

Does Character Education *Really* Support Citizenship Education?

Examining the Claims of an Ontario Policy

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Abstract

The claim that the character education policy of a school board in Ontario, Canada supports citizenship education is examined. 181 documents were analyzed to determine the ways the policy supports and/or undermines citizenship education's goal to prepare students to become "knowledgeable individuals committed to active participation in a pluralist society" (Sears, Clarke, and Hughes, 2000, p. 153). The findings show that the policy encourages students to acquire specific values, behaviours, and interpersonal skills rather than conceptual or situational knowledge. While the policy encourages active citizenship by promoting the development of decision-making, conflict resolution, and communication skills, it emphasizes participation in activities that support rather than challenge the status quo. The policy also offers some support for developing students' commitment to pluralism, but its narrow definition of diversity and emphasis on shared values, behaviour, and language contradict these efforts. I conclude that the policy supports citizenship education that adopts an assimilationist conception of social cohesion and/or social initiation as its purpose(s).

Introduction

Character education may become commonplace in public schools in Canada (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006; Alberta Education, 2005) as it has in the USA (Hamilton Fish Institute, 2005) and Britain (Arthur, 2005). Character education is the explicit attempt by schools to teach values to students. Advocates claim that character education increases academic achievement, improves student behaviour, and supports citizenship education (Benninga, 1997; Character Education Partnership, 2003; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006).

In this article I consider the claim that character education supports citizenship education and identify the approach(es) to citizenship education, if any, supported by character education. Approaches to citizenship education vary and reflect different and opposing beliefs about the purpose of citizenship education (Clark & Case, 1999). I focus on the character education policy of a school district in Southern Ontario, Canada, and examine the ways the policy supports and/or undermines the national consensus goal of citizenship education to prepare to become “knowledgeable individuals committed to active participation in a pluralist society” (Sears, Clarke, and Hughes, 2000, p. 153).

Purposes of Citizenship Education

The purposes of citizenship education are debatable (Clark & Case, 1999). Should it enable students to fit into society or prepare them to change it? Should citizenship education emphasize social cohesion, students’ personal characteristics, or the methods of academic disciplines? Each of these purposes has served as a rationale for citizenship education in North America (Clark & Case, 1999), and each gives rise to different conceptions of citizenship education.

Approaches to citizenship education that adopt social *initiation* as their purpose believe citizenship education should pass on “the understandings, abilities, and values that students require if they are to fit into and be productive members of society” (Clark & Case, 1999, p. 18). These approaches imply that society is functioning well and is worthy of reproduction. Citizenship education for social *reformation*, on the other hand, assumes that society is in need of improvement and aims to empower students “with the understandings, abilities, and values necessary to critique and ultimately improve their society” (Clark & Case, 1999, p.18). These two opposing purposes have given rise to dualist models of citizenship education including elitist/activist (Sears, 1996), minimal/critical (DeJaeghere, 2005), and traditional/progressive (Parker, 1996).

Social initiation models of citizenship education emphasize teaching students a common body of knowledge about history, government institutions and processes (Sears, 1996). They portray history as a narrative of continuous progress, and political institutions are presented as operating in lock step fashion (Sears, 1996). Democratic concepts and values are also taught, but their tensions in society are not considered (DeJaeghere, 2005). These models attribute societal problems to personal deficits rather than structures (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), and while they may encourage citizen participation, civic actions are limited to those that maintain the status quo (e.g., picking up trash). The highest level of participation demanded of citizens, according to elitist conceptions, is informed voting (Sears, 1996). Thus, citizenship education approaches that adopt social initiation as their purpose encourage students to respect tradition, institutions, authority, and dominant narratives and in so doing perpetuate the status quo.

Alternatively, approaches that adopt social reformation as their purpose aim to prepare students to critique and change society (Clark & Case, 1999; DeJaeghere, 2005). They encourage students to develop a deep commitment to democratic values including “the equal participation of all citizens in discourse where all voices can be heard and power (political, economic, and social) is relatively equally distributed” (Sears, 1996, p. 8). Further, the tensions inherent in democratic society are explored. Social reformation models not only encourage active participation, but they also examine the relationship between an individual’s behaviour and social justice (DeJaeghere, 2005). Students also learn how structures and institutions, including schools, textbooks, teachers and curriculum (Clark & Case, 1999), discriminate against some groups while privileging others (DeJaeghere, 2005; Sears, 1996). They are taught to uncover forms of oppression and consider how structures might be changed to become more inclusive and democratic.

Joshee (2004) proposes that a third purpose of citizenship education, social cohesion, is being pursued in Canada. The concern to address and promote social cohesion has arisen as citizens have become increasingly different from one another due to unequal consequences of neoliberal policies that advocate a global market economy with little state intervention (Jenson, 1998).

While it may be reasonable for schools to promote social cohesion, it can be pursued in ways that support democratic principles and in ways that promote assimilation (Bickmore, 2006; Blackmore, 2006). Democratic conceptions of social cohesion, for example, encourage diversity of identities and viewpoints and “significant citizen agency”, whereas assimilationist conceptions emphasize social harmony values, individual skills (such as cooperation,

communication, appreciation of diversity and generic critical thinking skills), and the marginalization of dissenting viewpoints (Bickmore, 2006, p. 361).

Regardless of the purpose and approach adopted, the very nature of citizenship education, with its goal of creating citizens, is concerned with producing and encouraging certain attitudes, values, and behaviours. Across Canada, developing knowledgeable citizens with commitments to active participation and pluralism are “key elements of citizenship [education] around which there is consensus” (Sears, Clarke, & Hughes, 1998, p. 3).

The first of these three elements, *knowledge*, includes both situated and conceptual knowledge. Situated knowledge is knowledge that is used to enhance and frame thoughtful participation in civic life (Sears et al., 1998). Conceptual knowledge includes understanding of concepts and ideas related to citizenship including justice, freedom, dissent, due process, the rule of law, equality, diversity, loyalty, and due process (Hughes, 1994; Sears et al., 1998). The second element of citizenship education is the preparation of students to *actively participate* in civic life. To do so effectively requires decision-making, conflict resolutions, and communication skills (Sears et al., 1998). Finally, the third element of citizenship education involves encouraging students to develop a *commitment to pluralism*. This commitment is dedicated “to fostering pluralist civic society with wide participation from many different individuals and groups” (Sears et al., 1998, p. 4). Below I examine if and how an Ontario school board’s character education policy supports the development of these key elements of citizenship education.

Character Matters!

The focus of this study is *Character Matters!*, York Region District School Board’s (YRDSB) character education policy. The Board serves York Region, a large geographical area (1,776 square kilometres) located just north of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, with a culturally and economically diverse population of almost one million residents (York Region, n.d.).

Character Matters! states that it “is committed to *high academic achievement* as well as *personal, interpersonal and citizenship development*” (emphasis in original, Havercroft, 2002, p. 2). It also claims that character education helps students become “reliable, productive employees and active, responsible participants in community life” (YRDSB, n.d.-j) Finally, the policy promises that “[b]y incorporating character education into existing curriculum in an intentional and systematic manner, our schools can help foster the democratic ideals of citizenship, justice, thoughtful decision-making, and enhanced quality of life” (YRDSB, n.d.-i).

The central component of *Character Matters!* is a list of ten character attributes: respect, responsibility, honesty, empathy, fairness, initiative, perseverance, courage, integrity, and

optimism. Character *Matters!* claims these values “are universal and transcend religious, ethnocultural and other demographic distinctions” (YRDSB, 2003, p. 1). The policy also assumes character can be taught and learned through direct teaching of the ten values (YRDSB, 2003).

Character *Matters!*'s assumptions and predominantly traditional approach to character education are shared by popular character education initiatives in the USA (e.g., Character Counts!, The Character Education Partnership). Traditional approaches to character education appeal to neoconservatives who are concerned about moral decline and wish to return to the “good old days” in which students learned important, traditional knowledge and were part of a common culture that held traditional values in high regard (Apple, 2006; Nash, 1997; Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005).

Traditional character education also serves neoliberalism. It does so by promoting the Protestant work ethic (Kohn, 1997a; Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005) which addresses neoliberalism's interest in the production of good workers and belief in the value of competition and a free-market economy. This ethic links individual effort with material success and suggests that individuals who do well in the economy have earned it through their hard work and good character.

Data & Analysis

One hundred eighty-one documents served as the data for this study. The documents include “a wide range of written, visual, and physical material relevant to the study at hand” (Merriam, 2001, p. 112) and fall into four sets. The first set includes documents produced by the YRDSB that explicitly focus on Character *Matters!*. The second set includes articles from *The Attribute*, “a character based e-newsletter” produced by the YRDSB (YRDSB, 2005, December 14). Documents linked to the Character *Matters!* website or referenced in documents available on the website but are not published by YRDSB comprise the third set. Finally, texts that are not explicitly connected to Character *Matters!* but are related to it through policy webs (Joshee & Johnson, 2005) make up the final set. Each document was analyzed to determine how *Character Matters!* supports or undermines the development of knowledgeable citizens with commitments to active participation and pluralism.

The three elements of citizenship education (knowledge, active participation, and commitment to pluralism) served as the initial categories for the analysis. I read each document and highlighted words, phrases, and passages that drew attention to one or more of these elements and their subcomponents. For example, to understand how and in what ways Character *Matters!* encourages students to acquire *situational knowledge* (knowledge used to

frame and enhance participation) I highlighted passages that link students' knowledge with their participation. I then considered the *kind* of knowledge students' were encouraged to use. These kinds of knowledge include knowledge from academic disciplines, knowledge of character attributes, knowledge of current events, and knowledge of interpersonal skills.

To determine how *Character Matters!* encourages students' to develop *conceptual knowledge* I highlighted all references to freedom, justice, loyalty, equality, dissent, and law and due process in the documents. I considered how each concept is discussed and how each is defined and constructed. I also examined how discussions related to pluralism and difference might support or undermine students' understanding of the concepts of equality and diversity. In addition, I considered the definitions of the ten attributes promoted by *Character Matters!* as another possible source of information about the democratic concepts. For example, I considered how the definition of fairness might influence students' understanding of the concepts of justice and due process.

Similarly, to understand how the policy encourages students' *active participation*, I adopted a broad definition of participation and highlighted all exhortations to teachers, principals, parents and the community to encourage students to become actively involved in their community; exhortations to students directly to become involved; descriptions of activities in which students were involved in their classroom, school, community, or beyond; as well as policy statements that addressed the benefits and need for student involvement. I paid particular attention to the ways the texts encourage the development of conflict resolution, communication and decision-making skills and considered each of these as subcomponents of active participation (Sears et al., 1998).

Next, I created subcategories that represent different types of involvement (e.g., service learning, making donations, fundraising, organizing conferences, serving in student government), location of involvement (classroom, school, local community, province, Canada, international), and adjectives used to describe participation (e.g., contributing, effective).

I followed a similar process to identify the policy's support for the development of students' commitment to pluralism. I first highlighted words, phrases, and passages that reflect efforts to influence students' attitudes towards diversity and difference. I included descriptions of activities that focus on diversity, lessons about dealing with differences, and anti-racism initiatives, for example. I also examined the stated goals of activities related to diversity. These goals include encouraging students to recognize, celebrate and value diversity. Finally, I considered the policy's underlying assumptions and claims about differences between people

(e.g., claims of universal values) and how they support or undermine efforts to influence students' attitudes towards pluralism.

Findings

Situated Knowledge

Education stakeholders in Canada believe citizenship education should encourage students to develop both situated and conceptual knowledge (Sears et al., 2000). Situated knowledge is knowledge that enhances and frames “thoughtful participation in civic life” (Sears et al., 1998, p. 3). Character *Matters!*'s declaration that “[s]tudents who adopt positive character attributes become reliable, productive employees and active, responsible participants in community life” (Havercroft, 2002, p. 3) suggests that the knowledge students need for civic participation is knowledge of certain character attributes. This idea is furthered in an *Attribute* article linking democracy and character:

The conditions for democracy exist when all citizens have the potential to participate equally in the work of society. As such, in a democracy, the necessity for character also exists. A democratic people must be committed to principles of respect and empathy for others. They exhibit honesty, fairness and courage, sometimes in the face of adversity. A democratic people educate with a strong sense of optimism for the future of humankind, that kindness and compassion, and a sense of belonging to the family of humankind is paramount to serving the self. (YRDSB, 2005, January 24)

Absent from this discussion is mention of any additional knowledge needed to participate in society beyond knowledge of the character attributes promoted by Character *Matters!*

Instead, Character *Matters!* encourages students to combine their knowledge of the attributes with various interpersonal skills. An *Attribute* article states that “part of the function of schools is to develop the capacity of students to work with others” (YRDSB, 2004, August 23). According to the article, this ability requires social awareness; relationship skills including active listening, empathy, and a willingness to lead or follow according to the group's best interest; conflict resolution and participation skills; and a sense of humour (YRDSB, 2004, August 23). These skills, like the attributes, must be explicitly taught and modeled (YRDSB, 2004, August 23).

Thus, while Character *Matters!* does not argue against teaching students to use other knowledge to enhance their participation in civic life, it does not promote it either. Instead,

Character *Matters!* suggests that the knowledge students need for responsible and effective participation is knowledge of Character *Matters!*'s attributes and a variety of interpersonal skills.

Conceptual Knowledge

Character *Matters!* claims that “[b]y incorporating character education into existing curriculum in an intentional and systematic manner, our schools can help foster the democratic ideals of citizenship, justice, thoughtful decision-making, and enhanced quality of life” (YRDSB, n.d.-i). In this section I examine this claim by considering if and how Character *Matters!* promotes teaching and learning core concepts of Canadian democracy: freedom, justice, due process, dissent, the rule of law, equality, diversity, and loyalty (Hughes, 1994) .

Character *Matters!* explicitly supports teaching and learning about some but not all of these concepts. As I discuss in detail below, Character *Matters!* encourages students to understand and appreciate diversity, but it adopts a narrow definition and emphasizes similarities rather than differences between individuals and groups.

The policy also offers limited support for teaching and learning about justice in general and social justice in particular. For example, the 2004 Board Report lists “justice orientation discussions” as an example of an approach to character education (York Regions District School Board, 2004, p. 7), and a letter to staff identifies social justice issues as part of character education (Hogarth, 2005, p. 1). Thus, while the policy supports teaching and learning about issues of justice, it emphasizes how they can be used as vehicles for developing character rather than facilitating students’ understanding of justice as a democratic concept.

Similarly, Character *Matters!* does not explicitly advocate the teaching and learning of loyalty, freedom, due process, dissent, the rule of law, and equality as democratic concepts and ideas. It does, however, construct some of these concepts as character attributes and provides implicit lessons about some of them. For example, the *Family Workbook* (2002) lists loyalty as an attribute that a family might choose to demonstrate. Like all the Character *Matters!* attributes, loyalty is constructed as a behaviour rather than an internal commitment or democratic concept. So while the policy explicitly supports students’ demonstrations of loyalty, it does not encourage them to explore its relationship to citizenship. Implicitly, however, the policy emphasizes and encourages loyalty through its emphasis on the responsibility of students to contribute to their communities and enact their community’s supposedly shared values (i.e., the ten attributes). The importance of demonstrating this loyalty by acting in accordance with the attributes is reinforced through rewards and celebrations.

The concept of freedom, like loyalty, is discussed in *Character Matters!* but not as a concept that students must come to understand. Instead, *Character Matters!* discusses freedom in terms of its relationship to character. An *Attribute* article explains

Many people have asked why it is necessary to “teach” character. I think the answer is quite clear. Without character, there is no freedom...no freedom as individuals or as a society... In short, freedom without character does not exist.

(YRDSB, 2004, September 20a)

This article positions character and character education as necessary precursors to the attainment and maintenance of freedom.

Thus, *Character Matters!* does not encourage teachers to teach about the concept of freedom directly. Implicitly, however, the policy teaches that individuals are free to act within boundaries set by others. For example, while *Character Matters!* permits teachers to teach the ten attributes in ways that suit their students’ needs and teachers’ personal styles, their freedom to do is limited by the assumption that the attributes are universal.

Similarly, the policy does not explicitly encourage teachers to teach the concept of dissent. However, by rewarding students who comply with the behavioural expectations of the attributes the policy implicitly teaches that dissent is undesirable. This view is also evident in the *York Region District School Board Character Matters! First Annual Review* (Havercroft , 2002) in which “disenfranchised students” are identified as “a particular challenge to *Character Matters!*” (p. 12).

The final two democratic concepts education stakeholders in Canada believe Canadian citizens need to know (Hughes, 1994), the rule of law and due process, are not addressed in *Character Matters!* Their absence, in addition to the relative absence of the concepts of justice, freedom, loyalty, and equality as democratic concepts to be learned by students, suggests that *Character Matters!* offers little support for the development of student’s knowledge of democratic concepts.

Active Participation

Ministries and Departments of Education across Canada agree that citizenship education should aim to prepare students to actively participate in civic life (Sears et al., 1998). The ability to make decisions, resolve conflicts and communicate are believed to be necessary skills for citizens’ active participation (Sears et al., 1998). *Character Matters!* supports students’ development of these skills and promotes civic participation. However, not all types of participation are equally encouraged.

Below I present Character *Matters!*'s stated commitments to promoting active citizenship. I then examine the ways the policy advocates developing students' skills in decision-making, conflict resolution, and communication. Next, I consider the policy's support for student involvement in charity work, service learning and advocating for social justice to better understand the purpose(s) of citizenship education supported by the policy.

Character *Matters!* explicitly supports active participation. Students are told "It is in your best interests to become the very best that you can be, and becoming involved at the school and community levels can be personally rewarding. Take the challenge..." (YRDSB, n.d.-g). Further, the policy claims that "Students who adopt positive character attributes become reliable, productive employees and *active, responsible participants* in community life" (YRDSB, n.d.-j, emphasis added). Importantly, as I show below, Character *Matters!* promotes participation in activities that support the state, its agencies, and the status quo much more frequently and emphatically than it encourages students to participate in activities that challenge social and political systems of inequity.

Decision-Making Skills

Character *Matters!* supports student involvement in decision-making in a variety of ways. First, the policy encourages student involvement in developing classroom and school-wide rules. For example, the *Attribute* encourages teachers to "Have the students think of and share the 'rules' and expectations they've ever had to follow at school. Once their ideas have been recorded, have them vote of the ones that they are willing to live by for the entire school year" (YRDSB, 2004, July 26).

Character *Matters!* also encourages the development of students' decision-making skills through involvement in committees, student councils, and other leadership positions (YRDSB, n.d.-f). In fact, the policy offers strong support for the development of students' leadership skills through their participation in a variety of events and programs. Notably, many of these initiatives involve students explicitly promoting character education to other students. In one program, *LINK*, senior high school students are trained to "deliver Character Education through TAP (Teacher Advisor Program)" (YRDSB, 2004, March 22). At another school students "chair a Character Education Committee and organize two student-led Character Forums each year. [They]... are also responsible for selecting, printing and distributing "Words of Wisdom" (student issues with positive messages) to the teachers for discussion with their classes. A quote of the week, selected by the committee, is delivered to the school body via the morning announcements" (YRDSB, 2004, February 20).

Thus, while *Character Matters!* does promote the development of students' decision-making skills by providing opportunities for them to be involved in decision-making, these opportunities are often limited and serve ends predetermined by the school. Organizing conferences, choosing classroom rules out of a set of rules followed in previous classrooms, and chairing character committees all provide students with experience making decisions that support rather than possibly challenge the schools' interests.

There are a few instances, however, where the policy offers support for student decision-making without these constraints. For example, the *Attribute* recommends *Meaningful Student Involvement*, a resource that aims to "establish a foundation for an emerging movement that promotes democracy in education by engaging students in researching, planning, teaching, evaluating leading and advocating for schools" (YRDSB, 2004, April 5b). While other similar instances may be found, they are greatly outnumbered by efforts and descriptions of ways to involve students in making decisions within tightly controlled parameters so that the schools' purposes are achieved.

Conflict Resolution

Like decision-making skills, skills in conflict resolution are recognized across Canadian education jurisdictions as necessary for active participation in civic life (Sears et al., 1998). While they receive less emphasis than decision-making skills, *Character Matters!* does support the development of students' ability to resolve conflicts.

The document *Peer Mediation, Peace, Conflict Resolution* (YRDSB, n.d.-i) defines conflict resolution as teaching basic communication and problem solving skills, developing an environment where conflicts do not erupt into violence, promoting opportunities for increased understanding, supporting and affirming diversity, and seeking to establish an overall tone of respect. Essential skills for constructive resolutions include perception, emotional, communication, and creative and critical thinking abilities as well as certain values, beliefs, and attitudes (YRDSB, n.d.-i). This document also suggests a number of web resources and lists tips for creating a peaceful classroom. These resources define peace narrowly as "the absence of direct violence and conflict" (Joshee, 2004, p. 150) rather than adopting a proactive view of peace that involves understanding and addressing underlying structural causes of violence.

An *Attribute* article encourages teachers to "[i]mplement a school wide peer mediation/conflict resolution programme" (YRDSB, 2004, August 9). In fact, peer mediation is the conflict resolution strategy most frequently advocated in *Character Matters!* The model of peer mediation promoted involves "[teaching] a select group of students advanced intervention

and problem solving strategies [and empowering] students to assist other students in resolving conflicts when they occur” (YRDSB, n.d.-i).

The conflict resolution skills promoted in *Character Matters!* and the ways they are discussed in the policy construct conflict as something that should be avoided. While this may often be desirable, conflict is inevitable in pluralist societies (Bickmore, 2004) and can lead to possibilities that might not have otherwise been imagined. Emphasizing conflict resolution and avoidance are not likely to encourage or prepare students to challenge injustice since these challenges will undoubtedly conflict with mainstream thinking.

Communication Skills

Character Matters! supports the development of students’ communication skills in a variety of ways. First, the policy is explicitly linked to the Board’s focus on literacy. *Character Matters! and Literacy* states that a “classroom that actively strives for creating a culture where the 10 attributes are actually lived, is one that is free from [sic] negative distractions that prevent learning from taking place; the teaching and learning of literacy skills are enabled” (YRDSB, n.d.-b). Furthermore, the 2004 Board Report argues that “character [is] the very foundation for literacy and instruction” (Havercroft, 2004, p. 1).

Developing writing skills, a component of literacy, is encouraged through the policy’s support of an annual essay contest that asks students to write about their core values. *Character Matters!* also suggests integrating writing with character education through themes in Language writing, respect essays in Language class, daily journals in English, and Character Education Acrostic Poem (YRDSB, n.d.-c).

Character Matters! encourages the development of oral communication skills through drama, song writing, and public speaking. For example, the “Character Counts” speaking contest at an elementary school required students speak about “the importance of character” and “[t]hey clearly exemplified the character message and its importance in helping all to become responsible and contributing citizens” (YRDSB, 2004, June 1). In the *Literacy through Music* project students and an artist-in-residence “wrote lyrics to effectively convey a character message through song” (YRDSB, 2005, May 17). Finally, the policy encourages teachers to use drama to illustrate and practice the attributes in action.

Reading and responding to stories, other elements of communication, are also supported by *Character Matters!*. For example, the *Family Character Workbook* (YRDSB, 2002) encourages families to seek out stories that illustrate selected attributes. Similarly, teaching about the attributes through reading about characters who exemplify them is encouraged.

As described above, the policy encourages students to become involved in student councils, committees, organizing conferences, and providing training and counselling (e.g., peer mediation) to other students. Involvement in any of these activities would require communications skills as the activities demand that students work with one another, educators, and/or community members. However, I have already suggested that these opportunities also help the schools achieve their purposes and predetermined goals. So, too, do essay contests centred on students' core values, speaking contests about the importance of character, and the other communication activities described above. These activities do not encourage students to use their communication skills to achieve their own purposes nor do they provide opportunities for students to advocate for social change.

Another way *Character Matters!* encourages the development of communication skills is its support of cooperative learning. Cooperative learning is cited as an example of the "Hands" component of the "Head, Heart, Hands" paradigm¹ of *Character Matters!* (Havercroft, 2005). An *Attribute* article (YRDSB, 2004, August 23) lists the following communication skills as necessary for cooperative learning: active listening, making a plan, making suggestions, responding to suggestions, asking for reasons, giving reasons, asking for feedback, giving feedback, checking accuracy, checking for understanding, persuading others, paraphrasing, summarizing, body language, reading others, control of one's own voice, seeing the point of view of others, and elaborating. Teachers are explicitly encouraged to teach these skills (YRDSB, 2004, August 23).

While there is considerable evidence that *Character Matters!* supports and encourages students' development of communication skills, it does not connect them to active participation in the way that Canadians do (Sears et al., 2000). That is, while Canadians identify the ability to communicate as necessary for participation in civic life (Sears et al., 2000), *Character Matters!* presents them as ways to achieve the goals of character education, work cooperatively, and support student achievement. I now turn to consider the kinds of participation most frequently advocated by the policy.

Charity and Service

Character Matters! strongly encourages students to become actively involved in civic life by donating to others. The *Attribute* is replete with articles honouring students' and teachers' efforts to collect and donate money and items such as food and clothing. Similarly, toy and clothing drives, bake and calendar sales, and other fundraisers are recognized at Board

¹ The "Head, Heart, Hands" paradigm represents the components of character identified by *Character Matters!*: knowledge (head); feeling (heart), and doing (hands) (Havercroft, 2002).

meetings as evidence of empathy and character. Importantly, many of the charity initiatives are designed to assist people in countries other than Canada. While these kinds of initiatives are important and necessary, the emphasis on helping individuals in other countries draws students' attention away from the needs of individuals in their own communities. It teaches students that charity work is a suitable way to be active in civic life without encouraging them to examine the social, political and economic factors that contribute to inequality locally, nationally, and globally.

In addition to being charitable, *Character Matters!* encourages "learning through service to others" (YRDSB, 2004, October 4). Not only does *Character Matters!* consider service learning to be "one of the most meaningful ways to teach responsibility, empathy and understanding", it is also considered "a wonderful way to encourage our students to become caring and responsible members of our community" (YRDSB, 2004, October 4). The underlying assumption is that students will develop character and civic mindedness through their service to others. Service learning is recognized in the 2004 Board Report (YRDSB, 2004) as an example of how *Character Matters!* is embedded in curriculum and instruction, and it is explicitly listed as a valued component of the policy in the 2002 Board Report (Havercroft, 2002).

Social Justice

Character Matters! offers limited support for student involvement in activities linked to social or political activism. Support is evident in the policy's definition of fairness; it is defined in part as "stand[ing] up for human rights" (YRDSB, n.d.-a). This statement suggests that students should participate in challenging and changing attitudes, individuals, and institutional structures that promote injustice. A few documents suggest examples of what this might look like or recognize individuals who have become involved in this way. For example, *How to Get Involved: Students* tells students that "[w]hen things go wrong, when you see bullying or racism, don't ignore it. Say something to help turn things around and / or talk to the adults in the building," (YRDSB, n.d.-g). Participating in walks against male violence and racism, breakfast clubs, and posting antiracism posters are a few suggested ways to integrate character education into a school's program. Notably, these activities are part of a much longer list of suggestions, the majority of which are not linked to social justice. Nevertheless, while students' participation in activities linked to social activism receives less emphasis than other types of participation, the policy does offer some degree of support for it.

Pluralism

Acceptance, promotion and valuation of diverse people, lifestyles, and perspectives are hallmarks of democracy (Solomon & Portelli, 2001). Citizenship education in a democratic society, then, must be committed to fostering a commitment to pluralism and recognition of its importance. *Character Matters!* goes some way to foster this commitment and recognition, but its narrow definition of diversity and emphasis on shared values, behaviour, and language contradict these efforts.

Character Matters! explicitly promotes recognition and celebration of diversity. For example, an *Attribute* article describes the events of a Black History Month Celebration which recognized “several distinguished Black Canadian citizens who have made noteworthy contributions to the Markham community” (YRDSB, 2004, March 8). Another article invites students to enter a contest “celebrating and promoting respect for our diverse community” in honour of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (YRDSB, 2004, November 15).

Beyond accepting and celebrating differences, the policy explicitly encourages students to value diversity. For example, *The Attribute* describes and promotes a conference for educators that provides them with “sources ‘to develop the skills, attitudes, knowledge and disposition’ needed to create learning environments that value diversity” (YRDSB, 2004, April 5a). Another article describes and provides a link to *The Harmony Movement*; this organization promotes “the appreciation and value of human diversity in communities across the country through public education programs...” (YRDSB, 2004, September 20).

Character Matters!'s concern with diversity is also reflected in its support of antiracism initiatives. School-based and board wide conferences focussed on antiracism are described in the *Attribute* (e.g., YRDSB, 2004, May 3, 2005, February 21, 2005, June 14), and an article encourages readers to “commit to making each day a day dedicated to the elimination of all forms of discrimination” (YRDSB, 2005, March 21a). Further, units on antiracism and discrimination are suggested as ways to integrate character education in the curriculum (YRDSB, n.d.-e).

While the significance of these initiatives must not be overlooked, their focus and the policy's claim that “[i]n Canada and in York Region, all races, religions, and ethno-cultural groups are respected and valued” (YRDSB, n.d.-d) show that *Character Matters!* promotes a narrow concept of diversity. This concept is limited to differences in culture, ethnicity, and religion. Other forms of difference, such as differences in language, sexual orientation, or ability, are not usually part of discussions about diversity in the policy. In fact, the only case in which a wide range of differences *is* recognized is in the claim that “To be Canadian suggests that one

hold a perspective that transcends boundaries of race, ethnicity and culture, socioeconomic background, ability, faith, gender, sexual orientation and age” (Hogarth, 2005, p. 4). This claim silences dissenting voices and delegitimizes different perspectives as it defines and essentializes what it means to be Canadian. It also constructs diversity as something that must be transcended – something to get past – rather than something to be valued for itself.

Crucially, while *Character Matters!* encourages recognition and respect for a narrow concept of diversity and the elimination of racism, the policy is much more interested in emphasizing and constructing similarities between individuals. This interest is evident in its emphasis on teaching and adopting shared values and in the policy’s concern that everyone uses the same language when discussing character education.

The 2002 Board Report includes multiple statements about using a shared language including “The challenge here is to gather the many related initiatives under the *Character Matters!* umbrella to develop consistent language and principles from Kindergarten through Grade twelve” (Havercroft, 2002, p. 9). Parents are told to “Speak the language of the attributes” (YRDSB, 2002, p. 21), and teachers are encouraged to “Use the language of the character attributes to address ‘teachable moments’...Weave the language of character education into the content of your curriculum” (YRDSB, n.d.-h).

The focus on regulation and standardization of language reflects *Character Matters!*’s interest in changing students’ behaviour so that it conforms to expectations linked to the policy’s ten attributes. For example, the 2002 Board Report explains that the attributes “mark a standard for our behaviour as adults and youth across the system” (Havercroft, 2002, p. 4). Principals and teachers are encouraged to “Correct gently against the character attributes” (YRDSB, n.d.-d; n.d.-h, p. 7). At a school featured in the *Attribute* “the ten character attributes form the cornerstone of student behaviour and expectations” (YRDSB, 2005, March 21b). Students at the school see the attributes in their agendas and hear about them in assemblies and announcements. Students then “earn certificates for displaying these traits through their words and actions” (YRDSB, 2005, March 21b). Moreover, the policy requires that everyone in the board, not just the students, act according to the attributes (YRDSB, 2003), and it encourages administrators to use them as a “focus for discussions about expectations of staff and student behaviour” (Havercroft, Kielven, & Slodovnick, 2004).

Character Matters!’s emphasis on conformity to standardized expectations for behaviour, its desire to regulate individuals’ language and standardize their values, and its narrow definition of diversity offers little support for the development of students’ commitment to pluralism.

Conclusions

These findings show that *Character Matters!* supports conceptions of citizenship education that aim to promote an assimilationist conception of social cohesion and to prepare students to fit into Canadian society rather than change it. These two purposes are not unrelated; I consider their relationship and discuss *Character Matters!*'s support of these purposes below.

While an emphasis on promoting social cohesion through citizenship education is not new, it has re-emerged as a priority in response to increasing differences that have arisen in response to neoliberal policies (Jenson, 1998). Without a socially cohesive society, Canada's neoliberal policies may not be sustainable (Committee on Social Affairs, Science, and Technology, 1999; Jenson, 1998). Canada's Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science, and Technology (1999) stated that "The most serious challenge for decision-makers is to ensure that economic integration driven by globalising markets does not lead to *domestic social disintegration*" (emphasis in original, Introduction). If, however, social cohesion can be secured, neoliberalism can continue to dominate and impact economic, social (Olssen, 2004), and education policies (Osborne, 2001).

Efforts to promote social cohesion may emphasize assimilation or democratic commitments to pluralism and diversity (Bickmore, 2006). Assimilationist notions of social cohesion emphasize "homogenization through inculcation of unproblematized values [and the] silencing or marginalization of dissenting viewpoints" (Bickmore, 2006, p. 382). *Character Matters!*'s commitments to teaching and learning shared values, its inattention to dissent as a democratic concept, and its celebration of compliance to the behavioural expectations linked to the character attributes show that the policy supports an assimilationist view of social cohesion.

Additional support is evident in *Character Matters!*'s treatment of conflict. Rather than advocating that students learn about the inevitably and potential utility of conflict in pluralist societies (Bickmore, 2006), conflict is instead constructed as something to be avoided. Bickmore (2006) argues that "[w]here curriculum reinforces student passivity and disengagement by marginalizing conflicting viewpoints, it denies those students the opportunities to develop skills and understandings of themselves as social actors (citizens)" (p. 361). Moreover, within this limited social cohesion framework, differences are constructed as things to recognize and ultimately overcome rather than continually address and revisit. This positioning demands that less attention be paid to issues of inequality and the pursuit of social justice since it implies that doing so is divisive (Joshee, 2004).

In addition to promoting an undemocratic notion of citizenship education for social cohesion, *Character Matters!* supports citizenship education that adopts social initiation as its

purpose. Evidence of this support is found in the policy's use of the curriculum and students' communication skills as ways to support and further the policy and goals of the school board rather than as means of student advocacy or interrogating injustice.

Furthermore, the predominantly traditional approach to character education advocated by *Character Matters!* (Winton, in press) conflicts with a number of central tenets of citizenship education for social reformation. For example, in addition to discouraging dissent, avoiding conflict, and offering limited support for social justice, *Character Matters!* promotes a deficit view of students by constructing adults as having good character while children do not and suggests that without adult guidance children will not develop it. Students are expected to learn and enact the attributes prescribed by the policy; they are not encouraged to debate the merits of each attribute, suggest others, and modify the list based on their discussions – hallmarks of democratic processes.

Character Matters! reproduces inequities in society more generally by paying attention to *individuals'* character rather than encouraging students to investigate how economic, political, or cultural factors affect character and behaviour. This focus allows political, economic, and cultural institutions and ideologies, including neoliberalism, to remain unchallenged (Purpel, 1997). Neoliberalism's commitment to competition and celebration of the individual is also furthered through *Character Matters!* support for contests and rewards as teaching and learning strategies. Thus, *Character Matters!*, like other traditional approaches, takes on the "ideology of the struggle to preserve the *status quo*" (p. 150).

Fortunately, even though *Character Matters!* promotes an undemocratic notion of social cohesion and the status quo, there are many opportunities in the policy for teachers to resist its efforts. For example, while *Character Matters!* defines conflict resolution narrowly as the avoidance of conflict, critically-minded teachers can use the policy's endorsement of conflict resolution to initiate discussions about issues about which there is little consensus. These discussions can form the basis of examinations of ways to work despite unresolved conflicts, the benefits of differing viewpoints, and discussions about the desirability of avoiding conflicts. These examinations will help students see that conflict is part of life and provide them with strategies for dealing with it.

Similarly, *Character Matters!* offers a limited definition of active citizenship that teachers can build upon. For example, they can use the policy's endorsement of active participation to introduce critical examination of policy issues and provide students with opportunities to protest current policy (e.g., through letter writing, awareness campaigns) and imagine other possibilities. Teachers can encourage students to draw on their knowledge of history and

current events to identify means of resistance and advocating change. This would provide students with opportunities to develop a sense of their own agency as well as teach students to use their knowledge to enhance and frame their participation.

In sum, *Character Matters!* does support citizenship education, but importantly, it supports undemocratic social cohesion and social initiation models of citizenship education rather than a social reformation model. This study shows that individuals committed to social justice and democratic education must approach claims that character education supports citizenship education with caution and ask “*What kind of citizenship education? For what purpose?*” before embracing character education as a means to prepare students to transform society.

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