumed that a successful leader is someone who thinks deliberately. Reflection, it seems, is pivotal to spiritual happiness, knowledge, and professional success.

Throughout *Working the Pause*, we refer to *the pause* as a moment and an activity. In this way, *the pause* is linked to ancient and contemporary habits of reflection. Through theoretical and practical vignettes, we argue that our character is revealed by, and perhaps built into, a pause between action and thought. In the space of the pause, we craft, and re-craft, our character.

In *Working the Pause*, we hope to offer theory-to-practice and practice-to-theory notes on reflection. Yet, the book can also be read as a call for a pause. This is not new, per se, as it is clearly what Dewey ([1997a](#), [1997b](#)) meant by stopping and pausing and it is what Aristotle had in mind when he said, “For the agent they would call prudent is the

one who studies well each question about his own [good], and he is the one to whom they would entrust such questions” (2019, p. 107 [1141a26-28]). One who studies well each question is one who deliberates, and deliberation is a slow process. Nevertheless, we hope to show that pausing is a vital matter. It is a matter of character and, as a matter of character, what we do with the pause affects flourishing, for each of us and for our world.



One who studies well each question is one who deliberates, and deliberation is a slow process. Nevertheless, we hope to show that pausing is a vital matter. It is a matter of character and, as a matter of character, what we do with the pause affects flourishing, for each of us and for our world.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the goal of the R&CWG is the same as that of character education as a whole. With the activities described above, we wanted to integrate theory and practice, facilitate participants modeling the practice, and then to look to ways of deeply integrating the practice, that is, to becoming exemplars.

One thing that we’ve discovered is that reflection and contemplation is a rich area for research and practice, both in terms of what we know about reflection and contemplation (i.e., the long philosophic tradition and contemporary psychological research) and what we don’t (e.g., how do we avoid contemplation turning into brooding, how do we bridge the gap between thinking about the right thing to do and doing it, how do we cultivate meaningful reflection and contemplation on lifelong goals or even goals that extend beyond our lifespans, etc.).

And beyond this, we wish to serve the community of those devoted to character education by helping it to become a more robust community, one that productively embraces and confronts diversity and disagreement without losing our common goals, and thus to serve our community at large.

One of our members, Mary Lynne Derrington, put it best: “Learning more about reflection and the models of reflection was beneficial to me as an educator as it opened my eyes to nuances of reflection that were new to me. The most energizing and rewarding aspect of this work was regular interactions with a group of people who were interesting, knowledgeable, and inspiring. Working towards the session we conducted at KPCEL was a wonderful way to focus our efforts as a group and have a final product that was a contribution to the conference.” ■



Scott Parsons, Ph.D. is the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Character and Ethics Development at the Texas Tech University System. He is a retired Army officer with over 24 years of military experience. Additionally, he served as the Character Development Integrator for the Military Program at West Point for three years prior to coming to the Texas Tech University System.



Matthew Post, Ph.D. is Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs and Applied Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tulsa, Honors College. He is responsible for developing programs in liberal arts, classic texts, and character education. His research examines the relationship between school culture and motivation for virtuous action in a variety of educational institutions, public and private.

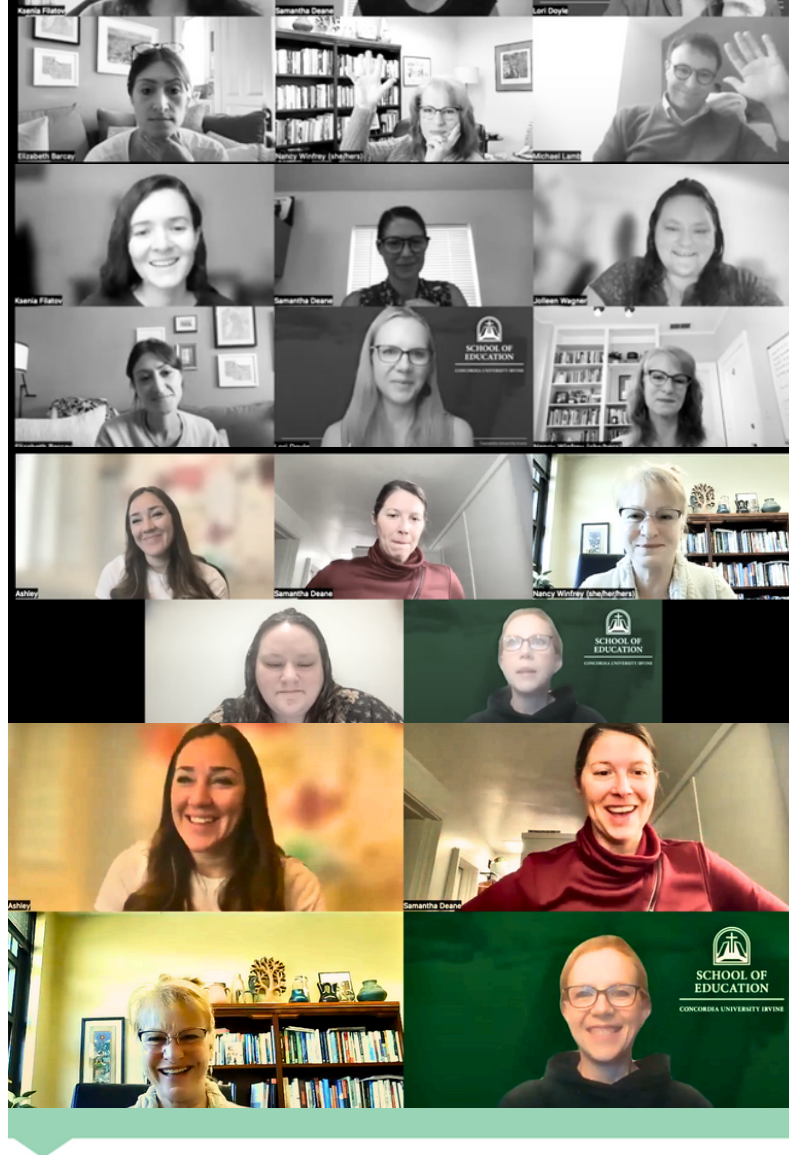
Photo by Ksenia Filatov



Becoming a Community of Inquiry

ASHLEY BETKOWSKI, LORI DOYLE,
NANCY WINFREY, SAMANTHA DEANE

It started with a call to join a working group or community of inquiry dedicated to character education. Compelled by our shared interest in teaching character, we felt our way to becoming a community of inquiry dedicated to learning about each other, character education, and pedagogy. Together we discovered the pedagogical realities associated with a virtual working group while experiencing the pedagogical opportunities associated with character formation. This article is an exploration of the workings of a virtual small group that brought about formative changes in each member's understanding of character. In fact, the call to join a working group launched a formative community of inquiry.



The Pedagogy Working Group

As a community of practice, we understand the importance of pedagogies that promote holistic, formative education for human flourishing. We gather together to share our experience with different contexts, learning environments, and methods that foster character formation. Join us in this community of pedagogical practice.



Screen-grabs from the Pedagogy Working Group Zoom meetings, and a slide created by the Pedagogy Working Group for the 2023 KPCEL Convening

Theoretical Foundations

The KPCEL Pedagogy Working Group process is grounded in social constructivism and dialogue education. Social constructivism, as developed by Vygotsky (1978), builds on the work of earlier cognitive scientists but emphasizes the collaborative nature of learning and the ways in which culture, social context, and language influence what would otherwise be considered an individual process of knowledge acquisition. Individual reflection or private speech and collaborative dialogue, taken together, utilize “language as the most privileged cultural artifact- a semiotic tool that mediates the higher mental functions of reflection and learning” (Shah, 2022, p. 302). In practice, our group members read and reflected on material that was subsequently discussed in our online meetings. Those conversations, what Isaacs (1999) calls “the art of thinking together,” were guided by a tacit, shared understanding of dialogue as the process by which we as learners became integrated into a knowledge community. Without explicitly naming the tenets of Vellas’ (2002) dialogue education framework, we were practicing virtually all of them: safety, sound relationships, sequence, praxis, learners as decision makers, immediacy, teamwork, engagement, accountability, and embracing the whole person, i.e., feelings, ideas, and action.

Although our approach was shaped by the academic context, we also shaped the community by the way we used language and, over time, by the way our relationships developed and deepened. The monthly Zoom calls allowed time and space for reflection and application. This cycle of reflection and dialogue is a fundamental feature of a community of practice.

A Community of Inquiry in Action

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). Not all communities are communities of practice, and not every scenario requiring practice constitutes a community. Together the terms community and practice refer to a specific type of social structure with a specific purpose.

There are three parallel elements of a productive community of practice: domain, community, and practice. Domain refers to the shared interest around which the group gathers and situates the group within the organization, community environment, or institution where legitimacy is grounded.

Community refers to the attention paid to individual roles, operating norms, trust building, and so on. Finally, practice refers to the process whereby knowledge, skills, and dispositions are developed and supported, and how that is nurtured over time.

The Pedagogies of Character Formation working group is a group of five to seven scholar-practitioners of character education from different institutions who came together virtually to discuss the practice of character education for teachers, students, and staff. We began by discussing what we mean when we talk about pedagogy, but also the context of our educational environments, e.g. higher education, virtual education, PK-12, and staff formation.

Over the course of our meetings, it became clear that each of us was well-versed in and persuaded by the idea that values-based education is connected to human flourishing, regardless of the specific title we put to this process (i.e. moral education, character education, formative education). In spite of, or perhaps as a testament to, the variety in our different frames, a desire to discuss and develop practices for whole-person development propelled the group's subsequent inquiries into pedagogies of character formation. At the heart of each meeting was the same question: what are you doing, why, and is it working?



In spite of, or perhaps as a testament to, the variety in our different frames, a desire to discuss and develop practices for whole-person development propelled the group's subsequent inquiries into pedagogies of character formation. At the heart of each meeting was the same question: what are you doing, why, and is it working?

These questions culminated in a jointly crafted theory-to-practice presentation at the 2023 Kern Partners for Character and Educational Leadership, including a pedagogy-of-character-formation activity designed for adults and children, alike, with modifications for in-person and online settings.

We had the advantage of voluntary engagement in this pedagogy working group community, as opposed to being held together by external control or mandate. Our shared interest in the domain- character education- was the initial draw but because we had control of our process, we were able to allow for divergence and conviviality. This freedom enabled us to create a communal space for judgment-free exploration, as learning practices and social practices are interconnected (Cousins and Deepwell, [2005](#)) even in an online format such as ours.

Calibration

The nature of working across contexts, disciplines, institutions, modes, and theoretical orientations drove our group to spend considerable time working through what it means to be a part of a community inquiring into the work of teaching. Given our institutional and professional diversity, there was no sense in talking about universally applicable pedagogy. Rather, we needed to understand what it meant to share in the trials and tribulations of being educators who aspire to teach character. In this group setting, we agreed that dialogue about the practices of teaching for character sharpened our focus on what it is to become a leader of formative character education. Attending to our gaps in



Attending to our gaps in understanding, shrinking the authoritative distance between teacher and student, crafting educational ontologies that welcome learning through conversation with one’s peers, and scaffolding conversations about the values that form us and those we aspire to attain, requires a firm grasp on the virtues of humility, courage, creativity, hope, compassion, and justice, at a minimum.

understanding, shrinking the authoritative distance between teacher and student, crafting educational ontologies that welcome learning through conversation with one’s peers, and scaffolding conversations about the values that form us and those we aspire to attain, requires a firm grasp on the virtues of humility, courage, creativity, hope, compassion, and justice, at a minimum.

Centrality of Relationships

Although the pedagogy working group began with a mix of male and female practitioners, it bears mentioning that over time only women remained in the group, planned the workshop, and joined the subsequent paper project. The centrality of relationships is well documented in the literature on women’s psychosocial development (Clark & Watson, 1998), and while that topic is beyond the scope of this paper, in our case the collaborative effort was shaped by our relationships. Leaning on adult learning theory, we clearly shared ownership of our work, saw the process and impact as relevant, and enjoyed a level of safety in our meetings that supported honest and exploratory dialogue. We maintained a through-line of academic professionalism as we navigated discipline-specific perspectives and writing styles, yet as the relationships developed our process of working together also evolved.

Creating Together

Initially, the working group provided a space for members as practitioners to bring ideas and challenges to the collective well of experience and knowledge, but the task of creating a workshop expanded our use of that shared repertoire from application in our various institutions to an emphasis on creating a new vehicle for teaching character through the arts; a discipline outside our academic backgrounds. As a result, we shifted, as Hamalainen and Vahasantanen (2011) explain the process, from a collaborative learning goal of enhancing understanding through shared knowledge construction, to a creative collaboration goal of producing a new or novel output. This creative output, in our case, was a conference workshop where art framed the pedagogical approach and a product that exceeds the outcome of collaborative knowledge construction. When the four of us later responded to the idea of capturing that process in writing, our continued self-selection maintained the synergy created by our complementary personality traits and equitable approach to leveraging perspectives and fueled a new deliverable.

After one year of calibrating and relational collaborating on the general

topics of character education and pedagogy, members of a working group combined efforts to create a presentation for an audience of practitioners in the field. In response to a conference call on the connection between character education and the arts, group members brainstormed based on the previous year of discussion and came up with an activity to embed within the larger scope of general connections between the arts and character education. The result was a three-part presentation: Part one was an introduction focused on the impact of art on emotional and cognitive outputs. Part two was an activity designed to allow participants an opportunity to have a lived experience with the potential emotions and cognitive sparks associated with revealing something internal and personal through art. Part three was a wrap-up opportunity for pair-share on the experience. Woven throughout the presentation were verbal reminders for participants to consider their respective student audience and keep in mind elements such as age, maturity, learning environment, and modality or delivery. While audience members for this conference were adults, it was mentioned that the activity could apply to any student population. To punctuate this point, online extensions were briefly shared on a slide and a handout.

The presentation asked participants to use artistic materials to create a visual representation, with no words, of a character trait they were proud of or one they wished to develop. After enough time passed, participants were asked to place their drawings across two tables for a “Gallery Walk” where other participants were able to walk around to see all the pieces in the exhibition. The participants were provided post-it notes and asked to leave comments, questions, ponderings, notes of affirmation, or ah-has around the pieces viewed. After some time, the participants were asked to move to their own work and read the comments posted. Following the exhibition, the participants engaged in reflective processing. In groups of three, participants shared their responses to three prompting questions, in any order they desired.

Questions:

- *What feelings came up in you when asked to do this task and/or read the responses of your peers?*
- *Did any of those responses surprise you or confirm something for you?*
- *How do your emotional responses help you understand yourself or connect to your character?*

The participants were encouraged to consider the dispositions of character they would want to embody to support students in this activity and ways to engage their students in creative expression. The responses of participants to the discussions highlighted the discomfort of being asked to draw and the negative perspective of their abilities; the empathy for others feeling the same; the courage needed to overcome fears of drawing; and the confidence after viewing comments of peers. Since the activity was presented to educators of all kinds, the working group shared other methods of using this activity, such as virtual platforms and discussions.

The working group modeled using creativity and courage alongside conversation and community to build character. The pedagogical practices rooted in allowing open-mindedness, diverse perspectives, empathy for one another, and self-understanding through reflection emphasized the artistic methods of character formation. Regardless of modality, the concept of community and conversation must be at the forefront of pedagogical practice. Artistic integration allows for the formation of many character strengths and strengthens self-awareness.

Thus, the presentation not only reflected useful pedagogies for formative character development but also the theoretical underpinnings of learning through communal conversation and social development.

Conclusions

Our community of practice convened voluntarily, united by a shared ambition to advance the field of character formation. Each member brought their unique expertise but through the principles of social constructivism and dialogue education, we collaboratively joined in practice to create and grow together. In this community, while our primary focus was pedagogical approaches to character formation across various contexts, we simultaneously formed our own character through the relationships we built, the dialogues we engaged in, and the content we created. The theoretical foundation of communal working groups, as explored in this paper, underscores the profound benefits of communities of practice for holistic character development. The value derived extends far beyond product output; by coming together in pursuit of common interests and fostering relationships, we cultivate both character and community. ■



Ashley Betkowski, Ed.D., is the Assistant Director for the Canyon Center for Character Education at Grand Canyon University. In this role, she is serving leaders, educators and students in cultivating a flourishing society through virtue formation and development of practical wisdom. Her passion is education and making a difference in the lives of students.



Lori Doyle, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Education, Director of the Master of Arts in Educational Leadership Program, and Assistant Director of the Servant Leadership Institute at Concordia University Irvine. Lori has been involved in extensive curriculum development projects at the university and enjoys creating professional development opportunities for instructors. Her areas of research interest include adult education, virtual learning environments, servant leadership, vocation, mission alignment, self-efficacy, and curriculum development.



Nancy Winfrey, Ph.D., works with the Program for Leadership and Character at Wake Forest University. Her focus is curriculum and pedagogical design in the professional schools, with an emphasis on the Wake Forest School of Law. In that role she is working to integrate character development throughout the legal curriculum and operationalize the mission of educating successful and flourishing lawyers. Her teaching and research interests include Dialogue Education, small group processes, authentic leadership, and designing for brain-based learning.



Samantha Deane, Ph.D., is a philosopher of education, and Senior Research Associate at the Center for Social Concerns, University of Notre Dame. She is the author of *Democratic Education in an Armed Society* (2023).



Student Kindness: A Glimpse at Meta-Data

STEVEN J. BOURGEOIS

Capturing virtue is not easy. If you want to engage in a challenging project of measurement, try to empirically assess the quality of a student's character. One is confronted with a construct that is difficult to define, difficult to quantify, and difficult to isolate. Perhaps more daunting is the notion of assessing the antecedents of moral behavior, the motivation (or motivations) that are hidden within the human psyche. To put an even finer point on these psychometric obstacles, consider assessing such a developing trait with respect to school-aged children.

Central to the work of my research firm, Ahart Solutions, is the collection of extensive survey data from schools. Since 2019, we have surveyed over 50,000 individuals, equally distributed between staff members, parents, and students. With an average of 30 items per survey, we hold a data warehouse of over 1.5 million responses from K–12 stakeholders. For each client, we establish a data-sharing agreement where Ahart can maintain meta-data in masked form to facilitate longitudinal research. Each survey includes scaled items which have been validated and solidified into a standard index that we use consistently for each stakeholder group. In addition, we have collected extensive qualitative data from text-box comments, along with transcripts from asynchronous audio interviews and focus groups.



Since 2019, we have surveyed over 50,000 individuals, equally distributed between staff members, parents, and students. With an average of 30 items per survey, we hold a data warehouse of over 1.5 million responses from K–12 stakeholders.

In this article, I share meta-data on student kindness, which is pertinent to the theme of Catalyzing Character. The approach is casual, with minimal statistical language or professional jargon. The discussion offers a glimpse into the measurement of character development with focus on how students in grades 3–12 treat each other at school.

Quantitative Results

This research brief comes from meta-data that includes over 10,000 individual surveys from 30 schools, including 1,000+ staff members, 7,000+ parents, and 3,000+ students who have responded to our school climate index within the past year. The more in-depth analysis will focus on student responses to both scaled and open-ended questions. For scaled items, the values are percentages of 3s and 4s on a 4-point scale. Visualizations with values in blue and an up arrow indicate a statistically significant difference above the mean, while values in red with a down arrow indicate significant difference below the mean.

Stakeholder Perceptions of Student Kindness

Of all the items on our school climate indexes, one consistently generates the most statistical spread: ***How kind are students to each other at this school?***

One would expect that staff, parents, and students would have similar views on this item, since it examines an aspect of school culture to which they have a shared experience. However, results indicate significant, even dramatic group level differences. Staff members posted the highest score on this item followed by parents. However, students' self-reports were dramatically lower than those of the adults. Figure 1 displays a comparison of stakeholder perceptions of student kindness.

This finding shows that perspectives vary, based on how directly individuals experience a phenomenon. Parents have an indirect view of the question, based on conversations with their child at the dinner table and possible trips to the school car line. Staff members have more direct insight into the phenomenon of student kindness. However, their understanding is limited to the students whom they see every day, along with what they learn from fellow faculty members. It is the students themselves who have the most direct insight into student kindness based on continuous

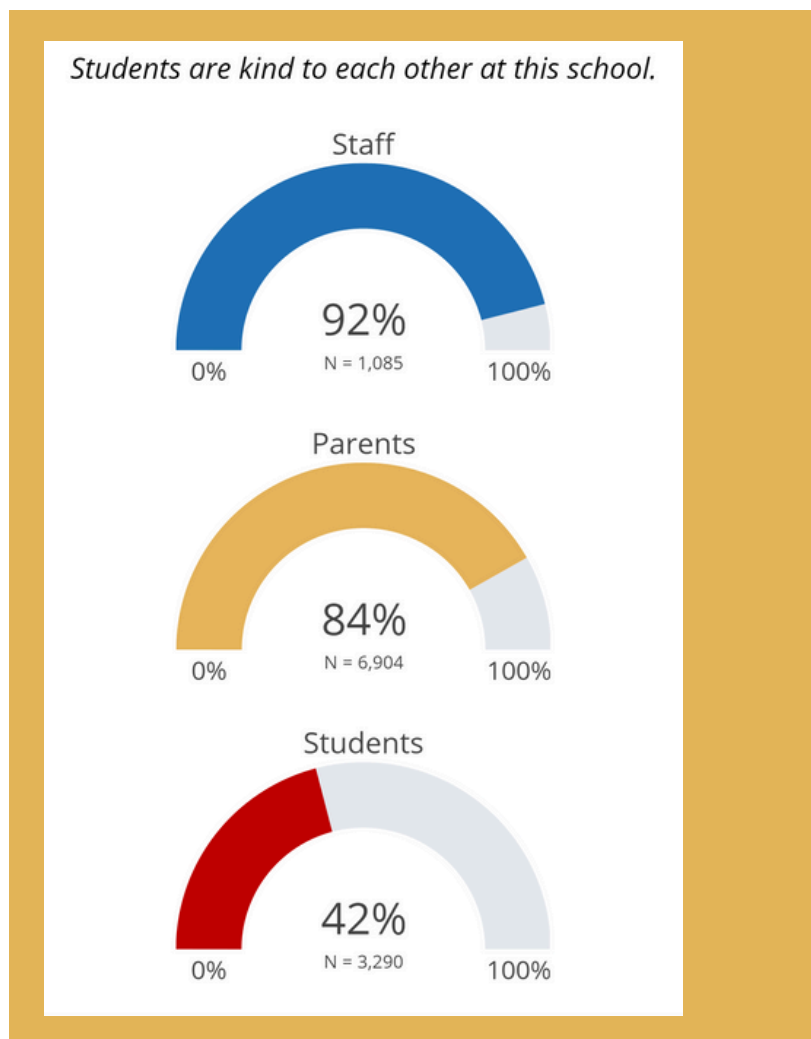


Figure 1. Stakeholder Perceptions of Student Kindness (n = 11,279)

exposure to the behavior patterns of their fellow classmates. In assessing character, school culture is certainly relevant since it represents an aggregate variable of individual "characters" viewed over time.

Student Perceptions of Kindness by School's Socioeconomic Status

The item on student kindness generated dramatic school-to-school differences and statistical spread. I examined school characteristics and determined a key variable of interest was school-level percentage of economically disadvantaged students. Figure 2 displays a heat map, which by default has the highest bar in dark green and the lowest in dark red, with a shade of yellow in the middle. Green means students perceive more kindness, whereas red means students perceive less kindness. At the top of the y-axis are high-income schools as measured by percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch. At the bottom of the y-axis are very low-income schools.

This positive association between school affluence and students' perceptions of kindness points to discrepancies in school quality beyond academic achievement and would be worth pursuing in future research.

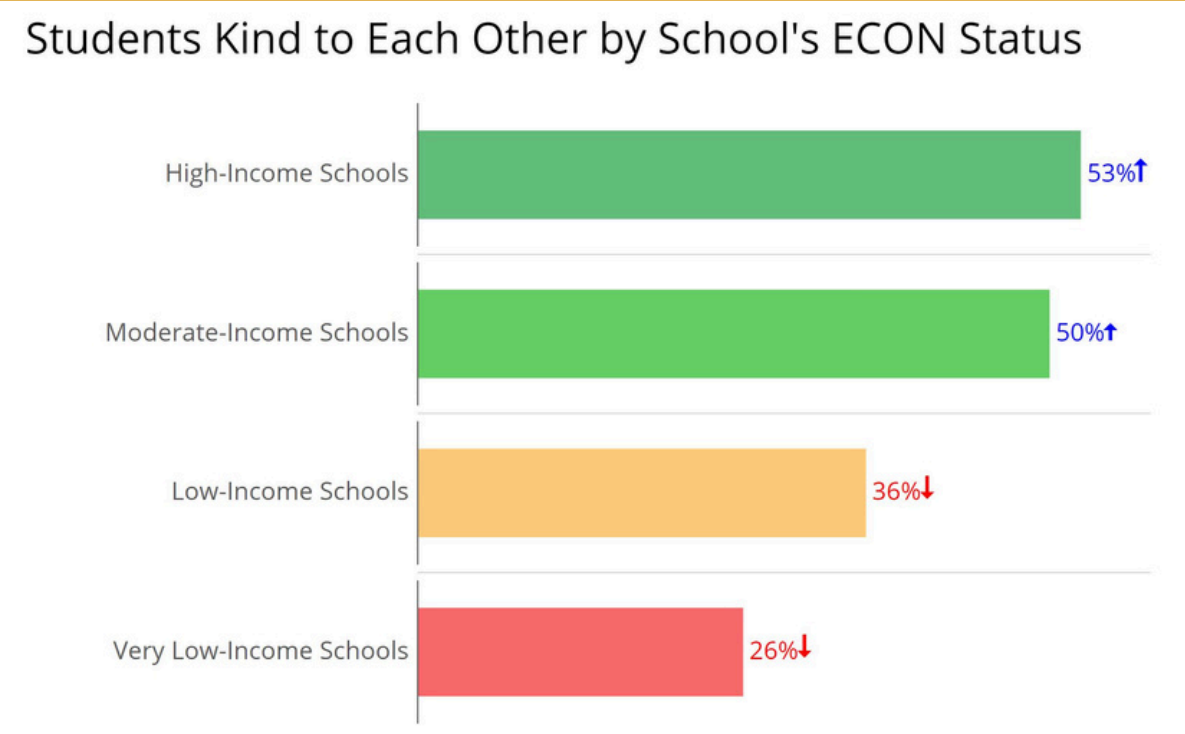


Figure 2. Student Perceptions of Kindness by School's Economic Status. (n = 3,126)

Student Perceptions of Kindness by Grade Level

Figure 3 displays students' perceptions of kindness in school by grade level. While the overall mean was 42%, there were meaningful differences by grade level. Scores dropped consistently from 52% in third grade to a nadir of 33% in sixth grade. This finding aligns with Binfet, Gadermann, and Schonert-Reichl (2015), who administered their School Kindness Scale and found that students' perceptions of kindness decreased as they advanced in grade level, with fourth graders reporting the highest levels and eighth graders the lowest. We extended our analysis through high school, indicating a precipitous increase from 8th to 9th grade, topping at 70%.

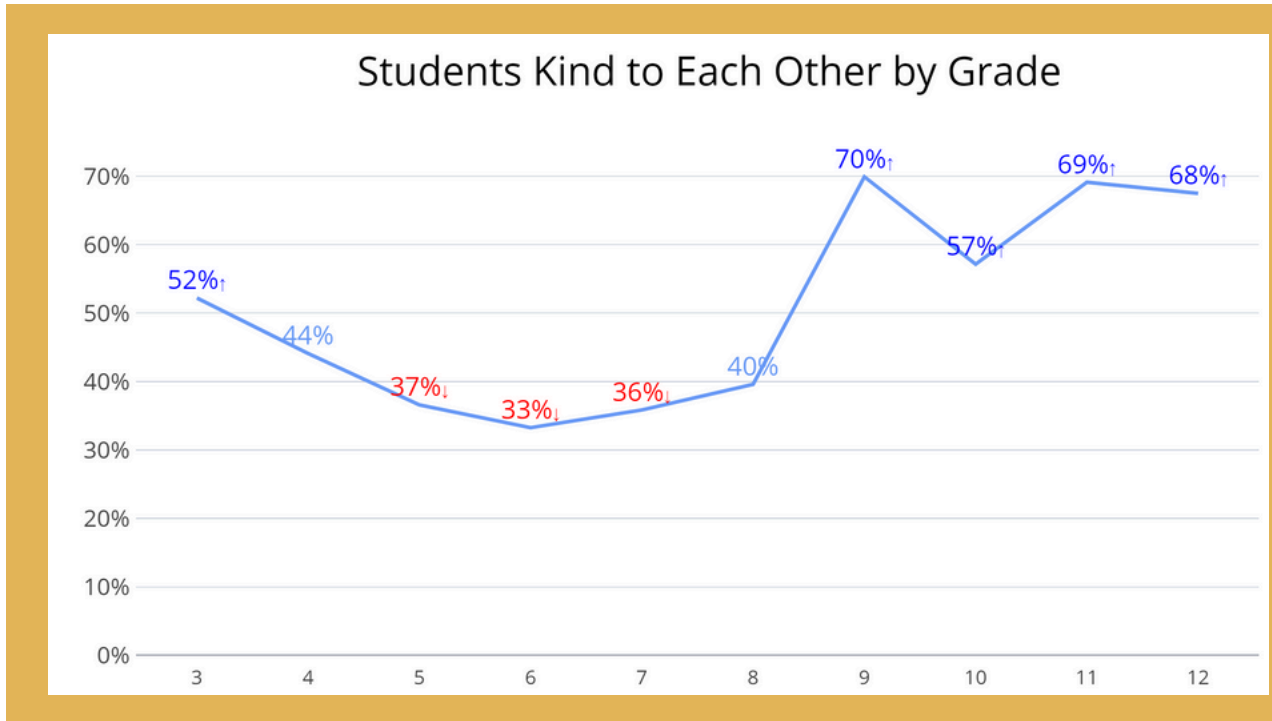


Figure 3. Student Perceptions of Kindness by Grade Level (n = 3,126)

The analysis of student kindness by grade level shows an inflection point during the middle school years, potentially calling for character education interventions to shift the entire distribution upward.

Qualitative Results

To provide a deeper understanding of kindness, we administered an open-ended item asking how students treat each other at school, and to gain a global understanding, I employed a sentiment analysis tool, categorizing each comment as negative, positive, or neutral. Figure 4 displays sentiment analysis of students across schools, indicating that two-thirds of the responses were negative.

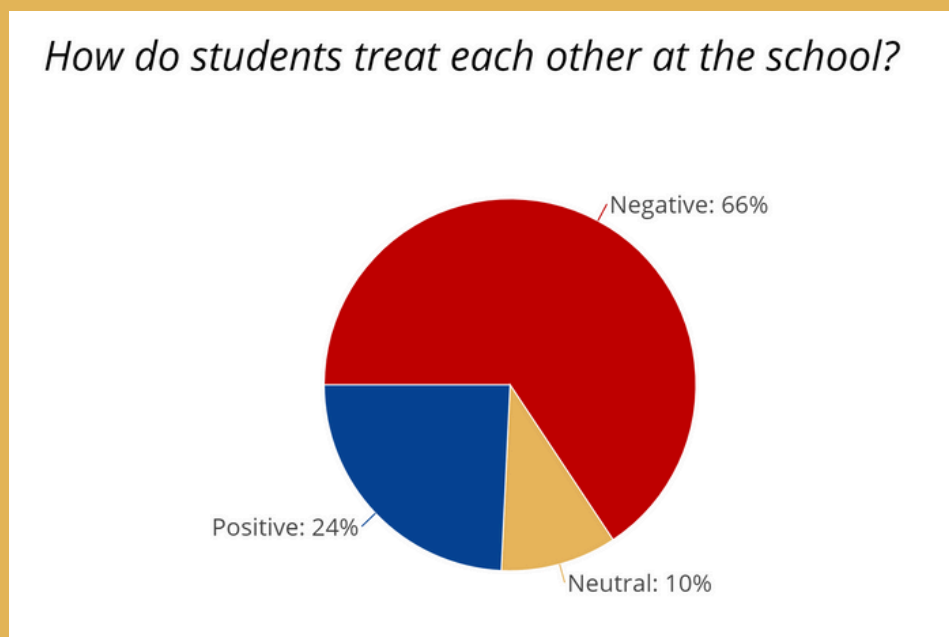


Figure 4. Sentiment Analysis for Student Kindness (n = 2,943)

Drill Down on Student Kindness in Grades 5–7

Following up on the grade level differences in students' perception of kindness, I trimmed the text-based comments to metadata of only students in grades 5–7 (n = 576), the group that scored lowest on the scaled item recall above. I structure the qualitative findings into two categories: negative and positive themes. For each theme, I provide an explanation, the number of mentions, two representative quotes, and the student's grade level (5th, 6th, or 7th).

We then employed A.I. tools to determine the three most prominent positive and negative themes with respect to student kindness. We copied all text-based student comments on this item and pasted them into a customized ChatGPT bot that was trained to isolate statements of consensus and calculate the number of mentions. Figure 5 displays the number of mentions of the three most representative negative and positive themes. Note that the data set contains nearly twice as many negative as positive codes.

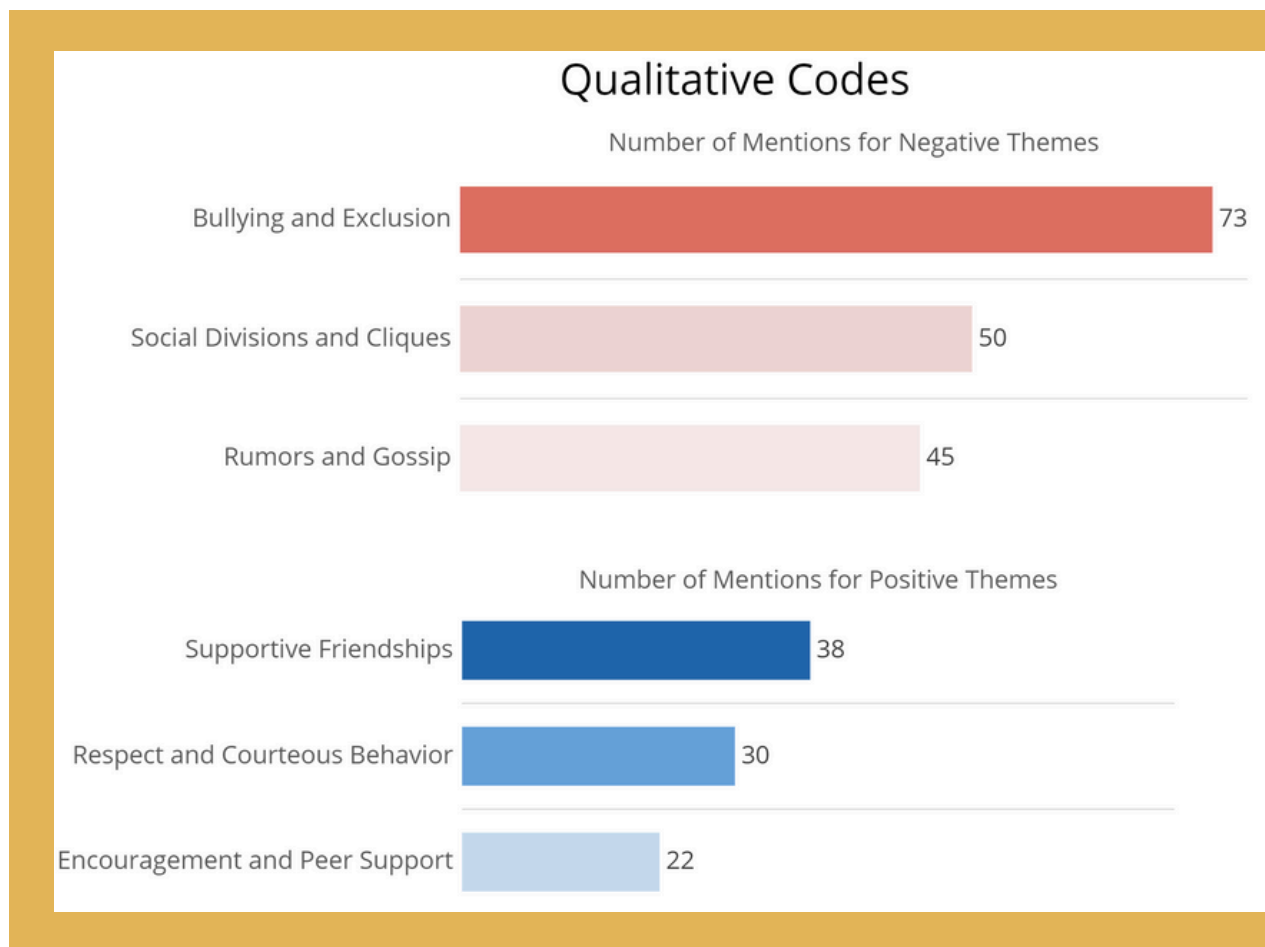


Figure 5. Qualitative Codes for Student Kindness by Number of Mentions

To identify the most representative and insightful student quotes, I asked two members of the Ahart Research Team to independently read all student comments that supported each of the three positive and three negative themes determined by A.I. analysis. I also engaged in the same process myself, and the three of us collaborated on the selection of two positive and two negative student quotes for each theme.

Negative Themes



2) Social Divisions and Cliques (45 mentions): Students discussed the presence of social cliques and divisions, which lead to feelings of isolation and unkind behavior towards those outside of these groups.

- "They treat each other in a caste system. My friend group is on the lower side of the caste system for the boys." (Grade 7)
- "The popular kids are mostly skinny, and the less popular kids, especially those who are overweight, get bullied. Everybody else just follows the lead of the popular kids. There's a clear division between who's in and who's out." (Grade 7)

1) Bullying and Exclusion (73 mentions): Numerous students reported experiencing or witnessing bullying and exclusion, which creates a hostile and unwelcoming environment.

- "Two people try to create two sides and one side will get mad if you try to be friends with both, which is hard. Sometimes I feel like there is none here for me. I only have a couple of friends, and only two feel real. For me, I get called names, and the people I think are my friends don't stand up for me." (Grade 5)
- "The students are mean and disrespectful, and there's quite a lot of gossip and drama. It's like school is all about drama now and not actual schoolwork." (Grade 5)

3) Rumors and Gossip (40 mentions): Students frequently engage in spreading rumors and gossip, which fosters an environment of social tension and exclusion, particularly affecting those who are not part of the more popular or dominant social groups.

- "It's such a small school that rumors spread really quickly. You can't say anything without it getting around, and people get hurt by the gossip." (Grade 7)
- "People here love to talk behind your back, and it can be really damaging. Even if it's not true, the rumors can make you feel really isolated." (Grade 6)



Photo by by WOKANDAPIX from pixabay

1) Supportive Friendships (38 mentions):

Many students mentioned having supportive friendships where peers help each other academically and emotionally, fostering a welcoming and encouraging atmosphere.

- "A lot of my friends treat me well at school, and I treat them well too. Even people who I don't talk to a lot are nice, and my friends let people who don't play with us usually play with us." (Grade 5)
- "We treat each other like we are friends or brothers. When I first joined this school, I was like a baby bird—I couldn't fly by myself. Then I met people who helped me become better at flying to where I could fly by myself, and along the way, I picked up some friends." (Grade 6)

2) Respect and Courteous Behavior (30 mentions):

Students reported instances of respectful and courteous behavior among peers, including small acts of kindness and mutual respect.

- "They treat each other with respect. Everyone is respectful to one another. If there is ever a difference between students, they figure it out." (Grade 7)
- Some people treat others with respect and treat them the way they want to be treated. Others are rude to people and don't care, but it's very few people. Most students have learned how to solve conflicts peacefully between themselves without getting a teacher involved." (Grade 6)

Positive Themes



3) Encouragement and Peer Support (22 mentions):

Some students actively support and encourage each other, creating a positive atmosphere that fosters friendship and reciprocal regard, though this behavior is not universal across all peer groups.

- "When someone is struggling with something, whether it's schoolwork or personal issues, there's always someone willing to help or encourage them." (Grade 7)
- "Students here often cheer each other on, whether it's in sports, during presentations, or just in everyday situations. It makes the school feel like a supportive community." (Grade 6)

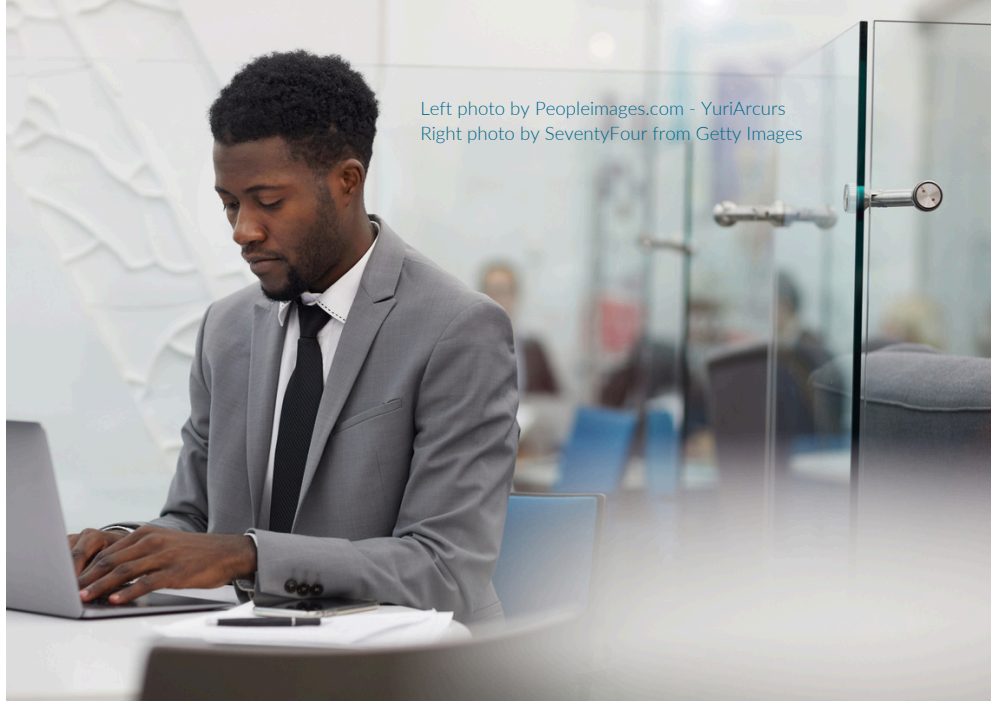
The voices of students provide depth of understanding on what kindness means to them and how they interpret the actions of their classmates. The comments of the 5th-7th graders are sensitive, nuanced, and honest, giving the reader an idea of what it is like in their shoes every day at school. They paint a complex picture of a school social ecosystem where they are trying to find their place. The mixed methods approach outlined above combines empirical data with contextual insights to offer a deeper understanding of student character.

Next Steps

Over the past two years, in collaboration with [Dr. Matthew Post](#), Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs at the Honors College at the University of Tulsa, I have been refining and validating research instruments that assess students' motivation for virtuous behavior. Similar to the above research brief, we employ a mixed methods approach, capturing the what, how, and why of student virtue. We are launching the fourth version of [Virtuous Motivation Survey](#) in the fall of 2024, which we anticipate will be the final iteration. In collaboration with the [Canyon Center for Character Education](#), we have piloted our assessments to establish a baseline and post-intervention measure for their character education program. During the coming academic year, we are seeking additional partners who want to add precision to their measurement of student character by leveraging our research tools and extensive comparative data. ■



[Steven Bourgeois](#), Ph.D. is a jazz pianist and founder and CEO of [Ahart Solutions](#), a firm that provides rigorous mixed methods research to learning organizations. He is the co-author of [The Center Cannot Hold: A Critical Look at Contemporary Education](#) (2022) and co-host on [The Old School Podcast](#).



Left photo by Peopleimages.com - YuriArcurs
Right photo by SeventyFour from Getty Images

Career and the Crowding Out of Character in Higher Education

DUSTIN WEBSTER

One of the common critiques of higher education is that college “isn’t worth it.” Although such critiques have tended to be more associated with the political right, I was surprised this election cycle to see campaign ads for Biden also claiming that college isn’t necessary, or at least it shouldn’t be, for getting a ‘good job’—a claim that belies the fact that socially and politically, education is currently viewed as the primary means for addressing poverty (as evidenced in part by the increasing prominence of ‘mobility scores’ in college rankings). While I agree that economic security should not be contingent on having a college degree, I also worry that the value of college is overwhelmingly framed in economic terms, especially when college offers the potential to do so much more.

Last year, the student newspaper at the University Of Pennsylvania, *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, published a piece in which they discovered that 50% of recent Penn graduates went into the fields of finance and consulting. While this number may seem shockingly high, it was of little surprise to me or many of my colleagues. It is not uncommon for Penn students to share something along the lines of, in the words of one of my students: “After graduation I have a job lined up in finance, so I’m going to go do that for a while and then figure out what I really want to do with my life.” Of course, as an elite private institution, Penn is populated by a particular and in some ways unique student body. But it’s not only at Penn that it’s common to view the purpose of college as being primarily about getting a good, high paying job (think the ubiquitous ‘is college worth it?’ question, which suggests this general commitment). Although I understand where these students are coming from, I have to ask myself, why didn’t this student take advantage of the opportunity to “figure out what she wanted to do with her life” during the four years that she was in college? With all that college can provide—all of the opportunities for self-discovery, transformation, and virtue development—it seems a shame that politically, theoretically, and in the social discourse, its purpose is positioned as so narrowly and instrumentally aimed at economic



With all that college can provide—all of the opportunities for self-discovery, transformation, and virtue development—it seems a shame that politically, theoretically, and in the social discourse, its purpose is positioned as so narrowly and instrumentally aimed at economic goals.

goals. If Penn students, the overwhelming majority of whom are from privileged backgrounds, experience pressure to treat college in this way, because of how education is framed as the way to address poverty, this pressure is even stronger for their less privileged peers. When one's path out of poverty is through education, it’s hard to take advantage of the other opportunities that education can provide.

In much of my work, I think of virtue/character education broadly as developing a sense of what it means for oneself to live a good and flourishing life (in addition to the cultivation of specific dispositions). In this sense, one's character is reflected in their tastes, pursuits (both for career and leisure), values, and their general mode of engaging and being in the world. Socrates described ethics as defined by the question, “How ought one to live?” and one way that we can understand

someone's character is as how they answer and pursue that question. As I've argued in other work, thinking of character this way makes higher education a place that is ripe for opportunities for character development (Webster, [2022](#)). For many students, college represents the first time they are living independently away from their parents. Depending on the institution, there can be countless opportunities to study new ideas and discover new extracurricular activities. Significantly, students will also probably encounter a wide variety of people from different backgrounds, who hold different values, and who answer Socrates' question in different ways. These new opportunities can be even more pronounced for students from poor families who are more likely to have attended under-resourced K-12 schools, and who are more likely to have grown up in racially and economically homogeneous communities (Ryan, [2010](#)). Although these diverse experiences are not necessary for answering Socrates' question, they are helpful for coming to a fully considered answer.

For example, how can one come to the realization that a flourishing life for themselves involves studying philosophy, leading a cultural club, or playing ultimate frisbee if they've never had the opportunity to do any of those things? These examples may seem quaint, but the

point is that college, at least in many contexts, can be a time to explore, discover, transform, and ultimately develop the character and values that lead to flourishing in a holistic sense. But, when the most important outcome is focused on economics or getting a job, very few of these opportunities matter, and if they do matter, it's only to the extent that they contribute to this career-focused goal. Some scholars have gone so far as to argue that poor students pursuing their passions in college, rather than focusing on the tried and true paths to career, is a problem because it puts their mobility at risk (Cech [2021](#), p. 72.). This might be true, but given all that college can be, it seems like such a sad and limited way of thinking about it.

At this point, some readers may think I am overly idealistic, and I admit that given our contemporary political landscape in the United States, it's difficult to challenge, or even question the economic framing of purpose of college. What else are young students, especially those from poor families, supposed to do? How can I legitimately tell a student (or their family) who is working so hard to get out of poverty that their thinking about college is wrong? Doing so would be at best impractical, and at worst elitist and snobbish. Perhaps this is why the vast amount of contemporary scholarship across disciplines that explores the

challenges that poor and otherwise marginalized students face in education remains committed to this underlying economic notion of its purpose. But just because this is the way things are now does not mean that this is the way they always have to be. There are many ways of addressing poverty and lessening its burdens. This mission does not necessarily have to fall to education. And even though this state of affairs will not change tomorrow, or perhaps anytime in the near future, acknowledging what I believe is an obvious but ignored (often deliberately ignored) cost of using education in this way is important and could lead to incremental change.

Around the same time that the story in *The Daily Pennsylvanian* that I referenced earlier was published I was teaching an undergraduate course that I called “What is Education For?” This was a survey course in the philosophy of education structured around various aims of education such as the pursuit of knowledge, character development, social justice, economic mobility, transformation, and more. Many students in the course reported that they had not previously thought about all of the purposes that education can be put towards. Just recently, a student who was in that course, and who was a senior at the time, emailed me. A cognitive science major and philosophy minor, after graduation she went to work in—

you guessed it—consulting for a medical firm. She enjoyed the work, she said, but she realized that it was the wrong career path for her and was in the difficult process of making some changes, which involved going back to school. She then said that had she thought more about the purposes of education during her time at Penn, she would have approached her education in a different way.

I don’t share this story to try to support my argument, and again I acknowledge that approaching education in a ‘different way’ is not a luxury that many students have. I simply want to point out that firstly, we don’t consider or acknowledge the tradeoffs of using education in this narrow way often enough, and, secondly, even if it is difficult to change, there are real costs to real students when college becomes so singularly aimed at career preparation. The unique context and environment of higher education offers so many opportunities for students to develop their character and discover what it means for them to live a good life. Perhaps we should be less willing to trade these off. ■



Dustin Webster, Ph.D. is a postdoctoral fellow in the Philosophy Department at the University of Pennsylvania and Co-Director for the Project for Philosophy for the Young. In addition to philosophy for children, Dustin's research interests include character and virtue education, and educational ethics.



Psychological Integration and the Good Life:

Character Education from a Self-Determination Theory Perspective

SIEUN SIENNE PARK

Over the past few decades, the importance of intrinsic motivation in education has been widely recognized, leading to ongoing efforts to enhance it in learning and development. However, equally important is the need to pay more attention to integrated motivation, the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation. Recent scholarship has highlighted the convergence between integrated motivation posited by Self-Determination Theory and key aspects of being virtuous (Besser-Jones, [2013](#); Curren & Ryan, [2020](#)). Integrated motivation is not only regarded as autonomous and conducive to high well-being, much like intrinsic motivation, it also exhibits more mature self-awareness, moral motivation, and wisdom, making it even more important for character education. Understanding virtuous character as a product of psychological integration has some important implications for character education.

Fragment of painting, "Running along the beach," by [Joaquín Sorolla](#) (1908)

An integrated state of mind refers to a state where past and present experiences, along with various life domains, are well-integrated, resulting in a coherent set of values and sense of oneself and one's life. This involves understanding the meaning or values of life events and the way the parts or domains of one's life fit together. The events may be awkward mistakes or significant life changes and traumas. The life domains may include family, career, friendships, moral beliefs, cultural heritage, ethnicity, and political inclinations. Through these events and across these domains, people are presented with values and goals that they may or may not be able to fully internalize or integrate. In a fully integrated state, people are likely to exhibit virtuous tendencies and experience a higher level of well-being (Curren & Ryan, [2020](#)). Character education aimed at developing an integrated state of mind focuses not only on developing moral virtues but also on ensuring these virtues are fully integrated with other life domains and values. It supports the psychological integration process.

The process of psychologically integrating an experience involves recognizing and internalizing its value, and harmoniously connecting that value with other values, emotions, and attitudes within oneself. This process is



The process of psychologically integrating an experience involves recognizing and internalizing its value, and harmoniously connecting that value with other values, emotions, and attitudes within oneself.

facilitated when three basic psychological needs—to experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are satisfied, and through mindful reflection (Ryan & Deci, [2017](#)). For example, if a person experiences immigration and feels knowledgeable and adaptable to the language, cultures, systems, and ways of life in the new country (competence), feels that she can be herself and has a variety of life choices (autonomy), and feels a sense of connection with others and as a member of the community (relatedness), then she will be more likely to fully integrate and value her experience of immigration and the country in which she has settled. Additionally, these values will be more easily integrated with other values such as cultural diversity, global justice, and community values. When a value is fully integrated, a person is less likely to experience internal and external conflicts with other values, which implies she will be likely to act appropriately without hesitation and experience a higher level of well-being.

The movie “About Time” (2013) metaphorically portrays the process of integrating life experiences through time travel. The protagonist, Tim, learns about his ability to travel back in time, a trait passed down through generations of men in his family. The ability to turn back time symbolizes the belief that one can learn, improve, and grow through reflection. We often make big and small mistakes and sometimes lie in bed at night wishing we could turn back time to correct them. While we have to wait patiently for another opportunity, Tim can immediately go back in time and try again. Using this ability, Tim learns, gets better, and experiences personal growth.

A significant aspect of psychological integration is that it results in mature self-awareness, including accepting and appreciating one’s imperfect self, and gaining greater clarity about what one truly values (Curren & Ryan, [2020](#)). When Tim sees and approaches his first crush, Charlotte, who had rejected him years before at the theater, he rewinds time several times to present himself to her in a more mature and appealing light. After several attempts, Tim is finally invited to dinner by Charlotte, which immediately resolves the hurt and the self-perception of being unattractive that he had carried from past rejection. This sets up a moment-of-truth scene where he declines an invitation from



Universal Pictures (2023) film poster for *About Time*.

Charlotte and rushes home to propose marriage to his beloved girlfriend, Mary. The collision of Tim’s unresolved quest for Charlotte with his present life calls for integrative resolution, and in facing this, he gains deeper insights into what holds genuine value for him.

Despite his extraordinary ability, Tim faces life’s challenges that cannot be resolved merely through reflection and growth—he finds himself in a situation where he must choose between saving his sister Kit Kat’s life or not losing the child he has. Similarly, in our lives, there are losses of loved ones, involuntary experiences of violence or trauma, injustices, and tensions that cannot be avoided despite our best efforts.

Within my Korean immigrant community, I have often witnessed people experiencing deep internal conflicts as immigrants. Career success abroad can suddenly lose its meaning when it coincides with a parent's illness. When major life transitions, losses, or traumatic events remain unintegrated, they can become compartmentalized and significantly impact overall well-being.

What is encouraging is that, much as Tim matures through the trial and error of dating, even significant adversities and trauma can lead to the cultivation of greater virtue and enhanced well-being through effective integration. Experiences such as adversity and trauma require special support to facilitate effective integration. This is a long-term process that involves developing integrative emotion regulation that accepts the emotions these experiences evoke, achieving better self-awareness through these emotions, and addressing negative self-perceptions related to the experiences. For instance, someone who experienced collective economic hardship during childhood may have conscious or unconscious guilt about having money, and the loss of a parent may engender a sense of powerlessness to protect others. Integrating trauma requires educational and psychological support to provide experiences that help one

recover from ongoing psychological setbacks. Through this process, people can move beyond guilt and self-blame, accept themselves, and gain wisdom by understanding the meaning of their experiences, ultimately achieving a sense of meaning in their lives.



Integrating trauma requires educational and psychological support to provide experiences that help one recover from ongoing psychological setbacks. Through this process, people can move beyond guilt and self-blame, accept themselves, and gain wisdom by understanding the meaning of their experiences, ultimately achieving a sense of meaning in their lives.

The question then becomes: What does a highly integrated state look like when viewed through the lens of time travel, which allows for reflection and growth? Tim's answer to this is straightforward. Before his father passes away, he imparts insights to Tim on living a fulfilled life through the gift of time travel. His father advocates for experiencing each day, meticulously observing its unfolding events, and subsequently revisiting the same day.

By doing so, he gains an understanding of the day's occurrences, thereby enabling him to live that day better the second time. Tim, however, discerns that the ultimate revelation lies not in living life perfectly but in cherishing every facet of life's experiences: "In the end," he says, "I think I've at last learnt the full message from my strange adventures in time— the truth is I now don't travel back at all, not even for the day. I just live every day as if I've deliberately come back to this one day—to enjoy it as if it was the full, final day of my extraordinary ordinary life..."



Fragment of painting, "Clotilde and Elena on the Rocks at Javea," by Joaquín Sorolla (1905)

”

By integrating various life experiences—whether big or small, joyful or painful— we can comprehend their meaning, ultimately realizing that all of them hold value. This understanding, that each moment in life is unique and thus precious, fosters a profound appreciation for life, others, and oneself.

I describe a highly integrated state of mind as being deeply mindful and non-judgmental, experiencing less anxiety and tension, and possessing wisdom that transcends categorical understanding. By integrating various life experiences—whether big or small, joyful or painful—we can comprehend their meaning, ultimately realizing that all of them hold value. This understanding, that each moment in life is unique and thus precious, fosters a profound appreciation for life, others, and oneself.

The idea that life is precious because it happens only once may sound clichéd, but it is a unique sentiment felt in a highly integrated state. Tim was able to achieve this through time travel. Although we lack such abilities, if we begin to reflect on our experiences, understand their meanings, act for the benefit of others, and cherish the present moment, we can live well without the time-traveling ability that Tim had.

A character education framework focusing on psychological integration has two key components. First, character education should not only teach individual virtues but also foster the psychological process of integrating various values and virtues across different aspects of life. While early development entails learning and exploring diverse virtues, over time character education should progress towards harmonizing virtues across various domains of life and addressing conflicts between different values to foster an integrated state of motivation. This is essential to the formation of the moral motivation characteristic of virtue. While being non-judgmental and mindful, having a sense of meaning in life, and experiencing gratitude are important aspects of good character, these cannot be developed as individual skills. Rather, these qualities can be developed in the process of psychological integration, along with developing integrative understanding and integrative emotion regulation.

Second, character education demands a holistic approach. Particularly, negative feelings stemming from early childhood adversity can impede healthy moral development and well-being. Understanding psychological integration teaches us that traumas and adversities need not remain as lifelong burdens. By integrating these experiences, individuals can gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for others, acquire wisdom for making sound life decisions and moral judgments, sustain healthy relationships, and find greater happiness. This lifelong journey requires not only individual effort but also active support from both education and society. In K-12 settings, understanding each student's experiences and providing proactive interventions, including counseling, to support recovery from trauma that hinders integration should be an essential component of character education. ■



Sieun Sienne Park, is a PhD candidate and Scandling Scholar in Education and a core investigator at Office of Equity Research, at the University of Rochester. She works at the intersection of philosophy and psychology, focusing on well-being, psychological integration, autonomy, and diversity.

FROM THE ARCHIVES:

It may be said that a person is human only insofar as he is of others, with others and for others. He is autonomous, and his dignity is found partly in that autonomy. But his fulfillment and the basis of that dignity is found in life in accord with his nature, a life of acknowledgement of his dependence and his relatedness. The person is an essentially related being, not simply because of his or her need for others and the necessity of encounter with them, but also because it is in activity with and for others that the self is fulfilled. A person is born into the riches of human consciousness and is born to share them. It is in extending the self that the self is found. In other words, a person's distinct humanness or full dignity is found not simply in autonomy – what has here been called radical autonomy – but in autonomy exercised in accord with what he is. Both the means and the goal of moral education must be tuned to this somewhat paradoxical fact of human existence.

Walter Nicgorski, *Environment: The Social Dimension of Moral Development*, in *Act and Agent: Philosophical Foundations for Moral Education and Character Development* (Eds.: McLean, Ellrod, Schildler, & Mann), 1986, pp. 307–331.

Catalyzing Character is generously supported by the Kern Family Foundation.

— THE —
KERN  FAMILY
— FOUNDATION —