

# project



**Juan P. Dabdoub González (Pamplona)** is Professor and PhD in Education Theory in the Faculty of Education and Psychology at the University of Navarra. He is a member of the Education, Citizenship and Character Research Group at the same university; the Secretary of the Association for Moral Education; and a Scholar Affiliate of the Center for Character and Citizenship at the University of Missouri-St Louis. He has been co-director of Become since 2022. He has been researching and promoting character education with a focus on leadership around the world with the support of the Templeton World Charity Foundation since 2015.

**Aitor R. Salaverriá (Pamplona)** is a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education and Psychology at the University of Navarra working on a thesis aimed at researching and promoting character development in university communities. He has been the co-director of Become since 2022. He was the educational director of the Colegio Mayor Belagua until 2021, where he worked for the last ten years. He is a collaborator of the Education, Citizenship and Character Research Group at the University of Navarra.

# Become: Redefining education

## The importance of character in the formation of leaders and learners

by Ana Moreno Salvo

### INTERVIEW WITH JUAN P. DABDOUB GONZÁLEZ & AITOR R. SALAVERRÍA

**E**ducation seeks to prepare new generations for adult life in the world and society they will live in. What does character education contribute to the formation of future citizens of the twenty-first century?

We are often asked this question: Why should we commit to character education? Is it really necessary to add more to what we already do in schools now? Do we really have to? When asked this, we tend to answer that the approach to the question is wrong. Rather than thinking about 'What does character education contribute?', we try to make people realise that it is inevitable. Schools are influencing their students' character development whether they want to or not, consciously

or unconsciously. More than 2,000 years ago, Aristotle said that the mere presence of adults influences children's character, especially if the relationship is as close and prolonged as it is between teachers and students. As Marvin Berkowitz often says, you cannot 'not educate' character.

Therefore, rather than considering whether or not to

**Schools are influencing the character development of their students, consciously or unconsciously**

engage in character education, we want to help schools realise that they are already doing so. Based on this conviction, we try to guide a common reflection on how we are, in fact, influencing our students' development. The goal is to review what we already do so that it strategically and intentionally supports people's growth.

**How was Become founded, what is its purpose and who is it aimed at?**

Become originated as a spin-off of the research and development work we have been doing for the past ten years in the Citizenship and Character Education Group at the University of Navarra in conjunction with the Center for Character and Citizenship at the University of

Missouri-St Louis, and with the generous support of the Templeton World Charity Foundation.

We are an organisation that wants to help people become who they are called to be. We seek to help communities create the conditions that promote their members' personal growth, character development and well-being. We do this by adopting a research-based, common-sense approach to restore many organisations to their original, noble meaning. The work we have done in the field of education has led us to partner with institutions interested in promoting people's integral development. We have worked with schools in different countries, such as Spain, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, Colombia, Slovakia, Croatia, Ecuador and Peru. In 2025, we plan to start in Chile, the Philippines, Finland, Estonia, the Czech Republic and Sweden.

We believe that the principles that can make a school an ideal place for people to grow could also inform the daily life of a university, a residence, a company, a hospital or even a family. This is why in the coming years we want to work to be able to support organisations beyond the school environment.

### **In the case of character education, why do you focus on leaders rather than teachers?**

Research suggests that the culture of the school is the most important factor in promoting character development. Schools often have a range of initiatives to promote student growth, such as service learning, collaborative learning, classes on virtue, great books programmes, one-to-one tutoring, mindfulness activities and so on. We try to help them to see that what is really 'shaping' students is the ordinary life of the school, which affects their development on a daily basis. Rather than thinking about

'doing things' to promote character development, we should look at the way we are and the way we do the things we already do: What are our priorities? What kind of relationships are created at school? What are the motivations that drive us? What is the level of involvement of students and teachers?

To paraphrase Paul Houston, we believe that 'schools are perfectly designed for the results we are getting. If we don't like the results, we have to redesign schools.' In this sense, promoting the integral development of people within institutions requires a redesign of the ordinary elements that shape their daily existence and dynamics. This redesign has to prioritise the individual in their tasks and *raison d'être* more than results, utility or productivity.

We focus on leaders because they are the ones who have the power to take decisions that have a significant impact on the culture of the school community. These decisions are often preceded by personal change. The work that teachers do to promote individuals' growth is irreplaceable, but we decided to start with leaders for strategic reasons. Without a good culture, teachers' efforts are unlikely to bear fruit.

### **You talk about the importance of redesigning communities. What conditions should an educational community have in order to provide good character education?**

Before answering, I think I should clarify something: the conditions for good character education are the same as the conditions for good education. There is no need to add something else to education. Many of the movements that have emerged in recent decades, such as character education, personalised education, social-emotional education or positive youth development, are nothing more than attempts to remind us

of something essential to education that has been neglected for one reason or another. Is it possible to educate without taking character into account? Is it possible to educate without taking into account that children are people? And without taking emotions into account? This is nothing new or contemporary. Way back when, Aristotle said (quoting Plato) that a good education was manifested in our ability to 'rejoice and grieve with what is right'. Rather than adding to education, the goal is for education to fulfil its purpose.

We say that the design of education today is especially geared towards two objectives: to know more things and to know how to do more things. Without disregarding these two objectives, at Become we invite a redesign of education to prioritise three essential goals for a person to become the best version of themselves: well-being, integrity and identity.

By well-being, we mean promoting the conditions needed for people to be physically and psychologically well. The level of well-being answers the question 'How am I doing?' People cannot develop properly if they do not feel safe and loved or if they are on the verge of collapse from exhaustion.

Integrity encompasses the spectrum of morals, ethics, character development, virtues and values. This level answers the question 'What am I like?' The goal is to design education in such a way that it can promote the cultivation of virtues and stable dispositions to do good.

## **The redesign of educational communities has to prioritise everyone's well-being, integrity and identity**



Finally, the identity level answers the question 'Who am I?' It is one of the questions we will continue to answer every day of our lives. Who do I want to be? Who am I called to be? You may already have all the virtues and feel inclined to do many good things, but that is not enough to answer what good things you will do with your life, bearing in mind that you cannot do them all.

#### **What are the distinguishing features of Become compared to other training models?**

We propose five arguments that characterise our formative approach and, to some extent, distinguish it from other initiatives.

#### **ONE: WE FOCUS ON WHAT CAN BE CHANGED**

At the beginning of our programmes, principals are often asked what they think needs to change for their schools to improve. They often respond that they need better students, better teachers, better families, better facilities or even better politicians. These perspectives are quite frustrating for them because these things are unlikely to change in the near future, nor do they have the ability to significantly influence them. Most principals will have the same students, teachers, families, facilities and politicians. If they continue to focus on changing what they cannot change, they will become exhausted, indifferent or cynical about any hope of education improving. Become does not focus

on aspects that cannot be changed, or ones that educators cannot change because they're beyond their reach. Instead, we suggest focusing on the aspects that the leaders and community members can change. Redesigning the way a school operates, redesigning its practices and strategies, is something that can be promoted and achieved by most school leaders in any cultural setting.

#### **TWO: WE START WITH THE LEADERS**

As we said before, Become focuses on leaders to initiate and sustain the redesign of educational communities to generate a culture that effectively promotes students' character development. The first thing principals can change or

improve to promote a better culture in their schools is their own character and leadership style. If leaders do not begin by cultivating the character they want to see in their teachers, staff and students, they will likely fail to promote good character development regardless of the message, curriculum, programme or strategy. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, 'What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say'. Principals are often unaware of how they can improve their character or what shortcomings they need to rectify, and they may be reluctant to change the way they lead or even unaware that their leadership needs to improve. Because of the position they occupy, it is often

difficult for members of their educational community to tell them what aspects of their character they need to check or correct. There are faults that are hard to tell a friend, let alone a boss: lack of humility, inability to listen, distrust, perfectionism, paternalism, coercion, inability to forgive, wanting to control everything, etc. Our programmes address this concern not by dictating to leaders how they should be but helping them to become more aware of how they really are, reflect on how they would like to be and encourage them to start this process. Being part of an interactive community of principals is helpful in this regard because people are often more open to listening, observing, learning and

taking advice from their peers than from their employees.

### **THREE: WE MODEL CULTURE FOR CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**

Our programmes use readings, conversations, reflections, videos, teamwork and other activities to achieve their objectives. However, the most significant means we use is creating the kind of community (culture, climate, ethos) with the participating leaders that they could create when they go back to their schools. The design of these programmes fully matches the proposed principles of school redesign. In this sense, participating in one of our programmes is a lived experience of the kind of culture that could be created at school. What is done, how it is done, why



## We don't ask anyone to do more but instead to rethink what they already do to strategically impact education

it is done and the character of the programme facilitators is intended to be a living example of what they can do, how they can do it, why they can do it and what they can be like when they return to their schools. They include planning activities so everyone can get to know each other; authentically listening to and respecting different opinions; setting aside time for silence and reflection; not imposing important decisions or leaving them for another time, but encouraging everyone to seek solutions collaboratively and decide as a community. The programme doesn't just include theory and practice, it is also about directly experiencing those practices and watching them being modelled.

### FOUR: WE AVOID GENERAL PRESCRIPTIONS

A number of education programmes spell out what needs to be done in detail. This could be teaching a new curriculum or set of lessons, performing a series of activities or implementing a teacher training course. All of these initiatives undoubtedly have a positive side, but not all of them work in all communities or have the same impact; or they may be useful, but only for a certain period of time. This is because each school's circumstances are unique and changing, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution for all of them, or for all times. Perhaps most importantly, they often overlook the deeper work of adult development and culture change. Our approach shares the conviction that there

is no one character education programme or curriculum that will work in all schools, nor any that will work indefinitely. Each school has its own problems, resources and challenges, and what it needs to transform its culture is a particular solution which has to be flexible enough to adapt to a rapidly changing world. Rather than proposing general and somewhat rigid solutions, these programmes advocate particular and flexible plans. For this reason, it is less effective to train leaders in a specific, fixed approach than it is to help them develop what it takes to lead effectively in their own circumstances: assessing the climate of their schools, discerning what programme or approach is needed at that specific time, being agile enough to adapt when circumstances change (e.g., pandemic) or being exemplary in leading their community. Rather than telling leaders what to do, it is more effective and sustainable to focus on helping them develop what they need in order to diagnose what their community needs and be able to provide it. Principals often know their schools better than anyone else or are in a privileged position to know the most relevant aspects of their community.

### FIVE: WE DO NOT ASK ANYONE TO DO MORE

Principals often fear that character education is one more thing they have to add to the never-ending list of things they have to do in their schools. Some often use the expression: 'My plate is full; I don't have room for anything else'. However, our programmes invite leaders to understand that character education is not just another thing on their plate. To paraphrase many leaders in the field, character education is not something else added to their plate; it is the plate that holds everything else together at school.

The essence of promoting character development is not about doing more things but about redesigning the ordinary parts of education. This is convenient because implementing extraordinary initiatives often requires time and resources that schools lack, while the ordinary things are going to be done anyway and will have an impact on students' development, intentionally or not. In this sense, you cannot not educate character: to a greater or lesser extent, everything that is done at schools has an impact on children's character, whether you want it to or not. Moreover, it is not something that competes with or detracts from academics. Studies show that schools that integrate character education through this redesign approach ultimately achieve better academic results.

### How do you approach this? What is expected of participants? What do they take back to their schools?

We do not believe that a few courses or programmes will have a transformative impact on the education of a school, a city or a region. What we believe is truly transformative is belonging to a community of leaders where everyone collaborates and learns from each other to strategically and intentionally redesign their communities. If we can get principals to be willing to serve each other to help each other grow and move their schools forward, real educational transformation will very likely take place.

**Schools that are well designed for character development have better long-term results**

In our search for effective ways to start such communities, we have found two remarkable initiatives. They are two training programmes developed by Marvin Berkowitz and Melinda Bier at the Center for Character and Citizenship at the University of Missouri-St Louis: an executive programme (vLACE) and a focused programme (PRIMED Institute).

vLACE is a programme aimed at educational community leaders. Each workshop is led by a facilitator who uses videos, interactive activities, readings and reflections to try to generate a community of practice among participants. There are two main objectives. The first is to influence self-knowledge and cultivation of the identity and integrity of the leader and their community. There can be no significant change in a school's culture without its leader starting by cultivating the character they want to see in the rest of their community. The second is to engage leaders in the learning and development needed to design, implement and assess initiatives that make their schools true learning communities, where character development is a real priority. vLACE includes the development of a long-term plan for transforming school culture. It consists of nine eight-hour workshops held monthly over the course of an academic year. Each workshop presents an international expert's approach to character education. These experts do not attend the workshops in person. The vLACE facilitators lead each workshop by presenting each author's approach through videos, activities, reflections and readings. Finally, vLACE includes eight monthly assignments that include personal reflections, surveys or questionnaires for each school community. These tasks require an average of four hours each, and

some have to be done in teams with the school's other leaders. The outcome of all this work is a medium- to long-term plan to transform each community's culture.

The PRIMED Institute, on the other hand, is a five-day immersion experience in character education. We invite leadership teams to spend a few days together in a climate of trust, reflecting on and discussing what can make their schools places where character development is promoted strategically and intentionally. It has three main objectives. The first is to learn about the fundamentals of effective character education. We use the PRIMED model developed by professor Marvin W Berkowitz as a guide to introduce participants to a successful approach to school transformation. The people who will lead this change need to know the principles underpinning the practices they will then implement. Secondly, we strengthen team relationships in an experiential learning format. Implementing a change of this magnitude, which directly affects the school culture, requires a united team eager to take on this ambitious challenge. During the course, participants will have the opportunity to bond with the other team members, share many hours of conversation and have a good time together. Finally, they will make an action plan for the next academic year. With the knowledge gained in PRIMED, participants are invited to develop an action plan for the next school

**Leaders can transform school culture and the character development of their students**

year. Any transformation of this style requires several years of work. The plan developed as a result of this experience can serve as a way forward and introduce the character education perspective at school. Participants are mentored by the course facilitators as they make this plan.

Our experience in recent years is that people who have participated in these programmes want to keep the community of leaders they have created during our programmes in order to continue the journey they have embarked on together. The community of leaders becomes a great opportunity to continue to cultivate friendships, enhance self-awareness, further deepen the principles of effective character education and help each other to move their schools forward. Making principals part of such a community is the best way to promote real change in schools.

