



Teaching Character: A Practical Guide

Character Education and Developmental Disability

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This paper proposes a framework for helping people with developmental disabilities (DD) develop virtue literacy and character within an employment training program. This framework utilizes a moral dilemma discussion model within a supported employment setting. Phronesis, or practical wisdom, can support individuals to make a moral decision when faced with a choice between conflicting virtues. Underdeveloped skills and lack of practice in moral decision-making and the process of phronesis may lead to poor employment outcomes, such as termination, which makes character development an important component of vocational training for this population.

People with developmental disabilities (DD) are often restricted from opportunities to develop character during their K-12 school experiences (Shogren *et al.*, 2018). Low expectations on the part of educators, segregated classroom settings, and curriculum that is ‘watered down’ are possible causes of this gap in learning that can contribute to students with DD falling behind their peers (Peterson, 2010). These restrictions continue when they reach employment age. In the United States, 75% of adults with a developmental disability are unemployed (Smith and Wilder, 2018). This is a crisis amongst this population; the inability to obtain and keep employment can have far-reaching consequences for people with DD. Education in character and support in moral decision making can help to level the field and give them a better chance at being hired and retained. The ability to make the right choice, at the right time, for the right reason deserves to be a priority amongst this population.

This framework will provide guidance for how to work with people with DD and support them through their character development so they can have better employment outcomes. When working with people with DD in an employment setting, it is important to employ several strategies. Teach about character using familiar contexts, as learning new skills in isolation is less effective. Utilize situations that the individual has seen or experienced, to increase the likelihood that learning will be generalized to other settings and situations. Work through any communication challenges to ensure that the voice of the individual is heard, as people with DD are often left out as contributors to their own life course (Peterson, 2010).

This guide is designed to be used with people with DD (herein: client) who are receiving employment training from a job coach (herein: coach). The first step is direct instruction to build virtue literacy. This develops an awareness of a client's own character strengths and creates a shared language in which to communicate and think about character. The next step consists of modeling moral dilemma discussions around common problems that arise while at work. The final step is guided practice with in-the-moment decisions in a supported work setting, with the goal of transitioning the client to natural supports, such as co-workers and friends who are strong in character.

Direct instruction in character education is done to build virtue literacy: working together with clients to learn the language of character and find their own strengths. The coach can use measurement instruments, such as the VIA-Youth, to gather data for a baseline of character strengths in the client (Shogren *et al.*, 2018). Once strengths are assessed, learning can transition to an applied model, such as 'strengths spotting' (Niemic *et al.*, 2017). Clients begin by learning about character strengths, finding and describing them in themselves, then move to identifying character strengths in others around them (Niemic *et al.*, 2017). Coaches can introduce moral dilemma discussions, where clients participate in thinking and talking about situations that require character-based choices. Coaches should utilize examples identified by the client, and found in familiar settings, such as movies, stories, and their own lives. This step is where the coach models 'phronesis': thinking out loud while teaching clients about perspective-taking, balancing their own needs against the greater good, and leveraging their own personal character strengths.

Once a client is comfortable identifying their own character strengths and having moral dilemma discussions around issues in their own lives, coaches can begin moral dilemma discussions that involve work-related issues. Moving the discussion from a personal to a work-related context will lead to more client success with generalizing new learning within employment settings. It is important for the coach to provide errorless learning during these discussions, as to avoid accidentally reinforcing errors in thinking (Markham *et al.*, 2020). Coaches can support this type of learning by modeling thinking out loud, and explaining how one choice might be better for the greater good. Examples of moral dilemmas in this stage should be pulled from areas of work that lie within the strengths, preferences, and interests of the client.

With personal character strengths firmly established and reinforced, and theoretical work-based dilemmas explored, the final step is supported coaching on the job. Coaches should use information gathered in the previous steps to have a good picture of the client's strengths, as well as their areas of inexperience or weakness. When coaching on the job, the coach will watch closely for opportunities for moral dilemmas, either with the client directly or with those around the client. When a learning-in-action moment arises, coaches can support client learning by taking a brief pause in the workday to model an internal moral dilemma discussion out loud. Time should be built in during and after a client's work shift, to discuss and reinforce dilemmas that were observed, and choices that were made. Once fluency of work routine and tasks is in place, the coach can use 'strengths spotting' again to reinforce character learning in the client, and to assist the client with identifying natural supports that can act as good examples and sounding boards for making character-based decisions.

Access to a flourishing life is important for all, and carefully structured coaching can supplement experience and opportunity to help develop thoughtful action amongst people with developmental disabilities. Through careful and intentional support, coaches can work with client's strengths to help them make the best choices that they can: making the right decisions, at the right time, for the right reasons.

References

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