

# Literature-Based Character Education

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"Relationships are the most complex things ever thought up besides computers!" Though embedded with considerable exasperation as well as awe, this insight reflects significant progress for one eighth grader in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Just six weeks earlier, before he and his classmates embarked upon an innovative educational experiment, he admittedly saw "chicks" as little more than fair targets for his unruly adolescent hormones, and the word "relationship" was not in his lexicon.

At the same time in Roxbury, one of Boston's inner city neighborhoods, chronic low achievers in another middle school classroom boasted of reading an entire book for the first time ever. Their teacher complained, with mixed emotions, of problems keeping his stock of books from disappearing. He marveled that parents, too, were often reading the homework assignments and talking to their teenagers about them.

And in rural Dudley near the Connecticut border, a thirteen-year-old girl labeled "at risk" was lamenting, "I learned practically nothing from this book. I have already learned this stuff by living my life and making mistakes... I guess I wish this book would have come out a lot earlier so I wouldn't have had to go through the things I did to learn about it."

What is this book that has adolescents clicking off their remote controls and turning to the printed word? At first glance it's an unlikely candidate for any best seller list. Its plain, red, hardcover binding with gold block lettering looks more like a volume from a set of junior encyclopedias than any publication that would appeal to teenagers. Its pages are totally devoid of pictures, and its title, *The Art of Loving Well*, has not always been a selling point. It is the forty short stories, poems, and essays in this anthology and the activities that go along with them that speak to the power of good literature and are so compelling.

The Loving Well Program teaches students about the complexities and joys of a wide variety of relationships including friendships and family, infatuations and first romances, enduring commitments and marriage. It treats sexuality education as a part of general character development and helps students develop strong personal and social ideals. Studying believable situations in short stories, poems, essays, folk tales, and myths can empower middle schools students to make wise decisions about their own lives and to grow into responsible citizens capable of a full range of healthy, loving relationships.

## **Roots in character education**

"It's important to be virtuous; it's more important to teach others to be virtuous, and it's easier." Over the past decades, schools have not always responded well to Mark Twain's gentle coaxing. Efforts to teach students about becoming virtuous have often become misunderstood as attempts at moral control or indoctrination, and many programs are rightfully suspected of having hidden political, religious, or economic agendas. The end result is that schools have become quite afraid to teach about moral values. Unfortunately this reluctance has developed at the very time that so many are calling upon schools to help solve burgeoning problems of violence, drugs, and the erosion of civic commitment and healthy families.

Twain was not entirely accurate. Of course, it is easy to preach about virtues to others. But, to teach the importance and subtleties of character virtues can be hard. It is nonetheless a vital classroom undertaking. Schools can no longer elude their responsibility for developing students' personal and social character (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993; Leming, 1993; Lickona, 1991).

## **Getting the green light**

The Loving Well Project began in 1987 at Boston University. Several of us at the School of Education were already enthusiastic about literature-based education as a result of The Character Project, a curriculum previously developed and field tested under a grant from the U. S. Department of Education. Although there had been no formal evaluation, teachers and students reported that the stories and activities did indeed enhance students' understanding of eight vital elements of integrity and responsible citizenship, (i.e. honesty, responsibility, respect, courage, persistence, love of country, fairness, and kindness). The precise impact on students' actions, however, was left to speculation.

When a call came from Washington challenging us to test the impact of literature-based education by tackling the problem of teenage pregnancies, The Loving Well Project was born. The Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs, a division of the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, had funds from the Adolescent Family Life Act designated for prevention programs. In collaboration with College of Communication colleagues, who were to produce a videotape component of the program, we crafted a proposal and shortly thereafter celebrated its acceptance. Fortunately our confidence in the impact of literature-based curriculum outweighed our trepidation. A 1992 evaluation report based on four years of field testing with 10,000 students in urban, suburban, and rural schools confirmed the project's success.

The complete title of the text component is *The Art of Loving Well: A Character Education Curriculum*. It is designed to help equip students' with the inclination and ability to make careful, wise, moral choices. Each of the activities accompanying the 40 selections helps students understand Erich Fromm's conclusion that all healthy relationships include basic elements of care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge (Fromm, 1956). "Growth" was added to Fromm's list as a fifth essential ingredient.

### **Literature-based education addresses life's complexities**

Rich literature is an effective antidote to the intrinsic impulsiveness of adolescents, especially in an electronic era. If it is true that the medium is often the message, curricula that depend on careful reading and thoughtful conversation are powerful models for the responsible, informed, respectful communication essential to all healthy human relationships. In addition, literature-based education shows students that art is not an irrelevant pastime typically reserved for Sunday afternoons. On the contrary, fine literature etches life's complexities clearly and when well taught inspires us to discover wisdom for our own lives.

Too often literature has been taught as autopsy. The corpus put on the table, bright lights turned on, the blood drained, and the cold dissection continued until the remains are buried. We advocate teaching literature in ways that are not so clinical and bloodless but that are enlivening and vital ([see sample activity](#)). Good teachers first urge students to react to the selections intuitively, emotionally, vigorously, to note the appealing and appalling traits of the characters, the nuances of conflicts, and the consequences of decisions and actions. They then encourage students to go beyond their initial impressions, to revisit and refine their insights, to respect differing opinions, and to appreciate life's ambiguities. An important axiom of *The Loving Well Project* is that haste is an archenemy of wisdom.

Finally and most importantly, good teachers connect ideas in literature to choices in real life. Conversations begun in the classroom but expanded to include parents, other adults, and friends who are not classmates help teenagers come to appreciate the value of collective wisdom. It also helps them realize that we continue to grapple with the intricacies of relationships throughout adulthood and that the potential rewards are worth the effort. As students consider the connections to their own lives, the story can remain a sanctuary. Talking about fictional characters and events affords a measure of safety but can address very personal issues.

Although not every discussion will have immediate connections to every student's life, we believe in the squirrel theory of knowledge. Students will accumulate literary referents or nuggets of wisdom to store away until they need them sometime in the future. In any event, the school will have promoted the principle that slowing down, observing carefully, reflecting and deliberating are sound habits for making important decisions and building healthy relationships

### **The three Vs: Vexing, vivid, and vicarious**

The first, and perhaps most consequential, step in developing the Loving Well program required the selection of engaging stories, poems, essays, folk tales, and myths. Each literary selection needed to vex the students a bit, to be vivid enough to engage the students, and to provide a vicarious experience that would encourage students' thinking about relationships.

An author's artful use of language shapes the reader's imagination and understanding often by the choice of a single word or phrase. Therefore, in order to understand a story fully, readers must slow down, or "text crawl." No more needs to be said about the divergent backgrounds of two classmates in Robert Cormier's "President Cleveland, Where Are You?" than that Jerry lives in a tenement while Rollie Tremaine lives in "a big white birthday cake of a house." The images and implications merit a thoughtful lingering and contribute importantly to character development.

In the same story, eleven-year-old Jerry is completely vexed by his fifteen-year-old brother who has become so Romantically bewitched that he loses interest in baseball and writes letters he never intends to send. Jerry's sense of family loyalty is strong enough that he eventually sacrifices a coveted "Official Imitation Major League Baseball Glove" in the interest of the romance, but his ambivalence is captured in three simple words, "Love, I muttered."

Another virtue of good literature is that it allows students to identify with characters most like themselves. The range of developmental differences is so broad in a typical eighth grade classroom that both Jerry's and his brother's feelings are likely to resonate.

When our eighth grader in Williamstown spoke of relationships as rivaling computers in complexity, he was beginning to understand how quality relationships demand more than merely impulsive exchanges. In a most basic sense, Loving Well is an anti-impulse curriculum. The characters, their problems, their feelings, and their relationships, are interesting enough that the reader wants to slow down and revisit various moments of the story for a more complete understanding. Skilled teachers reinforce this habit of reflection and sense of detail as essential to resolving each story's problems.

Vivid literature entices readers to become involved vicariously, to care about the characters and their fate. The situations are believable and relevant. It has been remarked that if we see a movie one night and involuntarily think about it the next day, then it is a film. These involuntary reflections suggest that it was a form of art, its impact beyond simple entertainment. The 40 selections in the hardcover Art of Loving Well anthology were selected to have a similar impact. The collection evolved over three editions and now reflects quite inclusively the cultural and ethnic diversity of our student audience.

Highly animated classroom discussions attest to the intensity with which students take the characters, the stories, and the issues to heart and allow their fictional experiences to inform their daily lives. As one student put it, "My favorite stories were 'Appointment

with Love' and beauty and the Beast' because one of my weakest points is judging people by the way they look. Or that was my weakest point anyway." Clearly, this young woman has developed some meaningful literary referents to guide her future thinking and behavior.

Not only the 13-year-old in Dudley but older brothers and sisters of many Loving Well students comment poignantly that they wish they'd been better prepared in order to avoid the pain and sometimes tragic mistakes of early romantic encounters. Vicarious literary experiences, well taught, enable a student to enter subsequent real-life situations as an experienced person. Awash in the insecurities typical of their age, adolescents entering their teenage years tend to think confusion and uncertainty uniquely theirs. In the words of Parr (1992), an authority in the field of character education,

"...literature has the ability to break into the sense of individual isolation that so often induces moral apathy and me-ism. By giving students an awareness that they are part of a larger community, it reassures them that they alone do not carry the burden of certain thoughts, ideas and feelings" (p. 19).

The varied literary settings, the times and places near and far, underscore the universality of the literary themes and underscore the value of collective wisdom.

From time to time teachers have expressed concern that the reading level of some selections might be too difficult especially for some of the chronic low achievers who most need the curriculum. Throughout the field testing it became evident that the inherent interest level motivated students to rise to the challenge. In short, they understand far more about the stories and the issues than we would have expected. In those few cases where actual learning disabilities present obstacles to independent reading, we still contend that students should not be denied access to first rate literature. We urge teachers to read some selections aloud if need be. Perhaps some of the better readers could read the selection in a "readers' theatre" format to the class.

It is a pleasure to remind students after a vigorous, productive class discussion that all the heat and light was generated by a few printed pages not by a high-action, color enhanced, stereophonic video.

### **Good literature is interdisciplinary**

Good literature, like life, is not only complex, it is thoroughly interdisciplinary. Its richness enables much flexibility in the classroom. Even a minor point in a story can become a major point of classroom discussion. For example, in Elizabeth Enright's "A Distant Bell," 11-year-old Susie notes a change in her father. "He looked greatly refreshed, and there was a whiff of something about him: a whiff of something to drink, I thought. I was glad. If he felt better, then I felt better, too." This observation is only one of many indications of an uneasy father-daughter relationship. Though his drinking is never

mentioned again, Susie's statement can serve as a point of departure for an important discussion about uses and abuses of alcohol and its impact on relationships

Though field tested primarily in language arts classes, the Loving Well program has been adopted by many health teachers who see one of their primary goals as empowering students to build happy, productive, responsible relationships. And schools that have instituted regular advisory or guidance periods find many of these short literary selections suitable for single session discussions. It is ideal when one good story becomes the topic of the day in lunchrooms, hallways, locker rooms, and in regular classes; then the school has gone a long way toward developing the school's sense of community and commitment to character education. In describing the impact of the Loving Well curriculum on his teachers and students, John D'Auria, principal of Wellesley Middle School in suburban Boston, attests to the potential interdisciplinary impact of literature-based programs:

It grounds the quest for intimacy in thoughtful reflection; it stretches students to look beyond themselves and find what is important in friendship, family, and love. This is learning which enriches the individual and strengthens the bonds we have with each other.

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