Character Curriculum Across Cultures

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"Members / of the same species, and human beings most of all, have a natural friendship for each other; that is why we praise friends of humanity. And in our travels we can see how every human being is akin and beloved to a human being" (Aristotle, 1985, p. 141 [1155a20-1155a23]).

Introduction

At the beginning of the 2024-2025 school year, a majority of Americans are dissatisfied with the quality of K-12 education. A poll conducted in August 2024 found that 55% of Americans, including those who are parents of K-12 children, are either completely dissatisfied or somewhat dissatisfied with the quality of education that students in kindergarten through grade 12 receive in the United States (Gallup Organization, 2024). While Republicans are more dissatisfied than Democrats, and the 20-point gap is the largest of the demographic subgroups, both major political parties seem to agree that solving the K-12 education crisis is not a national priority. Neither Donald Trump nor Kamala Harris spoke at length about K-12 education during their debate or throughout a contentious presidential campaign season.

Educational leaders are encountering multiple crises at once. There have been 56 school shootings on K-12 school grounds in the United States so far this year. The most recent scorecard from the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that reading and math scores for fourth and either graders are at their lowest levels in decades. The pandemic exacerbated many issues including chronic absenteeism, mental illnesses, and bullying. A recent study by Harvard's Center for Education Policy Research and Stanford's The Educational Opportunity Project shows that the achievement gaps between rich and poor districts are even wider in most states now than they were before the pandemic (Fahle et al, 2024, p. 3). Similarly, the shortage of K-12 teachers, particularly in speciality areas such as special education, continues to plague American schools (Nguyen et al, 2022).

Given these and various other challenges facing K-12 education, how should educational leaders respond? The school of education at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota (USA) has earned a strong reputation for preparing future educational leaders. Its educational

administration program continues to be the largest in the state with one-third of all K-12 principals having earned their administrative license and degree through Saint Mary's. For the 870,693 K-12 students in 2,252 schools across the state, the need for highly qualified educational leaders is significant, and the impact of Saint Mary's educational administration program will influence education in Minnesota for generations. But what is required to prepare highly qualified educational leaders? Saint Mary's educational administration program recently completed a revision of its curriculum, which launched at the beginning of the 2023-2024 academic year, with the umbrella name of "wise leadership." The new wise leadership curriculum integrates personal formation in the virtues with the state-mandated professional competencies for educational leaders. This essay will, first, provide an overview of the wise leadership curriculum with a description of each of the core courses. How and why personal formation in the virtues is integrated with state-mandated professional competencies is the focus of the second section. Then, in the final section, we will explore the application of the wise leadership curriculum in the context of educational leadership in Kuwait.

Wise Leadership Curriculum

One of the foundational principles of all educational programs at Saint Mary's is that the flourishing of students and schools depends upon the personal formation of the school leaders. The educational administration program recently launched its new wise leadership curriculum at the beginning of the 2023-2024 academic year. At the heart of the wise leadership curriculum is the integration of personal formation in the virtues with the state-mandated professional competencies for educational leaders. The Jubilee Centre's *Framework for Virtue-Based Professional Ethics*, particularly its central claim that "to be a professional is to be a person with a distinctive set of character strengths as well as an expertise" guided this work (Arthur et al, 2023, p. 6). The program defines wise leaders as those educational leaders who exemplify prudence in judgment, virtuous decision-making, and model good, moral action. Through their awareness, judgment, and motivation, they draw on practical wisdom, and act with virtue. Wise leaders foster an educational environment conducive to good moral action and thought in others.

The educational administration program is designed for candidates who have already earned a master's degree who are seeking to be licensed by the state as an elementary or secondary principal, superintendent, or special education director. The state-mandated professional competencies for educational leaders are embedded in the courses as they are at every other higher education institution that offers such a program in Minnesota. Unique to Saint Mary's program is the personal formation in the virtues with the additional objective of cultivating

wise educational leaders who are able to lead flourishing schools. The curriculum is practitioner-focused and rooted in research-based pedagogy, with an emphasis on leading with virtue and building high performing, flourishing school communities. Instruction focuses on applying organizational leadership theories, the principles of wise leadership, and the practical skills needed by school administrators to become leaders of flourishing learning communities.

In particular, the revised curriculum introduces participants to the virtues-based approach to living one's life by integrating a personal formation dimension to the traditional professional development focus. Candidates explore the moral virtues, concepts of human flourishing, crafting a life of meaning, and the central role that practical wisdom plays in navigating such a life. An important goal of the program is to assist candidates in building the linkage between the individual moral virtues and the virtue of practical wisdom, as well as the bridge between being a good moral person and being a wise moral leader. Crucial to a deep understanding of these principles are the study of moral exemplars, moral case studies, and moral decision making.

The program integrates personal formation in the virtues with the state-mandated professional competencies in recognition of the fact that candidates bring their "whole self" to their professional practice. In contrast to the modern tendency to compartmentalize the professional self from the personal self, Alasdair MacIntrye rightly emphasizes the unity of human life:

> For a virtue is not a disposition that makes for success only in some one particular type of situation….Someone who genuinely possesses a virtue can be expected to manifest it in very different types of situations, many of them situations where the practice of a virtue cannot be expected to be effective in the way that we expect a professional skill to be (2007, p. 205).

The development of the wise leadership curriculum is in fundamental agreement with this argument, and the descriptions of the core courses below highlight the bridge between personal formation and professional development:

EDS721 School Leadership: Purpose and Motivation

This course serves as an introduction and orientation to the program and its key concepts. The wise leadership model and the moral virtues are explored in detail, as they will guide the personal and professional development of candidates throughout the program. The themes of educational leadership, social-emotional competence, state standards, and leadership traits are examined. Participants are also exposed to an introduction to APA guidelines, as well as the many university resources available to support program completion.

EDS722 Ethical Decision Making for School Leaders

This course introduces participants to the virtues-based approach to living one's life. The course exposes candidates to the moral virtues, concepts of human flourishing, crafting a life of meaning, and the central role that practical wisdom plays in navigating such a life. The course begins to help students build the linkage between the individual moral virtues and the virtue of practical wisdom, as well as the bridge between being a good moral person and being a wise moral leader. The parallel between these objectives and the state competencies are examined. Crucial to a deep understanding of these principles are the study of moral exemplars, moral case studies, and moral decision making.

EDS723 Character-Driven Leadership

This course examines what it means to be a leader of good character and what is required to become a wise leader. From a foundational understanding of leadership models, leadership approaches, and the context of leading in an educational environment, participants will develop an understanding of their personal and professional responsibilities to lead with character. Additionally, candidates will explore how to leverage the moral virtues to act with wisdom, courage, humility, and justice. Key concepts including vision and mission, power and influence, practical wisdom, leading with character, and climate and culture will be explored.

EDS724 Leading Flourishing Schools

The focus of this course is moving from the personal to communal dimensions of cultivating character, virtue, and wise leadership. Candidates learn to create a school community that flourishes in all its aspects. Living in a diverse, pluralistic society, school leaders need to attend to the broad differences that comprise their school communities and know how to create an inclusive culture and climate that fosters flourishing in all its students, staff, and the broader community (i.e., families and community members). The course explores interpersonal dynamics, school climate and culture, and social and emotional proficiency including mental, physical, and emotional health. It makes connections between the language of virtues and flourishing and the role of wise leaders in developing flourishing school communities.

EDS725 Organization and Human Resource Management

While the previous course (EDS712) explores how to build flourishing school organizations, this course explores how to lead and support all school staff in the pursuit of a flourishing school. A leader's staff is their most valuable asset. The ability to develop an approach to human resource management that values the dignity of every human person and leverages each person's talents is essential for a flourishing school community. This course examines the respective roles of organizational design, human resource management, and wise

leadership in attracting, retaining, developing, and leveraging staff to achieve strong school performance. The many tools at a leader's disposal are analyzed, including policies and practices, systems design, and interpersonal dynamics.

EDS726 Continuous Improvement for Learning

This course explores the core work of leading flourishing school communities including the components of student assessment and program evaluation. Candidates are introduced to various assessments and types of data that can be used to determine school success and areas for improvement. Effective staff development, supervision of instruction and programs, and collaborative curriculum development are also explored. The value of building communities of professional practice is studied as a key component in the development of a continuous school improvement model.

In light of the various challenges facing educational leaders today, the wise leadership curriculum seeks to highlight the role of practical wisdom in the exercise of the virtues. The flourishing of students in large part is dependent on the professional judgements made by educational leaders. Important too is the flourishing of the educational leaders themselves, which is achieved when, as stated in the Jubilee Centre's *Framework for Virtue-Based Professional Ethics*, "they are able to cultivate virtues harmoniously in the service of the common good; have found an alignment between their personal and professional virtues, and have gained a sense of professional purpose" (Arthur et al, 2023, p. 8).

State Professional Competencies

As is common throughout the United States, the State of Minnesota has established curriculum requirements for educational administration programs. All higher education institutions in the state that offer an educational administration program must include the 12 core professional competencies. Given the trust that parents place in schools to educate their children, in addition to competence in organizational management, community relations, curriculum and instruction, and human resource management, the state identifies "values and ethics of leadership" as a core professional competency. According to the statute, professional competency in this area is demonstrated by:

1. an understanding of the role of education in a democratic society;
2. an understanding of and model democratic value systems, ethics, and moral leadership;
3. the ability to balance complex community demands in the best interest of learners;
4. help learners grow and develop as caring, informed citizens; and

5. an understanding and application of the code of ethics for school administrators (Minnesota Legislature, 2020).

There is nothing objectionable about these five objectives; they are all worthy goals for educational leaders to pursue. At the same time, it is difficult to conclude that these five objectives fully capture the values and ethics of educational leadership.

The code of ethics for school administrators referenced in #5 above includes an additional 11 standards of professional conduct:

1. A school administrator must provide professional educational services in a nondiscriminatory manner.
2. A school administrator must take reasonable action to protect students and staff from conditions harmful to health and safety.
3. A school administrator must take reasonable action to provide an atmosphere conducive to learning.
4. A school administrator must not use professional relationships with students, parents and caregivers, staff, or colleagues to private advantage.
5. A school administrator must disclose confidential information about individuals only when a compelling professional purpose is served in accordance with state and federal laws and school district policies.
6. A school administrator must not knowingly falsify or misrepresent records or facts relating to the administrator's qualifications or to the qualifications of other staff or personnel.
7. A school administrator must not knowingly make false or malicious statements about students, students' families, staff, or colleagues.
8. A school administrator must not accept gratuities, gifts, or favors that impair professional judgment, nor offer any favor, service, or item of value to obtain special advantage.
9. A school administrator must only accept a contract for a position when licensed for the position or when a school district is issued a variance by the board.
10. A school administrator, in filling positions requiring licensure, must employ, recommend for employment, and assign only appropriately licensed personnel, or persons for whom the school district has been issued a variance by the appropriate state board or agency, unless, after making reasonable efforts to obtain a variance, an appropriately licensed person cannot be assigned and the position must be filled to meet a legitimate emergency educational need.

11. A school administrator must not engage in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, or misrepresentation in the performance of professional duties.

Three observations can be made about these state-mandated requirements. First, the "values and ethics of leadership" core professional competency largely remains at the level of theoretical knowledge. It is one thing to understand "the role of education in a democratic society" and it is quite another to exercise the civic virtues necessary for a democratic society. While most professional programs stay at the level of moral knowing, the wise leadership curriculum intentionally emphasizes moral feeling and moral action in addition to moral knowing.

Second, both the "values and ethics of leadership" core professional competency as well as the code of ethics for school administrators tend to set minimum expectations. The wise leadership curriculum, in contrast, establishes an aspirational vision of educational leadership. Candidates in the program are invited to shift their moral mindsets to embrace the practice of the virtues that are necessary to advance toward this vision.

Third, the code of ethics for school administrators primarily emphasizes actions that educational leaders either must do (e.g. provide professional educational services in a nondiscriminatory manner) or must not do (e.g. knowingly falsify or misrepresent records or facts relating to the administrator's qualifications). No such list can ever include all that is necessary; neither can it guarantee ethical behavior. The emphasis of the wise leadership curriculum is who an educational leader becomes by what virtues they regularly practice.

In summary, as the wise leadership curriculum was developed, the "values and ethics of leadership" core professional competency and the code of ethics for school administrators were viewed as necessary but not sufficient. To argue for the importance of the character of educational leaders is not to diminish the importance of professional competence. The integration of personal formation in the virtues, and particularly the necessity of cultivating practical moral wisdom in the exercise of the virtues, is a necessary complement to the state-mandated professional competencies to form educational leaders who are capable of leading flourishing schools. As stated in the Jubilee Centre's *Framework for Virtue-Based Professional Ethics*, "practical wisdom in the professional domain [is] a helpful way to reinvigorate professional ethics, replacing the sterility of rule-and-code-based formalism, and a culture of mere compliance" (Arthur et al, 2023, p. 6).

Character Curriculum Across Cultures

We had anticipated the challenge of integrating personal formation in the virtues with the state-mandated professional competencies. The second challenge came as a surprise. At the same time as the wise leadership curriculum was being developed, Saint Mary's was

approached by the American Creativity Academy (ACA) in Kuwait to provide graduate education for their teachers and aspiring educational leaders. ACA enrolls approximately 5,500 students in three schools in Kuwait and has recently opened new schools in Saudi Arabia and Oman. While the partnership with ACA was unexpected, it was not unwelcome. It gave us an opportunity to explore the application of the wise leadership curriculum across cultures.

As a Catholic university in the United States, Saint Mary's might at first seem like an unusual partner for a school inspired by Islamic values in Kuwait. Very quickly in the partnership, however, it became clear that "character" is a language that we share. Saint Mary's virtue-based approach to professional ethics and our university-wide character initiatives have strong alignment with ACA's own mission, which includes "developing students' character with honesty, integrity, and responsible behavior." Indeed, one important benefit of adopting a neo-Aristotelian approach to character education is that it transcends cultural and religious differences. As Abir Catovic, a pioneer of Islamic education in the United States, emphasizes: "Character formation preoccupies Muslims because it prepares human beings to perform the stewardship role entrusted to them by God" (2024, p. 179). Before the establishment of the mosque, formation occurred primarily in the family. Eventually, formation expanded to include learning institutions outside of the mosque. Catovic affirms a broad understanding of education beyond mere technical knowledge: "Islam teaches that education enables human beings to understand their world, learn who they are and who God is, and discover God's purpose for their existence" (2024, p. 179).

The challenge of defining character, particularly its universal applicability despite cultural, religious, and social differences, has long been regarded as an objection to personal formation in the virtues (Hunter, 2000, p. 5). Kristján Kristjánsson effectively tackles this objection drawing from Aristotle's empirical universalism to emphasize the foundational similarities of human nature across cultures and time. While arguing for the existence of universally-valued character strengths, he acknowledges "varying interpretations or instantiations of a virtue, given different circumstances in different societies." "But then again," he continues, "in some societies people drive or the right side of the road, in some on the left; yet clearly it would be a myth to claim that there is no such thing as the general skill of a good driver" (Kristjánsson, 2013, p. 281). In their groundbreaking study, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman also find remarkable similarity across time and cultures in widely-valued virtues (2004, p. 49).

In order to better understand the perception and experience of the wise leadership curriculum by leadership candidates in Kuwait, a small pilot study using an online questionnaire was conducted. The online questionnaire was sent to one cohort with a total of 10 candidates

and candidates were given a two-week window in which to respond. Two primary research questions guide this study:

1. What is character? Do you think there is something essential about character that is shared despite cultural, religious, ethnic, political, and other differences?
2. When we consider educational leadership, what is the relative importance of the leader's personal character? How is character related to professional competence?

These questions aim to provide a greater understanding of the perception and/or experience of candidates as we continue to refine the wise leadership curriculum and assess its applicability. While the majority of K-12 students at ACA are Kuwaiti citizens and Muslim, the faculty and staff are approximately 20% Kuwaiti with many others hailing from South Africa, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, and Lebanon. The religious affiliation of the faculty and staff is also more diverse with approximately half identifying as Muslim. Despite the limitations of this small study, several preliminary observations can be made from the data.

Character is expressed through actions
- "Character is a person's qualities as well as their personality traits. It defines who a person is and how they behave."
- "Character is a set of experiences and values reflected in actions and reactions."
- "For me character is doing the right thing even when no one is looking."
- "Character is how one holds and conducts themselves."
- "For me, character is about the qualities that guide how we act, make decisions, and treat others. It's shaped by our experiences, beliefs, and the world around us"

Character is influenced by culture but also transcends it. *Several specific virtues were highlighted.*
- "Despite being shaped by personal experiences and influenced by culture, religion, ethnicity and politics, there are certain core qualities that transcend these differences. These core qualities include traits such as honesty, integrity, respect and compassion. It is important to note that although these qualities are shared, they may be expressed differently depending on one's personal experiences and the differences stated above."
- "I believe there is a set of character traits shared across all cultures, but their importance and how they are valued differ. For instance, in Islam, forgiveness and peace are emphasized as essential traits. However, within Arab culture—where most Muslims

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live—there can be a strong focus on values like pride and revenge, which sometimes contradict Islamic teachings. This contradiction is quite striking and shows how culture and religion can clash in practice."

- "I believe that, even though cultural values, religions, and shared political views help shape character, there are other common values that we share globally which shape your character—either by having them or not. These range from honesty to humbleness, and extend to include empathy, resilience, integrity, discipline etc. These foundational qualities form the bedrock of character, influencing how individuals navigate challenges, interact with others, and contribute to their communities.

- "Some essential aspects about character that transcend across all the above include, integrity, empathy, a sense of justice and compassion."

- "Ultimately, respect is a value upheld across all religions and cultures. The differences arise from our beliefs, yet it's entirely possible to hold different beliefs while still being respectful to one another. Respect can mean choosing not to engage with someone due to differences in beliefs. It can also mean asking questions to gain understanding, as long as the intention is not to force someone to change their beliefs. True respect lies in allowing others to reflect and make their own decisions after genuinely listening. The key word here is listening."

- "At its core, it's about things like integrity, honesty, empathy, and staying committed to doing what's right. No matter where someone comes from, culturally, religiously, or politically, there are some core values that seem universal. Things like respect, compassion, accountability, and fairness are recognized everywhere as signs of good character. These traits help people connect and build trust, even if their backgrounds are completely different."

Character is foundational to educational leadership. Professional competency builds upon character.

- "I believe that in any context, including educational leadership, a person's character serves as the foundation for their professional competence. A leader's personal character plays a role in their decision-making and relationships. For example, leaders with character traits such as empathy enable them to communicate effectively. A leader's character also guides them in making ethical decisions. Moreover, leaders are usually seen as role models and should display good character by demonstrating positive behaviors and values. This also influences the overall culture at the school."

- "I believe an educational leader should have the courage to bring about change, the honesty to admit mistakes, and a clear belief that education is a mission, not just a business. These qualities help create trust and inspire others. Leadership is not just about skills but about setting an example of integrity and purpose."
- "I believe that in educational leadership, the personal character of the leader is fundamentally important, though it manifests uniquely in each individual. While leaders may share similar values, these values vary in their expression and priority. Each leader brings their own personality, strengths, weaknesses, and insecurities to their style of leadership. This personal blend of traits directly influences their effectiveness and approach to decision-making, problem-solving, and team management."
- "A leader's personal character is important as it shapes the positive learning environments we strive to create, through integrity, ethical decision making and trust. It is how we interact, handle challenges, model behavior we expect from colleagues as well as fostering a culture we intend to grow in your school."
- "The true measure of a leader's importance is whether you can trust and respect them, and vice versa. You don't necessarily have to like a leader's character—just as we don't always like how a student behaves—but can you trust in their capabilities? Do you believe that the leader upholds the goals of the educational institution you both agreed to serve? Can you rely on them to support and coach you when needed? Issues arise when an educational leader's character clearly exhibits bias, disrespect, or unfairness. Upon signing a contract, educational leaders agree to adhere to the same standards and cultural norms as their followers, aligning with the values of their school and community. They are expected to set aside personal beliefs and act in accordance with shared expectations. If their views clash with the ethical and moral framework of the institution, it may be time for them to reconsider their choice."
- "In educational leadership, who you are as a person really matters. Traits like empathy, being real (authenticity), grit, being organized, and approachable are key to earning trust, inspiring others, and creating a positive vibe in the school. A leader's character shapes how they make decisions, deal with challenges, and connect with people. Good character goes hand in hand with being good at the job. Leaders with integrity and empathy can handle tough situations, support their team, and keep things fair for everyone. For instance, being authentic means being genuine and honest, while being organized helps keep everything running smoothly."

Conclusion

The results of this small pilot study are encouraging. We see in the data an appreciation for the importance of cultivating character, particularly for educational leaders. The partnership between Saint Mary's and ACA, which began with 10 candidates, has now grown to over 100 candidates in master's, post-master's, and doctoral programs. We intend to continue to explore the far-reaching applicability of our virtue-based curriculum for educational leaders. Indeed, far from being a source of division, we believe that virtue can be a bridge for greater connection despite cultural, social, and religious differences. As Annas concludes:

> Thinking in terms of virtue, then, can enlarge our thinking, as our understanding of virtue and what it is becomes enlarged. If we think of this in terms of coming to see ourselves as belonging to communities larger than, and cutting across, our given communities of family and society, we can see that thinking in terms of virtue can lead us to a viewpoint where we see ourselves as forming a community with all other humans who are virtuous in a similar way, having something in common with people in other times, places, and cultures which we do not have in common with the people with whom we do share time and place (2011, p. 58).

Educational leadership programs have the potential to become communities of virtue where candidates are both personally formed in the virtues in addition to acquiring professional competence.

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