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## So Much More than Academics: What's Character Got To Do With It?

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### Commentary

Over the past thirty years, the processes of teaching and learning have undergone a tremendous transformation. During the last decade alone, because of the focus on high-stakes testing and accountability, more demands have been placed on teachers. Today, educators are required to prepare 21<sup>st</sup>-century learners to compete in a fast-paced, technologically advanced, and linguistically diverse world. Two important questions are: "How should teachers teach and what must teachers teach in order to adequately prepare students for the future?" These questions are certainly being addressed from an academic perspective. However, an equally important question is, "Should academic skills and knowledge be at the core of educating successful future adults?"

Although, to a certain extent, students are being challenged academically, educators tend to avoid or overlook a major ingredient required to educate "well-rounded" 21<sup>st</sup>-century learners. That missing ingredient is "character-building." In fact, instilling basic character-education traits of responsibility, respect, hard work, obedience, and honesty in students is vital to students' success. However, it is important to note that teaching these life preparation skills should not rest solely on the shoulders of educators. Parents and community leaders must declare ownership and get on the bandwagon of nurturing and modeling those character traits which are vital to

laying the foundation for student success, and creating a better world for future generations.

The need for character education and related programs should not be minimized. In fact, ignoring the importance of developing strong character education programs for the home, school, and community can mean the difference between preparing a well-educated, *insensitive* 21<sup>st</sup>-century learner, and preparing a well-educated, *sensitive* 21<sup>st</sup>-century human being. It is our responsibility not only to educate, but also to prepare students in such a way that they will maintain a level of respect for humanity as they navigate through life. Unlike the standard school curriculum, character education has an uncanny way of getting to the humane level of a student, while empowering the learner in ways that will enable him or her to (1) use his or her intelligence wisely, (2) exhibit common sense, and (3) appreciate and respect others. In other words, "Character has a lot to do with it." The education community has too much at stake to put character development on the backburner. Failing to include character education in students' daily activities and into the school curriculum could possibly result in a lost generation. Therefore, it is imperative that we ensure that a strong character education program becomes an integral part of every child's educational experiences, and educators should insist on the right to

incorporate character development activities into their lesson plans.

### **About the Author**

**Dr. Rona Leach McLeod** is an Assistant Professor of Education at St. Andrews University, and has appeared in the internationally published Reading Today magazine, the publication of the International Reading Association.