Character Education and the Philosophy of Blame

Dan W. Butin
Cambridge College

Should blame be a part of the education of character? This is the opening question — and title — of Lynda Stone's essay. On first glance it is a seemingly simple question that has a seemingly simple answer: of course not. Why should blame — with its commonly associated implications of fault, censure, and scapegoating — be present in any form of education, much less education devoted to the positive formation of character and morals? Yet Stone concludes her essay by affirming the presence of blame in character education and even suggests that "the education of character cannot avoid blame and for this reason should not."

My response, as such, attempts to understand Stone's initial question and carefully examine her ultimate conclusion. First, though, I want to clear away the brush of tangential problems, focusing on issues of accuracy and conceptual clarity. In regard to the former, Stone inaccurately positions the character education movement (her goal is to demonstrate that its "influence on the education of the nation's youth is nearly incalculable") by suggesting that it is found in "virtually every state," tightly linked to No Child Left Behind, and so widespread as to garner "7 million citations [through Google] of institutional mission statements."

Yet I am not so sure. A recent comprehensive survey found just 26 states with some form of legislation pertaining to character education; scholars associated with the Character Education Partnership, a leading national professional organization, argue that "The standards movement…is not the most fertile environment for character education"; and my own quick Google search (on February 26, 2007) for the phrase "character education" found "just" 1,190,000 results, many of which seemed to point directly to resources on character education, not "institutional mission statements."[1] My point is not to dismiss the potential centrality of the character education movement; it is just to be clear about exactly what kind of movement we are talking about.

To this end, I would have appreciated greater conceptual clarity throughout. Character education is not monolithic. Scholars distinguish between moral education (for example, Lawrence Kohlberg), "just community" or "caring" education (John Dewey and Nel Noddings), and the contemporary character education movement (linked usually to a conservative worldview) that is oftentimes referred to as "traditional character education."[2] Likewise, there are differing notions of how and why blame is used, from simply justifying punishment, to constructing identity, to inviting "interpretation, anticipation and further action."[3] Stone appears to be consistently referring to "traditional character education" and to blame as fault. Yet, to offer but one counterexample, Stone critiques an essay by Christina Hoff Summers that seems to reference moral education and that may be fruitfully read as using blame to delineate identity as much as to fault anyone. Stone's generalizations are thus unable to differentiate between important conceptual differences.

Finally, Stone's essay is couched within a bramble of Foucauldian verbiage. She is arguing, I think, for the careful and critical investigation of the cultural milieu (what Michel Foucault would term the "episteme") within which the formation and flourishing of the traditional character education movement was allowed to occur. If this is Stone's position, it would have been helpful to have this clarified.

So let us now look closely at Stone's central question: Should blame be a part of the education of character? As I initially read Stone's essay I assumed she was leading the reader towards the standard move of pointing out the performative contradiction within traditional character education: that the message of tolerance or virtue (or whatever) is undermined by the means of explication. Stone's inclusion of Noddings's critique equating character education to the inculcation or indoctrination of virtues as *possessions* certainly points in this direction; as does Stone's point that blame, or at least the explicit use of the word "blame," is absent from the character education movement. Stone in fact makes much of this "absent/presence," arguing that the character education literature is replete with such "blame language in an absent/present formulation." The implication, I gather, is that the character education movement is being both duplicitous in its language and contradictory in its practices.

In fact, critiquing character education (or at least traditional character education) is easy. As one recent and rueful critique pointed out, traditional character education has absolutely no empirical evidence to support its claims, is conceptually muddled about what good character is and the best pedagogical means by which to teach it, and is morally bankrupt given that it advocates doing the "right" things for the wrong reasons.[4] Such criticisms have been made broadly to the general educational public, cross culturally, by insiders in the character education movement, and historically.[5]

And yet, this is not what Stone is apparently doing. Towards the conclusion of her essay Stone brings in the work of Mary Douglas on "risk and blame."[6] Stone uses Douglas to argue that a shift occurred in societies from blame to risk, from attempting to pin causality (blaming someone for an event) to assigning statistical probability (for the chance that an event will occur). "In society," Stone argues, "this is done through risk assessment, for instance in applying statistical probabilities; in schools this is done through ameliorative character education in which the risk of blame is itself avoided."

Stone thus seemingly has an answer to her initial question based on Douglas's work "that blame has had a centuries-long presence in the education of character…the education of character cannot avoid blame and for this reason should not."[7] What is the reader to draw from this conclusion? Is the implication that traditional character education is a manifestation of modernist actuarial practices of minimizing risk? That we should somehow teach this (in K–12 or higher education)? Is it that the implicit ubiquity yet lack of explicit mention of "blame" in character education is somehow a "step forward" in how we as a society handle the education of character for our youth? Or just the opposite: that we "should not" avoid blame because being explicit about causality (the blame game) is better than playing the risk game? And

if so, by what criteria do we determine "better"? Is it the Foucauldian one of freedom from totalizing structures? And is the language of risk as such the true modernist entrapment?

To take up this latter theme (given its resonance to Stone's essay), Ian Hacking has long argued that risk evolved (beginning in the sixteenth century) as a means of instilling morality: one must be prudent and act today with calculable foresight about what might happen in the future.[8] Risk assessment becomes a means of quantifying values, domesticating fears. It is the perfect complement to our present-day "air bag culture" that thrives within a culture of fear. A language of blame, for all the seemingly negative attributions listed at the introduction of my response, is in this respect an antidote to the quantitative entrapment of identity. It is a rebuke to the attempt to domesticate character as a bunch of traits to be processed, much like a standardized risk assessment might do for highway fatalities. It is an "antistrategic" move of making visible just how corrosive our educational system has become in its antiseptic qualities of seemingly fostering "character." In this regard I look forward to Stone's further engagement in fleshing out how character education may be turned unto itself to reveal a better way to educate for character.

1. Perry L. Glanzer and Andrew J. Milson, "Legislating the Good: A Survey and Evaluation of Character Education Laws in the United States," *Educational Policy* 20, no. 3 (2006): 525–50; Robert Howard, Marvin Berkowitz, and Esther Schaeffer, "Politics of Character Education" *Educational Policy* 18, no. 1 (2004), 189.

2. See for example, Michael Davis, "What's Wrong with Character Education?" *American Journal of Education* 110 (2003): 32–57; Glanzer and Milson, "Legislating the Good"; Howard, Berkowitz, and Schaeffer, "Politics of Character Education."

3. Barbara Stengel, "No-Fault Responsibility," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2006*, ed. Daniel Vokey (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2007), 13.

4. Davis, "What's Wrong with Character Education?"

5. Alfie Kohn, "How Not to Teach Values: A Critical Look at Character Education," *Phi Delta Kappa* (1997): 429–39; James Arthur, "The Re-Emergence of Character Education in British Education Policy," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 53, no.3 (2005): 239–54; Eric Schaps, Esther Schaeffer, and Sanford McDonnell, "What's Right and Wrong in Character Education Today," *Education Week,* September 12, 2001; Hugh Hartshorne and Mark May, *Studies in the Nature of Character*, *Vol. 1: Studies in Deceit* (New York: Macmillan, 1928).

6. Mary Douglas, "Risk and Blame," in *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1992).

7. I will ignore, given the space constraints, the philosophical hiccup whereby Stone equates an *is* with a *should*.

8. See for example, Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), and Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).