

# Choosing Approaches for Character and Citizenship Education

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“Small things done consistently in strategic places make change happen.”

– Cile Chavez

**T**his resource uses the term character education not to signify a particular philosophy, method or program, but as the broad, general area of moral formation which can encompass diverse approaches. Williams suggests character education “allows for many definitions and interpretations of character, including definitions that are focused on right and wrong, and that are as interested with matters of “care” (i.e., mutual respect and cooperation), as with more traditional ethics (i.e., justice and fairness)” (2000, p. 33). It may also relate to such topics as moral reasoning, pro-social skill development, caring communities, anti-bullying and anti-racism education, conflict resolution, and violence prevention education.

## General Approaches

The literature emphasizes several different theoretical approaches. Howard, Berkowitz and Schaeffer identify three general approaches to character education:

- a traditional approach
- a cognitive-developmental approach
- a caring communities approach.<sup>1</sup>

These perspectives are helpful in planning and implementing character and citizenship programming. Some schools or jurisdictions may emphasize one approach over another; others will incorporate all three approaches.

### Traditional approach

A traditional approach focuses on action and habit as fundamental. Using a paradigm that originated in Aristotelian philosophy, this approach sees formal, often direct, instruction as a critical feature of character education. Instruction is often explicit in defining specific character traits and highlighting good examples of these traits. The school then has a responsibility to model, value and encourage these traits, thereby increasing the likelihood that students will do the right or good thing.

### Cognitive-developmental approach

This approach is a process-oriented pedagogy rooted in an ethical view that emphasizes context rather than absolutes: moral actions and decisions are based on the context of the situation. In this approach, the school teaches critical thinking, social problem solving and considering alternate points of view as primary elements



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in knowing what is good and right. This indirect instruction paradigm focuses on building a child’s understanding (as described by Kohlberg) and sociomoral development (as described by Piaget), which in turn emphasizes the interpersonal interactions of peers under the guidance of caring adults.

## Caring communities approach

In a caring communities approach, the focus is on relationships rather than individuals. Emotions and sentiments are seen as the root of moral action and reasoning. Pedagogically, the school focuses on the school community and the relationships of the people in it. Concern for the emotional health and well-being of students is critical, with the school structure reflecting this focus.


## Continuum of Citizenship Education

Traditionally, citizenship education in Canada has focused on identifying and ingraining the knowledge, skills, dispositions and attitudes required for citizenship. As our understanding of citizenship has changed, approaches to teaching have changed as well. As Joel Westheimer explains, “An initiative that supports the development of personally responsible citizens may not be effective at increasing participation in local and national civic affairs. Moreover, efforts to pursue some conceptions of personal responsibility might undermine efforts to prepare participatory and justice-oriented citizens. We also should distinguish between programs that emphasize participatory citizenship alone and those that include an emphasis on the pursuit of justice” (2003, p. 19).

Westheimer’s category of personally responsible citizen addresses the focus of many character and citizenship education programs. Effective approaches should address all three categories of citizenship.<sup>2</sup>

	Personally Responsible Citizen	Participatory Citizen	Justice-oriented Citizen
<b>Educational approach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeks to build character and personal responsibility</li> <li>• Emphasizes honesty, integrity, self-discipline, hard work</li> <li>• Nurtures compassion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develops strategies to accomplish collective tasks</li> <li>• Teaches how government and other institutions work</li> <li>• Focuses on importance of planning and participating in efforts to guide school policies or care for those in need</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasizes collective work related to community life and issues</li> <li>• Prepares students to improve society by critically analyzing and addressing social issues and injustices</li> <li>• Less likely to emphasize charity and volunteerism as ends in themselves</li> <li>• More likely to teach about social movements, and how to affect systemic change</li> </ul>

Sears and Hughes have proposed a similar continuum that characterizes approaches to citizenship education as moving from passive to active.<sup>3</sup> Moving character education beyond a passive transmission model means involving students and the whole school community in actively identifying and building core values that are meaningful to them. The differences between these two approaches are shown in the table below.<sup>4</sup>

<b>Passive Conception of Citizenship Education</b>	 <b>Activist Conception of Citizenship Education</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are taught a common body of knowledge about national history and political structures.</li> <li>• Political and military history is emphasized and presented as a narrative of continuous progress.</li> <li>• Political institutions are presented as operating in a lock-step fashion (e.g., how a bill is passed, how parliamentary debate works).</li> <li>• Teaching styles and techniques vary but focus on common answers on matters of fact and/or value.</li> <li>• Students are taught a set of national values and norms, i.e., that current political structures are the best ones possible.</li> <li>• Students are taught that informed voting is participation by the average citizen who needs information-gathering skills to vote in an informed manner.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students learn how to uncover ways in which institutions and structures support social organization (e.g., capitalism and patriarchy).</li> <li>• Students learn ways that social and political structures have discriminated against certain groups and have changed to be more democratic and inclusive.</li> <li>• Students develop commitment to equal participation of all individuals and groups in society, and challenge manifestations of privilege and inequality.</li> <li>• Students develop critical reflective problem-solving skills and cross-cultural skills. They participate with a variety of people to make the world more just and environmentally sustainable.</li> </ul>

An extensive research review concludes that four practices that are most effective in promoting citizenship include:

- student participation, discussion and collaboration
- promoting student autonomy and influence
- social skills training
- helping and social service behaviour.<sup>5</sup>

These practices also support development of character.

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# Using Core Values to Infuse Character and Citizenship Education

There are a number of ways jurisdictions and schools can choose to use core values as a focus for organizing and delivering instruction to support character and citizenship education. Core values are interrelated and many are described by more than a single word. Schools need the flexibility to use language that is most meaningful to their students, teachers and community.

### Identifying core values

The *Guide to Education* provides basic direction for developing students of character through selected learning outcomes and the general goals of schooling. However, specific values for emphasis are identified at the school or jurisdiction level. The process of identifying core values is a way of building community-wide understanding and common language. Active engagement of students, school staff and the community builds consensus and support for values or traits chosen. One way to do this is through focus groups involving a broad range of participants.

In identifying core values, schools and jurisdictions can consider the list provided in Alberta's Commission on Learning report, *Every Child Learns. Every Child Succeeds* (2003). Adapted from the North York Region District School Board, the list is not exhaustive, but it presents schools and school jurisdictions with a starting point. The list includes the following values:

- respect
- initiative
- responsibility
- perseverance
- honesty
- courage
- empathy
- integrity
- fairness
- optimism.

*See Appendix C for a more detailed description of each of these core values.*

Similar lists of values, attributes or virtues exist in numerous books, articles and Web sites.

In a faith-based school or program, gospel values permeate the ethics, curriculum and cultures of schools. These values challenge students to be thoughtful about ethical issues and to have a “right relationship” with self, others and the world.

### Using core values as a reference

Some schools and jurisdictions use their identified core values as a foundation or underpinning for character and citizenship education. The values become reference points for choosing, planning and assessing learning activities, school policies and extra- and co-curricular events. Teachers take advantage of teachable moments throughout the school year to discuss and reinforce these specific core values informally and directly, as opportunities arise. Core values act as a filter in instructional decision making about literature choices, and selection and organization of topics or themes across subject areas.

## Providing direct instruction in core values

Some jurisdictions and schools provide explicit instruction about core values. They create opportunities for students to learn about core values through:

- ethical discussions and stories to **know** what the value is
- observing role models and participating in a caring community to **see** what the value looks like
- ethical decision making, positive relationship building and service learning to **practise** and apply the value, and related language, behaviours and attitudes.

Michele Borba suggests the following five steps for the direct instruction of a particular core value.

1. Identify behaviour.
2. Identify core value.
3. Identify habit.
4. Weave it in.
5. Track it.

A number of resources provide information and sample strategies for supporting this type of direct instruction. For example, *The Virtues Project* (2000), developed by Linda Kavelin Popov, offers a bank of information on a number of specific core values. This information includes:

- what the value is
- why practise it
- how to practise it
- what it would look like in different types of situations
- signs of success
- sample affirmations
- activities to support understanding such as mind mapping, role-playing scenarios, reflection questions, picture prompts, poster points and sample quotes.

Through religious education programs and through the permeation of gospel values in all curriculum, faith-based schools and programs support the growth of students as responsible citizens, encouraging them to act ethically and morally in the family, community and work environments.

## Organizing by grade level

A number of schools and jurisdictions identify specific core values targeted at specific grade levels, taking into account developmental appropriateness. In this approach, grade-level teachers choose literature and other learning activities that enhance and deepen understanding of that specific value. For example, Grade 1 students may focus on kindness all year and Grade 6 students may focus on a more sophisticated value such as leadership.

## Organizing schoolwide themes

Core values can also be used as a thematic focus for classroom and school activities. A schedule of monthly themes may be developed for a single school year, or three or four sets of ten core values may run over a three- or four-year cycle. Some schools choose to break down a core value into four related values that can be introduced weekly to support and build on an overall monthly theme. For example, an overarching monthly theme on kindness might incorporate a weekly focus on related values such as helpfulness, patience, thankfulness and tolerance.

Some schools or jurisdictions with a well-established character and citizenship initiative may revitalize their focus by developing an annual theme such as the Year of Compassion or the Year of Courage.

## Exploring related behaviours

Another strategy is to deepen understanding of a monthly target value by exploring specific behaviours that demonstrate and support that core value. For example, students' understanding of kindness could be enhanced by discussing and practising behaviours such as using kind words, offering to help, inviting others to join and showing appreciation.



## Critical Questions

Although it may be appropriate to directly teach students about core values, it is important to critically consider the pedagogy and intent of the instruction, and identify other approaches that may be used to supplement direct instruction. Kohn proposes key questions to consider when choosing approaches and developing strategies for supporting character and citizenship education.<sup>6</sup>

- **At what level are problems addressed?**

Is the goal “to fix students,” or is it more comprehensive? Kohn argues that there is a tendency to oversimplify social problems without taking into account political and economic realities such as unemployment, racism and other inequities. He contends that behaviour and character reflect the context in which we find ourselves, and argues that character and citizenship education should start with school culture, rather than solely attempting to change students.

- **What is the view of human nature?**

In order for character and citizenship education to be effective, it must begin with a positive view of human nature. Educators need to ensure they are working to build on students' (and schools') strengths, rather than operating from a deficit model that aims to “fix” them.

- **What is the ultimate goal?**  
Educators need to look beyond a tendency to romanticize the past and “preserve certain traditions” by seeking to help students become active citizens, and principled and caring members of the community.
- **Which values?**  
The reality is that schools, as social institutions, are value-laden—whether or not educators choose to articulate and make explicit those values. Kohn encourages educators to identify what values currently exist in their schools and to carefully choose which to emphasize.
- **What is the theory of learning?**  
A final essential question encourages educators to think carefully about how the instructional strategies used fit into an overall theory of learning. Schools need to consider how they will track and reinforce the core values they have identified. Kohn suggests that many schools attempt to “transmit” values to students through lectures, rote drilling and extrinsic rewards, even when they use a more constructivist approach in all other areas. The use of reward systems or other reinforcement strategies may be counterproductive because they may impede development of intrinsic motivation and commitment.

Kohn encourages educators to use active learning processes that engage students “in deep, critical reflection about certain ways of being” (1997, p. 429) and in turn foster a genuine and long-lasting commitment to ethical behaviour. He also suggests that the most successful programs are those in which the “promotion of children’s social and moral development is grounded in a commitment to change the culture of schools” (1997, p. 437). (See Chapter 5 for strategies for strengthening school culture.)

## The Ethics and Implications of Character and Citizenship Education

As with any teaching practice, ethics are central to all aspects of character and citizenship education in schools. It is important to consider ethical questions that inform any initiative developed. For example,

- How might intended changes affect others?
- Who has an interest in being informed about this initiative?
- Who will own information generated by the initiative?



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## Endnotes

1. Howard, Berkowitz and Schaeffer 2004.
2. Adapted with permission from Joel Westheimer, “Citizenship Education for a Democratic Society,” *Teach Magazine* (March–April 2003), pp. 18, 19.
3. Sears and Hughes 1996, Sears 1996.
4. Adapted with permission from Yvonne Hébert, “A Research-based Focus on Literacy and Citizenship Education Issues” (paper presented to the Third International Metropolis Conference, Israel, November 29–December 3, 1998), *Metropolis Site International*, 1998, [www.international.metropolis.net/events/Israel/papers/hebert.html](http://www.international.metropolis.net/events/Israel/papers/hebert.html) (Accessed August 15, 2004).
5. Solomon, Watson and Battistich 2001.
6. Kohn 1997.
7. Carson et al. 1989.

These kinds of questions can be further informed by four types of ethical practices.

- **Ethics of hope:** Character and citizenship education is motivated by an interest in making schools better places for students. It should be informed by a concern and optimism regarding the broad range of issues affecting students and the school community.
- **Ethics of caring:** It is too easy to see project completion as the central purpose of a character and citizenship initiative. At all times, the real people involved—students, teachers and others—must be kept at the forefront.
- **Ethics of openness:** Character and citizenship initiatives can unwittingly create insiders and outsiders in a school. It is important that all stakeholders be involved and informed.
- **Ethics of responsibility:** As professionals, teacher-researchers must be committed to principled action. The welfare of students and the need to maintain collegiality must be kept in mind at all times.

These four types of ethical practices, originally developed by Carson et al. to guide action research projects, are a reminder that ethical issues are often complex and the school environment is multifaceted.<sup>7</sup>

A scan, survey or cultural audit, based on a synthesis of the research literature, offers a series of questions to help educators align school culture and organization with approaches and strategies for character and citizenship education.

*See Appendix B for sample tools for assessing school cultures.*

## Collaborative effort

Research clearly shows that character and citizenship education is most effective when it is deliberate, thoughtful and grounded in school-based decision making. The most successful character and citizenship education initiatives involve teachers working together toward a common goal. Even if every teacher does only one small thing in his or her classroom, this collaborative effort will be much more effective than different teachers working in isolation towards different goals.

Whatever approach to character and citizenship education a jurisdiction or school chooses to implement, it is important to consider Michael Fullan’s caution that change is a three- to seven-year process and his advice to “Think big. Start small. Move slowly.” With broad involvement, careful planning, conscientious implementation and purposeful reflection, schools can create character and citizenship education that is meaningful, sustainable and thereby successful for everyone involved.