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Would You Like Values with That? Chick-Fil-A and Character Education

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“Character education” represents a long-standing staple of U.S.A. schools. From the “Old Deluder Satan” Law of 1647 to *The New England Primer* in the 18th century to McGuffey Readers from the late 1830s (and well into the 1920s), the idea of transmitting core values to the young is so deeply rooted in the history of schooling that “morals” is often assumed to be a “given.”¹ Over time, various social and religious concerns melded into a taken-for-granted presupposition that schools should play a major role in transmitting “good character” and fostering character development. Not only is there little contestation about the role of character education in schools, there is a dearth of literature connecting corporatization and character education. Even including Alex Molnar’s and Michael Apple’s work, little has been written about the specific instances of or connections between commercialism and teaching character in schools.² While Kaestle notes that the common school movement was successful in creating an “ideology centered on republicanism, Protestantism, and capitalism, three sources of social belief that were intertwined and mutually supporting,”³ there is little specifically about Christian fundamentalism, character education, and commercialism. Molnar’s chapter in *The Construction of Children’s Character* is an overview of commercialism in schools. He provides many examples of corporate intrusion into classroom life and argues that such a presence in schools undeniably influences students’ character (negatively). Apple’s work, too, is replete with instances of how neo-conservatives and right-wing organizations have increased their power and influence on school policy. While I value and appreciate this work, missing, on my view, are more detailed, “case analyses.” This essay attempts to fill that void. I specifically link Christian fundamentalism to a school-business partnership sponsor (Truett Cathy and Chick-fil-A) that provides a character education curriculum (“Core Essentials”) for public schools. The emphasis is on deconstructing the “Core Essentials” curriculum while also revealing Christian fundamentalist links to the corporate/school nexus. These links are

developed and brought together in what might seem like unorthodox ways, but the links are intended to help us reconsider the degree to which both school-business partnerships, generally, and a Christian fundamentalist-supported character education program, specifically, should be avoided.

I explore three main lines of inquiry: (1) the specifics of “Core Essentials” as a strategy for teaching character; (2) the role (and ironies) of private businesses influencing public school curricula; and (3) the assumptions inherent in the kind of teaching of character outlined by “Core Essentials.” Girding this inquiry is a concern about the problematic enterprise of teaching character, itself, as if it were an unquestionable domain. Further, the oddly-but-related contexts of childhood obesity findings and Christian influences (both general symbolism and fundamentalist indoctrination) on and in public spheres will be considered via Theodore Brameld’s *Ends and Means in Education*, John Dewey’s *Moral Principles in Education*, and Pierre Bourdieu’s *Acts of Resistance* and *Firing Back*.⁴ To be clear, this essay extends Weber’s, Kaestle’s, Apple’s and others’ views of Protestantism merging with capitalism to create historical realities (for Kaestle) or problematic situations (for Weber and Apple) by forcing the element of Christian fundamentalism into the equation. It is not a small matter, on my view, that the curriculum this essay considers is financially supported by a Christian fundamentalist. Indeed, the curriculum, as will be shown, encourages students to financially support the company itself (and corporate chief), thus setting up a cycle whereby unwitting teachers and students finance a Christian fundamentalist’s policies that, in turn, support Christian fundamentalism in general.⁵

Overview: From Character to Cathy

Current state curricula often include character education and a series of organizations have been established to advance the idea that character education is fundamental to schools. National programs that currently exist include, among others, “Character Counts!” from the Josephson Institute and “A 12-Point Comprehensive Approach to Character Education” from The Center for the 4th and 5th Rs (respect and responsibility). Other national and international organizations include the Character Education Partnership (CEP), and The Institute for Global Ethics.⁶ These organizations proclaim themselves to be non-partisan and each identifies universal values that should be adopted, though the number of values varies. Michael Josephson developed “Character Counts!,” the most widely used character education program in the U.S.A. Josephson retired from careers in law, business, and education to run the Joseph and Edna Josephson Institute, named for his parents. He serves the organization without a salary and all proceeds from speaking engagements and written work are stated as going directly back into the non-profit institute.⁷ The Center for the 4th and 5th Rs is led by Thomas Lickona, a professor of educational psychology at the State University of New York-Cortland. The Center for the 4th and

5th Rs is a university bureau committed to “building a moral society and developing schools which are civil and caring communities.”⁸ Lickona is a widely published author who also serves on the board of the CEP. Josephson and Lickona, however, are not the only ones influencing character education programs.⁹ Truett Cathy also influences character education curriculum in the U.S.A.

Cathy is the founder and CEO of Chick-fil-A, the fast food restaurant headquartered in Georgia. Cathy is also an avowed Christian fundamentalist.¹⁰ Accordingly, he donated an “age-appropriate” (protestant) Bible to every school library in the state of Georgia in 2003. He is also the financial resource behind the national “Core Essentials” character education initiative based in Georgia and through his financing, Chick-fil-A sponsors the teacher’s guides sent to each school.¹¹ In addition, Cathy teamed with William Bennett to offer wrist bands and cassettes as part of “kid’s meals” at various Chick-fil-A stores. The wrist bands and cassettes tout such values as “respect,” “courage,” and “honesty.”

Since Truett Cathy is a fundamentalist Christian as well as private businessman, I question the understanding demonstrated by Georgia State Superintendent of Schools, Kathy Cox, in a July 1, 2003 letter to Georgia school principals. She wrote that Truett Cathy is “a pioneering businessman” whose “generosity” allowed for an “age-appropriate Bible” to be placed in every school library in the state. She also wrote that Truett Cathy’s “initiative has been completely funded by Mr. Cathy. No state funds have been used to supply this book to your school. Mr. Cathy has a passion for helping children, [sic] and he sees this as another way to encourage the youth of our great state.”¹² What does the distinction between state and private funds for Bible purchases and placement mean? Does the fact that a Christian fundamentalist funded a character education program represent any challenges or concerns for, say, students who are Jewish or Agnostic or Muslim? Indeed, as this essay will soon show in detail, at least some of the money Cathy used to buy Bibles for public schools came, by extension, from elementary students who were themselves subjected to the very character education curriculum Cathy underwrites.

Differently, but still related to Christian fundamentalism, is there any connection between Kathy Cox’s endorsement, nay, praise of Truett Cathy and Cox’s claim that the term “evolution” is a “buzzword” that should be replaced in the state curriculum of Georgia?¹³ If Truett Cathy were actually interested in the welfare of children, why would he promote unhealthy fast-food as part of a character education program that touts “honesty” as a virtue? Indeed, what assumptions are made by Truett Cathy, furthered by the state, and pushed into the hands of teachers by the private, non-profit Core Essentials organization that Cathy’s profits from Chick-fil-A support?

The Program Itself: Detailing Various Aspects

A visit to the Chick-fil-A website reveals an interesting phenomenon. On the page displaying information regarding Chick-fil-A’s support of “Core Essentials,”

the company also notes the following: “Amid our nation’s growing concern for children’s character development, Chick-fil-A has found a way to help. Since 2000 we’ve been a national sponsor of Core Essentials, an educational program that gives teachers and parents tools for imparting key values to elementary-age boys and girls. By teaching inner beliefs and attitudes such as honesty, patience, respect, orderliness and courage, Core Essentials helps children treat others right, make smart decisions, and maximize their potential. The entire program teaches 27 values over a three-year period. To learn more about Core Essentials, contact a Chick-fil-A franchisee in your area.”¹⁴

When you go to the website page and begin reading the paragraph just cited, you are interrupted by the cartoon image of the back of a cow’s head. The image then scrawls “eat mor chikin” across the screen, the very screen that includes the words “character development.” It seems inconsistent, at least, to (1) have “more” and “chicken” spelled incorrectly on the page devoted to children’s schooling; and (2) for those who would support the general notion of character education and the ensuing lists of values that accompany the phrase, where do “graffiti” and “interruption” appear on those lists of values?

Once past the website interruption, however, one can find more information about the program and it does not take long to understand the underlying point. The website indicates that there is a booklet for teachers to help in the teaching of character—specifically to elementary school children in grades k-2 and 3-5. In *Core Essentials: A Strategy for Teaching Character*, the first page of the booklet *qua* teachers’ guide outlines three main elements of the program: Identifying Basic Components, Preparation, and Establishing a Routine. Each of the three main elements has sub-headings identifying key features indicative of the main elements as well as the overall intent of the larger program. Under “Identify the Basic Components,” there are the following sub-headings: “teacher’s guide, bookmarks/tablecards, value-able card, and posters.” The teacher’s guide is the booklet and tells teachers what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. The sub-section that explains elements in the teacher’s guide notes that “each month you have age-appropriate materials at two academic levels, K-2 and 3-5. Included in the guide are literature and video suggestions which may be displayed in the library by the media specialist.”¹⁵ For the bookmarks/tablecards, the booklet instructs that “the bookmark is perforated and should be separated from the tablecard, which is designed to be folded and placed in a convenient location at home (kitchen counter or table). The parents of each child may then use this tool to emphasize the value through family discussions and activities.” For the value-able card, importantly, the booklet reveals that the “. . . card is a key component which leads to successful implementation of the program. It is designed as the incentive for children who are caught [sic] displaying the value. Each month you will see suggestions in the Teacher’s Guide for ‘Catching Kids.’ Use these ideas to help you choose students who show they understand the value. The card rewards them with a FREE Chick-fil-A Kid’s

Meal. *Ideally, you should have enough cards to reward each student every month (if earned).*"¹⁶

Good Old Fashioned Character

With this overview, consider what happens to the kindergarten and elementary students in classes that adopt the Core Essentials program. What I intend to do here is outline the specific instructions that are included in the teacher's guide and underscore the elements that make this character education plan an indoctrinating, and thereby restrictive and troubling, approach to teaching children. One may argue that an indoctrinating approach to character education is what is needed. "Core Essentials" relies heavily on the idea that values are to be "imparted," or "revealed," thus reinforcing both a banking approach to teaching and learning and a kind of religious indoctrination whereby the teacher not only deposits data into the students' "empty vaults" (or minds) but also acts on the assumed validity of the dogma.¹⁷ I submit that these elements in the curriculum indicate a nexus of Christian, capitalist values. Importantly, there are also elements of hypocrisy that make the entire enterprise suspect.

There is a different value for each month of the year represented by the guidelines in question. They include, beginning in September and ending in May: initiative, respect, uniqueness, peace, orderliness, kindness, courage, joy, and patience. For each month, the teacher's guide begins with the exact same formula: a definition of the term, a list of suggested books that represent the value, a list of quotes, a story about an animal that illustrates the value, and directions for teachers. Consider the directions for October. The value is "respect" and the teacher is given the definition: "responding with words and actions that show others they are important."¹⁸ One of the "famous person" quotes given in the booklet is "Always respect your parents... Do whatever your parents say. They are your best friends in life." Aside from the obvious parallel to one of the Ten Commandments (Honor thy father and mother), there is also an irony in having the quote signify "respect." The quote is attributed to George Steinbrenner, the notorious baseball owner whose fights with managers and team members are legendary.

For December, the value is peace and is defined as "proving that you care more about each other than winning an argument." The booklet also indicates that "the first step toward living peaceably is one made quietly inside ourselves. We must decide that other people are worth more to us than our own selfish desires, and that the value of agreement is greater than the satisfaction of defeating an opponent."¹⁹ While the moralistic sentiment may sound nice, I wonder about a possible hidden agenda. Much like the "always respect your parents...do whatever they say" quote from the October lesson, I wonder about the degree to which students are actually being subjugated under a logic of hegemony. As though a sexually abusive parent's directions are always to be followed, the under belly of Christian universalism may

reveal itself given careful analysis. That a corporate fast-food chain arguably interested in increasing market share via competition supports a program that appears to want to produce docile, unquestioning students goes to the heart of the school-business intersection as well. To wit, are schools about producing unquestioning consumers via a character education program that appears to elevate passivity and dogma? This concern does not only apply to the students subjected to the program, however. Teachers, too, are under a hegemonic rationale that subjugates and marginalizes their expertise and professionalism under pre-ordained scripts.

Each week in December, for example, has a corresponding paragraph that begins “Our value this month is peace. The definition of peace is ‘proving that you care more about each other than winning an argument.’”²⁰ Forget that the vast majority of schools are not in session for four weeks in December, the four-week script nevertheless reflects a kind of proletarianization or de-skilling of teaching at the same time that it seems to mimic catechism-like recitations from Christian churches. For the “bulletin board” aspect of the teacher’s guide for December, teachers are told to “design a bulletin board with a chimney made of craft paper. Give each child a stocking made out of construction paper. On the stocking, have the students write how they care for other people. The children may decorate their stockings afterwards. Hang their stockings on the chimney that you have made.” The title given to the bulletin board assignment is “The Stockings Were Hung By the Chimney with Peace.” Aside from the overly-prescriptive directions that devalue teachers’ autonomy and professionalism, stockings are typically hung by chimneys in Christian homes, not Jewish or Muslim homes. Furthermore, if stockings are hung in homes for the Christmas holidays, is the point of young children hanging the stockings to “care for other people,” or to receive materialist presents?

A Christian theme is discernable in other parts of the Core Essentials handbook as well. For January, orderliness is the value and while the paragraph begins with “a study of nature,” the teacher is supposed to explain to the students that “the constellations are a beautiful example of the order which exists in the skies.”²¹ Given the recent controversy in Georgia concerning Kathy Cox and evolution, the “order in the skies” reference sounds eerily like creationist “grand design” assertions.²² For February, the value is kindness and the teacher is supposed to explain that a wise saying is “do to others as you would have them do to you.”²³ Fine as far as it goes, the *unhidden* “Golden Rule” taken together with other religious themes raises concerns in my mind. If elementary students hassle their parents into taking them to Chick-fil-A for their “free” meal during the month of X, they would receive a cassette and/or a bracelet/watch-type band that has a compartment to hold more information from the “Core Essentials” program.²⁴ For “responsibility” the plastic holder on the wrist band is a sheep dog and the insert of stickers includes statements like “guard sheep dogs are responsible for protecting sheep” and “shepherds trust their sheep dogs to do what is expected of them.” While my intent is not to make too much of these points, it does seem to me to be another fundamentalist and uncritical Christian theme. Sheep? Shepherds? Further,

married with the religious and overwhelmingly Christian themes are themes about work and capitalism. For the month of April, for example, students read quotes from Dale Carnegie and Henry Ford. Carnegie's quote is "when fate hands you a lemon, make lemonade" and Ford's is "there is joy in work."²⁵

What these and other quotes within the curriculum arguably indicate is the nexus of Christianity and capitalism. By weaving a language of accommodation with a language of economics, contrived optimism becomes an unquestioned foundation for docile, naïve workers. The nexus results in a kind of confused nationalist mythology that takes Christian values for granted while accommodating the lauding of individualism and pretenses of participating in a democracy. The mythology of "anyone can be anything they want" given "free markets," "hard work," and entrepreneurialism, masks the reality faced by increasing numbers of workers. As Bourdieu points out,

there are more and more low-level service jobs that are underpaid and low-productivity, unskilled or underskilled (based on hasty on-the-job training), with no career prospects—in short, the *throwaway jobs* of what André Gorz calls a 'society of servants.' According to economist Jean Gadrey, quoting an American study, of the thirty jobs that will grow fastest in the next decade, seventeen require no skills and only eight require higher education and qualification. At the other end of social space, the *dominated dominant*, that is, the managers, are experiencing a new form of alienation. They occupy an ambiguous position, equivalent to that of the petty bourgeois at another historical stage in the structure, which leads to forms of organized self-exploitation.²⁶

Part of the historical stage to which Bourdieu refers was outlined in 1926 by Richard Henry Tawney. In his classic text, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, Tawney presaged that "rightly or wrongly, with wisdom or its opposite, not only in England but on the Continent and in America, not in one denomination but among Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Nonconformists, an attempt is being made to restate the practical implications of the social ethics of the Christian faith, in a form sufficiently comprehensive to provide a standard by which to judge the collective actions and institutions of mankind [sic], in the sphere both of international politics and of social organizations."²⁷

The scenario goes something like this: inculcate the youngest and most impressionable with externally contrived religious values and increasingly mold the docile congregation of followers into workers who honor authority. In the process, remove opportunities for critique and questioning by championing *a priori* notions of consensus and the status quo. According to Lindblom, corporations are intimately tied to this very process and set up the nexus of and integration between capitalism and Christian moral codes at the expense of public debate and authentic democratic governance. He notes the key features in business terms and calls them "the grand issues of politico-economic organization: private enterprise, a high degree of corporate autonomy, protection of the status quo on distribution of income and

wealth, close consultation between business and government, and restriction of union demands to those consistent with business profitability. . . . They try, through indoctrination, to keep all these issues from coming to the agenda of government.”²⁸ For the parallel to schools, I am reminded of Theodore Brameld’s discussion of indoctrination when he was attempting to defend the notion of “partiality” in schools in his *Ends and Means in Education*.²⁹

Brameld defined indoctrination as a “method of learning by communication which proceeds primarily in one direction. . . for the purpose of inculcating in the mind and behavior of the latter a firm acceptance of some one doctrine or systematic body of beliefs—a doctrine assumed in advance by its exponents to be so supremely true, so good, or so beautiful as to justify no need for critical, scrupulous, thoroughgoing comparison with alternative doctrines.”³⁰ Brameld’s concern was that schools practiced indoctrination at the expense of the society. For the purpose of this essay, however, he went even further. He indicted “the Church” for establishing the very conditions that promoted learning of the kind he deplored (and this essay challenges). “For many centuries,” Brameld wrote, “the Church has deliberately and frankly inculcated its own doctrine as alone true and good, its chief indoctrinators being priests vested with authority to communicate its tenets to receptive minds. . . . this kind of education flourishes oftener than not: inculcation of moral codes or social folklore, and especially of attitudes and programs identified with the traditional economic-political system, simply means that public schools, far more often than most of their personnel themselves realize, are under the heavy influence of the dominant ideology.”³¹

When specifically looking carefully at the text of the “Core Essentials” teacher’s guide, to link and illustrate Brameld’s point, a series of questions come to mind. When, in March, the theme is courage, teachers are told that “courage is the foundation of our democracy. Discover the courage of the young citizens in your class by using a few of these ideas: Watch for students who do the right thing even when it has consequences; Observe students who stand up for their beliefs; Notice those students who do not give in to peer pressure; and Let students write or discuss what courage means to them. Allow them to make a pledge about their courage and watch to see who lives up to that pledge.”³² Given the preceding months that privileged meekness and obedience to authority, what should be “discovered” about the “young citizens” in the class? If citizenship has been crafted in a hierarchical and externally imposed fashion, with the teacher at the center—or more accurately, the “Core Essentials” program at the center—how seriously are teachers supposed to take the task laid out for them? Further, in terms of power, if the teachers are the ones “allowing” students to make a pledge and “letting” students write and discuss what courage means to them, the idea of students as courageous citizens is further subjugated under the power and authority of the teacher via the “Core Essentials” curriculum.

Values and the Drive-Thru: Is Your Body Your Temple?

Throughout the Core Essentials teacher's guide there are sections called "Catching Kids." These sections are ostensibly intended to "catch" children "doing good" so as to turn the idea of "catching" a student doing something into a positive rather than a negative action. Unique to the "Core Essentials" program, however, is that, because the program is underwritten by Truett Cathy and his Chick-fil-A fast-food chain, the "Catching Kids" sections have "value-able cards." These cards are considered "rewards" by the program and when given out by the teacher to the student enable the student to get a free "kid's meal" at Chick-fil-A. A couple of issues converge around this point. Firstly, the students who "earn" the reward are specifically within grades k-2 and 3-5. What we have are the youngest and most impressionable students in schools being bribed to act in particular ways in order to get a meal that is unhealthy—and paying for it such that they ironically, by extension, fund the very program that encourages them to eat fast food in the first place. As Carolyn Vander Schee has pointed out, childhood obesity is a concern that has direct links to schools and programs they sponsor (both via in-school food services and out-of-school connections like "Core Essentials").³³ Other studies also conclude that fast food intake among school children is part of a growing obesity epidemic.³⁴

By using an unhealthy meal as a reward for complying with a "character education" program, one wonders about the hypocrisy. Where in the program, for example, are students instructed to demonstrate courage by questioning the corporate underwriting of the program itself? At what point do students critically investigate the Christian fundamentalist beliefs held by the "benefactor" of the curriculum to which they are subjected? When are the students encouraged to consider the fact that in order for them to redeem their "kid's meal" voucher they will have to be accompanied by an adult who most likely will purchase food and provide profit for Chick-fil-A? Indeed, recall the direct quote from the teacher's guide noted toward the beginning of this essay. The guide encourages teachers to "use these ideas to help...choose students who show they understand the value... *Ideally, you should have enough cards to reward each student every month (if earned).*" The point may not be to reward students for good character, even if we could agree on what good character means. The point is to get as many children from grades k-5 into a fast food chain to eat greasy food with their parents so a fundamentalist Christian can provide funds to surreptitiously spread his private beliefs in public schools. Can we imagine that the marketing department at Chick-fil-A has not surmised the amount of business they would generate over a three-year period of time (the time it takes to complete the entire program, recall)? Differently, but related, when are students asked about honesty in disclosing complete calorie and fat content in the food that is being used to lure them to behave in particular ways?

Chick-fil-A does have a section on its website where it lists the nutritional value of *items* on their menu.³⁵ But even the way the documentation is presented is

misleading. To consider the amount of fat and calories in a “kid’s meal,” you have to know what actually comprises a “kid’s meal.” On the website, for example, both 4- and 6-ounce servings of chicken nuggets are provided on separate lines. A “kid’s meal,” however, includes more than just the chicken nuggets. The meal includes waffle fries and a drink. Why not be “honest” and include the combined caloric value of the entire meal (allowing for variants like whether the drink is a soda, lemonade, or water)? Is it easier to differentiate and parse the particulars so the whole is not easily discernible? Perhaps the most extreme evidence of Chick-fil-A’s Janus-faced approach to the issue of caloric intake and nutrition is its stance that eating plenty of their fast food is not really the problem. The problem is lack of exercise. Indeed, and incredibly, Chick-fil-A offers a “Chick-fil-A 10-Second Tip” in the Children’s Hospital’s (Knoxville, TN) “Healthy Kids” newsletter. The tip is, “Rather than only focusing on decreasing a big eater’s intake, try to increase activity and exercise.”³⁶

To illustrate the link between the previous claims concerning the problems with externally imposed ideology and health issues associated with fast-food intake, consider that students in the “Core Essentials” program are structurally inhibited from exploring the issue of healthy eating. The subject does not fall under any of the categories that are pre-ordained for and imposed on teachers. Furthermore, teachers are “sold” the idea that the program will “only take 15 minutes,” so when would teachers find the time to go beyond the pre-packaged approach anyway? Missing is the kind of approach developed by Janet Cundiff. She suggests a general structure through which students can answer the question “Can you ‘eat healthy’ by frequenting fast food restaurants?”³⁷ Her approach uses web links and teams of students to investigate food pyramids and food facts. Teams are asked to learn more about various fast food restaurants, including, among others, Taco Bell, Burger King, and Chick-fil-A. Teams search for healthy meals and individuals have roles regarding the various aspects of nutrition to be found on the various websites. Students then synthesize the information, present it to others, and reconsider, according to Cundiff, their own decisions, opinions, and arguments. Accordingly, the students are actively engaged in developing questions and critiques. The “Core Essentials” program does not foster these postures as its primary concern is with external imposition of pre-ordained assumptions about character—assumptions financially supported by a fundamentalist Christian.

I wonder what it would be like if, during the month of October (when “respect” is the value of the month), students would be encouraged to ask whether they, as a group, are actually being shown “respect” via the very program touting the value. Said differently, when is respect for the children shown by the teachers, “Core Essentials” executives, and Truett Cathy? What role did they have in determining whether they should be subjected to the overtly Christian themes embedded in the program? I also wonder whether the lessons being taught—regardless of whether they are ultimately valid—are also being demonstrated by the people who are promoting the program? How patient would Truett Cathy be of students demonstrat-

ing against his company? How respectful of students would Kathy Cox be if they refused to engage in surveillance of one another as the “catching kids” section of the program encourages?

Implications and Further Considerations

One point, then, is to discern the ironies and to tease out the inconsistencies related to the “Core Essentials” program. We have, in short, a program funded by a fundamentalist Christian whose company uses “kid’s meals” as a bribe for behaving in docile, disempowered, uncritical ways. Might this actually be the motive for the program? That is, might it be the case that imposing hierarchy, developing non-questioning students, and privileging Christian-corporate values are intentional acts perpetrated by those wishing to maintain and increase their power, even at the expense of the very students to whom they preach equality and kindness? To have “Core Essentials” and Chick-fil-A work in tandem with William Bennett’s *Book of Virtues* raises an obvious question about hypocrisy. Bennett, of course, was revealed to have gambled away millions of dollars at the same time he was loudly proclaiming the vital importance of teaching “virtues” in schools. Is this a “do as I say, not as I do” quagmire? What does it mean that fundamentalists’ heroes like Bennett actually represent particularist and contextual realities that are not easy to generalize? What does it mean when the Georgia State Superintendent of Schools, Kathy Cox, wishes to delete “evolution” from the curriculum, but applauds Truett Cathy’s donation of protestant versions of the bible to all of the public schools in the state?

Beyond critique of those in power and control of the program, one has to consider the reality of classroom life. Teachers, in a perversely thankful way, simply do not have the time to spare to “add-on” the “curriculum” represented by “Core Essentials.” The state of Georgia already has a character education component. It also has a core curriculum that, given No Child Left Behind, is raising the degree to which teachers teach to end of year tests. Teachers simply do not have the time to alter their bulletin boards, monitor the Chick-fil-A vouchers, and “catch” students behaving in ways the authors of the program do not conduct themselves anyway. So, beyond exploiting the youngest students in schools, beyond the attempt to further proletarian teaching, beyond attempting to mold obedient and subservient future workers, and beyond the irony and hypocrisy, is there anything valuable about the values valued by “Core Essentials”? Maybe.

If “Core Essentials” were used as an object lesson, itself, we might be able to reveal a kind of criticality that teaches about values while not externally imposing them without critique. Values exist in schools. Students bring values to the classroom just like their teachers. The question is whether those values are to be explored or whether they are to be assumed. Dewey makes it clear that “morals” are an important part of being a citizen (or any part of a group). He differs greatly from “Core Essentials,” though, in that he is not interested in externally imposed, “specialist”

developed terms and themes spread out over three years as part of a preparation plan for future work or future citizenship. In *Moral Principles in Education*, Dewey puts it this way: “We need to see that moral principles are not arbitrary, that they are not ‘transcendental’; that the term ‘moral’ does not designate a special region or portion of life. We need to translate the moral into the conditions and forces of our community life, and into the impulses and habits of the individual. All the rest is mint, anise, and cumin.”³⁸ In another passage, Dewey writes that “the emphasis then falls upon construction... rather than upon absorption and mere learning.”³⁹ As though he were aware of Core Essentials and other such programs, Dewey argues that children are rarely emergent and constructive creatures in classroom settings. Their intellectual life is stunted by the proceduralism of traditional expectations and methods. So, too, says Dewey, of morals in schools:

The child knows perfectly well that the teacher and all his fellow pupils have exactly the same facts and ideas before them that he [sic] has; he is not *giving* them anything at all. And it may be questioned whether the moral lack is not as great as the intellectual. The child is born with a natural desire to give out, to do, to serve. When this tendency is not used, when conditions are such that other motives are substituted, the accumulation of an influence working against the social spirit is much larger than we have any idea of—especially when the burden of work, week after week, and year after year, falls upon this side.⁴⁰

Three years worth of value-able “kid’s meal” cards externally dangled for Pavlovian results strikes me as the very thing Dewey would argue against. Importantly, Dewey is not arguing against morals. Instead, he is arguing against morals “in the air... something set off by themselves... [morals] that are so *very* ‘moral’ that they have no working contact with the average affairs of everyday life.”⁴¹ As a pragmatist and fallibilist, however, Dewey argued the utility that various values might have get their worth in their organic growth and development in context. Dewey again:

Here, then, is the moral standard, by which to test the work of the school upon the side of what it does directly for individuals... Does the school as a system... attach sufficient importance to the spontaneous instincts and impulses? Does it afford sufficient opportunity for these to assert themselves and work out their own results? Can we even say that the school in principle attaches itself... to the active constructive powers rather than to processes of absorption and learning?⁴²

I submit that the answers to Dewey’s questions are “no,” “no,” and “no.” Far too often in far too many schools, far too many teachers fall back on methods of teaching that are comfortable, staid. Accordingly, students’ natural tendencies to inquire become stifled in rooms that are organized (physically and in terms of curriculum) for convenience and platoon-style management.⁴³ While teachers are not primarily to blame for the external imposition of No Child Left Behind mandates and high-stakes testing that structure their lives, the very frustration they often feel with such external imposition is not recognized when they, in turn, impose upon their students. “Core

Essentials” is simply another in a long line of impositions that teachers and students must navigate. The difference is the degree to which the program represents a Christian fundamentalist’s values merged with corporate infiltration in a public school character education curriculum.

Extending Dewey, Bourdieu challenges the rhetoric of universalism that sets up the structures within which schools operate as stifling places for external imposition. For Bourdieu, “the effect of shared belief . . . removes from discussion ideas which are perfectly worth discussing.”⁴⁴ Indeed, Bourdieu envisions a kind of collective intellectualism that challenges deeply held beliefs. Long standing assumptions become the focus of renewed critique and action. He is specifically interested in examining the major power brokers in modern society. As he puts it, “the power of the agents and mechanisms that dominate the economic and social world today rests on the extraordinary concentration of all the species of capital—economic, political, military, cultural, scientific, and technological—as the foundation of a symbolic domination without precedent. . . .”⁴⁵ This symbolic domination is difficult to critique, however, because of the power it has over members of society. For Bourdieu, students are also a direct target and engage in hegemonic practices that further subjugate them to the influence of the market. He claims, for example, “that the ‘civilization’ of jeans, Coca-Cola, and McDonald’s [Chick-fil-A] has not only economic power on its side but also the symbolic power exerted through a seduction to which the victims themselves contribute. By taking as their chief targets children and adolescents, particularly those most shorn of specific immune defenses, with the support of advertising and the media which are both constrained and complicit, the big cultural production and distribution companies gain an extraordinary, unprecedented hold over all contemporary societies—societies that, as a result, find themselves virtually infantilized.”⁴⁶

Recall that “Core Essentials” is imposed on students in grades k-5. Bourdieu’s point that the larger society is infantilized by the hold corporate interests have over it is even more striking when we consider that the project of disempowerment literally begins with infants. Organic growth of student interests, for Dewey, paired with sociological critique of business influences, for Bourdieu, make for heady prospects when envisioning what schools—and their curricula—might look like during reformation. It would take, however, a sober reconsideration of the roles of students and teachers in schools to engage in substantive reconstruction of schools. It would require a collective “intellectualization” of various roles and, in order to do so, a sloughing off of the dead skin of corporate- and fundamentalist-sponsored, universalist edicts in the form of, among others, character education programs like “Core Essentials.”

What I am not advocating is a substitution of one kind of pre-ordained morality for another. There should not exist, in other words, a revised script that suggests “The value of the month is criticality. Criticality is defined as . . .” This sort of “bait and switch” game has been played for too long in the history of curriculum. The function

of indoctrination is the same, even though the forms may morph. Instead, students and teachers should develop their own versions of criticality as those versions emerge (and change) through the natural curiosity of students in k-5. In this way, a singular (Christian/Christian fundamentalist) view of character education is replaced with a pluralistic understanding of character and students, taking a cue from Dewey, would utilize their instincts and impulses to explore that variety with one another. No fries are necessary.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Richard Mosier, *Making the American Mind: Social and Moral Ideas in the McGuffey Readers* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965); Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983); Joel Spring, *The American School, 1642-2004* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2005), sixth edition; and Thomas Lickona, *Character Matters: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgement, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004); Ernest J. Zarra, "Pinning Down Character Education," *Kappa Delta Pi Record* 36, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 154-157; and Mary M. Williams, "Models of Character Education: Perspectives and Development Issues," *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development* 39, no. 1 (September 2000): 32-40. See, also, Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalism and Society: Reclaiming the Science, the Family, and Education* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997); and Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 1930/2001).

² See, for example, Alex Molnar, "Commercial Culture and the Assault on Children's Character," in Alex Molnar, ed., *The Construction of Children's Character* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997): 163-173; and Michael Apple, *Educating the "Right" Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality* (New York: Falmer, 2001).

³ Kaestle, 11.

⁴ Theodore Brameld, *Means and Ends in Education: A Midcentury Appraisal* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1950); John Dewey, *Moral Principles in Education* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1909); Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market* (New York: The New Press, 1998), trans. Richard Nice; and Pierre Bourdieu, *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market 2* (New York: The New Press, 2003), trans., Loic Wacquant.

⁵ See George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1981); Richard Antoun, *Understanding Fundamentalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Kimberly Blaker, et al., *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* (New Boston, MI: New Boston Books, Inc., 2003); and Robert Boston, *Close Encounters with the Religious Right: Journeys into the Twilight Zone of Religion and Politics* (New York: Prometheus, 2000).

⁶ See, for example, <http://www.character.org>, <http://www.charactercounts.org>, and <http://www.cortland.edu/c4n5rs/>. Accessed 23 October 2004.

⁷ See <http://www.charactercounts.org>. Accessed 23 October 2004. See also, Michael Josephson, "Character Education is Back in Our Public Schools," *The State Education*

Standard (Autumn 2002): 41-45.

⁸ See, also, Thomas Lickona, *Character Matters: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

⁹ In *The Construction of Children's Character*, Edward Wynne and Jacques Benninga join Lickona in what the book characterizes as "traditionalist views of character and character education." In addition to traditionalists, the book also indicates that there are "expansive views" and "critical views" of the topic. See Edward A. Wynne, "For-Character Education," *The Construction of Children's Character*, 63-76; Jacques A. Benninga, "Schools, Character Development, and Citizenship," *The Construction of Children's Character*, 77-96; and Thomas Lickona, "Educating for Character: A Comprehensive Approach," *The Construction of Children's Character*, 45-62.

¹⁰ See S. Truett Cathy, *Eat MOR Chikin: Inspire More People Doing Business the Chick-fil-A Way* (Nashville, TN: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002); S. Truett Cathy, *It's Easier to Succeed Than Fail* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989); and Ken Blanchard and S. Truett Cathy, *The Generosity Factor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002). Both Thomas Nelson and Zondervan are Christian publishing houses.

¹¹ "Core Essentials," *Core Essentials: A Strategy for Teaching Character* (Alpharetta, GA: Core Essentials, Inc., 2001).

¹² Kathy Cox, letter to school principals, July 1, 2003.

¹³ See Mary MacDonald, "Georgia May Shun 'Evolution' in Schools: Revised Curriculum Plan Outrages Science Teachers," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (29 January 2004): A1.

¹⁴ See <http://www.chick-fil-a.com/CoreEssentials.asp>. Accessed 21 January 2004.

¹⁵ *Core Essentials*, p. 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, italics in the original.

¹⁷ See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970). See, also, Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalism and Society: Reclaiming the Science, the Family, and Education* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

¹⁸ *Core Essentials*, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²² See Mary MacDonald, "Evolution Furor Heats Up," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (31 January 2004): A1. See, also, Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

²³ *Core Essentials*, 17.

²⁴ William Bennett's *Book of Virtues* is a primary source of the "values" in both the curriculum and in the Chick-fil-A merchandise.

²⁵ *Core Essentials*, 23.

²⁶ Bourdieu, *Firing Back*, 31. Italics in original.

²⁷ Richard Henry Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Company, 1926), 5.

²⁸ Charles E. Lindblom, *Politics and Markets: The World's Political-Economic Systems* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 205.

²⁹ Brameld, *Means and Ends in Education*, 65ff.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

³² *Core Essentials*, 20.

³³ See Carolyn Vander Schee, "Food Services and Schooling," in *Schools or Markets?: Commercialism, Privatization, and School-Business Partnerships*, ed., Deron Boyles (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005), 1ff.

³⁴ Shanthly A. Bowman, Steven L. Gortmaker, Cara B. Ebbeling, Mark A. Pereira, and David S. Ludwig, "Effects of Fast-Food Consumption on Energy Intake and Diet Quality Among Children in a National Household Survey," *Pediatrics* 113, no. 1 (January, 2004): 112-118; Richard J. Deckelbaum and Christine A. Williams, "Childhood Obesity: The Health Issue," *Obesity Research* 9, suppl. 4 (November, 2001): 239S-243S; David S. Ludwig, Karen E. Peterson, and Steven Gortmaker, "Relation between Consumption of Sugar-Sweetened Drinks and Childhood Obesity: A Prospective, Observational Analysis," *The Lancet* vol. 357 (17 February 2001): 505-508. See, also, Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

³⁵ See <http://www.chickfila.com/MenuTable.asp?Category=specialties>. Accessed 10 June 2004.

³⁶ "Chick-fil-A 10-Second Tip," *Children's Hospital's Healthy Kids: A Quarterly Publication for Parents Preschoolers* [sic] (Knoxville, TN), volume IX (Winter, 2003): 3. That the hospital condones (and promotes) this kind of logic is fodder for further investigation.

³⁷ Janet Cundiff, "Living in the Fast (Food) Lane!" <http://www.web-and-flow.com/members/jcundiff/fastfoods/webquest.htm>. Accessed 10 June 2004. The movie "Supersize It!" also explores issues relating to and resulting from eating fast food.

³⁸ Dewey, *Moral Principles in Education*, 58.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴³ Herbert Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 84, 162.

⁴⁴ Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance*, 6.

⁴⁵ Bourdieu, *Firing Back*, 39.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

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