

VAB Program: VAB' Character Education Program

Defining Character

Human beings over the ages have identified and enumerated a number of positive traits in character. The Greeks put forward four cardinal virtues of good character: wisdom, justice, self-mastery and courage. Character is also defined as sum of our intellectual and moral habits. Character is doing the right thing, even if it is not convenient to you. Character is the Golden Rule – Treat others as you would like to be treated. Good character is about “knowing the good, loving the good and doing the good”.

You are not born with character. Plato believed knowledge led to formation of character, while Aristotle took it a step further – character is about one's habits.

- Our character starts with our thoughts
- Our thoughts influence our words
- Our words lead us to actions
- Our actions, repeated over time, become our habits
- Our habits form our character

Moral Character and Performance Character

Character traits like humility, kindness, respect, empathy, fairness and gratitude are universal traits desired in human beings. These virtues have a connection with the religions of the world and constitute the moral compass of an individual. These virtues are termed Moral Virtues or virtues of Moral Character. But moral virtue without action is of little consequence in life. These virtues are thoughts of the mind and feelings of the heart. Action must be taken based on the moral virtues, but for enabling action virtues like hard work, perseverance, courage and wisdom or prudence must also be developed. These are elements of Performance Character.

State of People's Character in Society in Bangladesh

After Independence, Bangladesh has progressed economically, but progress has not been unblemished. There is a general consensus that the moral fiber of the society is near complete collapse. Absence of and/or weak rule of law have allowed unscrupulous financial success and immediate gratification for some, and unfettered corruption has spread all over. People may lament for the loss of morality at the individual level, but collectively, if we can think of a concept like “a nation's or society's character”, such character leaves a lot to be desired, and collective performance is definitely dismal. In fact, there is a passive acceptance of corruption and as a nation we are not even at the start of the character building process.

But everything may not be lost. VAB, in the course of its years of work with high schools in rural areas, finds a golden thread to imbue the rural youth with virtues of character. While the urban society is dominated by corruption ridden people, and even the rural elites are not free from it, the rural society generally has a core group of hardworking, honest and respectful people. The peasants, the daily workers, the factory workers and the craftsmen of all types earn their bread by the sweat of their brow. They are the majority in rural Bangladesh. The young people in this group of hardworking families are relatively free from the corrupting influence that characterizes the urban society, and they need to be brought to the forefront of the national psyche. Perhaps, this can have an impact on character at the overall national level, too.

The pool of young people in the country, in particular in the rural society, provides a more fertile ground to cultivate character building. Given the right settings, the young minds can be motivated more easily. Their habits can be molded to instill character in them in its true sense.

The Stakeholders of Character Building in Rural Bangladesh

Students

There may be a parochial view in some quarters about rural students, but they are not different from those in more affluent settings. By and large, most rural students come to the class regularly and on time, listen to the teachers, work hard to do well in examinations, are courteous to their friends and other people, and respectful to seniors. There is a need to appreciate the virtues they have and build on them.

Parents

The majority of rural parents does not have a formal education. The father may be a peasant, daily labor, rickshaw puller, pushcart carrier or small vendor, small trader, or factory worker. Some may be craftsmen, artisans, and handymen or brick makers, carriers or layers. The mother is often a housewife, household worker in others' house and agricultural worker. They may also work in factories. On the whole, they work hard to make both ends meet. Generally, they are hardworking, honest and straightforward. A peasant's family is a mainstay of a combination of character virtues – respect, diligence and dutifulness. They are respectful, grateful and humble. They demonstrate respect for land, nature, crop and humans. They practice diligence and dutifulness in work at all phases of cropping and harvest. They deserve to be treated as persons of character and to be valued by children and the society. Their worth in practical demonstration of character virtues goes unnoticed and unappreciated. Similar behavior is seen among other classes of the village work force. They also make huge sacrifice to send their children to schools.

The students in villages have a great role model in their parents and neighbors.

Teachers

Teachers are respected in the community. The parents know them and exchange greetings with them on the streets, in the tea stalls and in the village bazar and haat (weekly market). The teachers are generally caring about the students. They know many students personally from social interactions. However, private tutoring by teachers has brought a conflict in their role in education. There is shortcoming in their diligence and commitment to their duties in many cases. There is a priority for tutoring for payment over providing good teaching in the classroom. However, experience has shown, put in the right environment, the Headmaster and the teachers of a school genuinely want and do put extra efforts to see that their students do well in examinations and win in competitions against a competing school. VAB will view this as a strength in their effort to make a change.

The close association of the rural teachers with the rural society also provides an opportunity for action.

School Management Committee

The Management Committee provides the necessary logistics to run a school. The Committee can also provide assistance and cooperation outside the school perimeter in support of the school activities. VAB will seek the support of the Management Committee in the character building programs.

Community

Like the teachers, and the parents, the general community members also desire good performance by the students. The school and the community are integral parts of each other.

The positive relationship of the community with the schools can be exploited for good purpose.

Role Models

Role models can play a vital role mentoring young people to build character. A role model should be a person of character. Unfortunately, there is a distinct shortage of persons in all societies who can be identified embodying all the virtues of character. Young people are prone to accept anyone who shows an attractive trait or personality as a role model. It should be the job of parents and teachers to help them follow the right role model. One redeeming quality of a role model would be an uncompromising attitude toward doing something that needs to be done. A non-literate parent may teach a child good manners, a teacher may help build confidence, a well-known cricketer may motivate to play cricket well and pursue excellence, an ex-student may demonstrate that the rural background need not be a handicap in life. There is no dearth of the existence of specific virtues in a person.

The uniqueness of VAB approach is to leave out the path of identifying a person as a role model; instead it strives to arrive at a set of virtues expected to be the characteristics of a role model. VAB undertakes interactive discussion with students to identify at least one virtue in a person they respect for that virtue. This will then help identify a set of virtues that a student values. The interactive discussion leads to a consensus accepting this set of virtues as the desired **Self-Image** of the students. **The essence of the Character Development program is to have the students build an ideal Self-Image and strive to live up to the Self-Image.**

Supportive Components of Character Building

School Playgrounds

The school is also quite central to village life and how the village functions. Its playground is the playground for rural children and its premises are often the venue of village activities. A clean and inviting atmosphere would better promote extracurricular activities which can help young people to keep away from unsocial activities. Active sports and games teach cooperation and build friendship, which are also helpful in strengthening normal positive outlook.

The presence of the school as a social institution can be a boon to make progress in quality and character.

Character in Curriculum

Following the National Education Policy, the curriculum in high schools is geared to development of citizenship and character. Patriotism, pride in national identity, love of nature and people and respect for diversity are strewn through various segments of the curriculum. Students acquire a full cognition of all the virtues, but they do their studies related to virtue for the examinations only, with little regard that the virtues are to be “internalized” in themselves and practiced in life. **And so, there is a need for a jump from cognition into action.** The VAB program on pedagogy and on character education is directed to produce that jump.

One may examine and reflect on the contents of curriculum. In Bangla, one will find illustration of the virtues of patriotism, love of nature, kindness to animals and respect for all people; in Social Studies, rights and responsibilities of citizens and the equality of all citizens; in Religious Studies, respect for and striving for good of all creation, living and nonliving; and in the practice of Math, traits of hard work, persistence, logical rigor, and creativity.

The positive elements in curriculum can be a great resource for character education.

VAB also distributes a copy of a booklet, “Adarsho Manush” authored by a character development enthusiast and a VAB patron, Momtaz Bhuiyan.

Interactive Student Training on Character Education

VAB developed a novel approach to promote character and citizenship. It builds on positive traits in the society and in individuals. As already outlined, character develops with practice. The VAB program on the Group Method of Teaching-Learning and the Club Program center round practice of character virtues. Character training, in essence, is ingrained in all activities undertaken through the VAB Model. **The formal training on character education is to turn cognition to practice and practice to habit.**

VAB first introduces the essence of the program in a one-hour session in every class in a school. After that, VAB creates a Leadership Group on Character with the 50 Executive Committee members of the five School Clubs.

The training is conducted in an interactive manner with this Group. The training brings in what the students already have learned about character through their curriculum and through participation in different activities in group learning, group practice, club work, exposure to religion and association with different groups in society including parents, relatives, teachers, and neighbors. The students are given a form (Form A) with suggested categories and they are asked to fill in the two columns on the right of the Form. A typical answer is shown below.

Form A: Figuring out enduring human qualities

Category	Sub-Category	Emulating activities described by students in their own words	Qualities identified by students
Societal	Society	People help each other in times of distress such as cyclone, flood, fire, death in a family; they offer sympathy, food, and even shelter.	Empathy, Compassion, Helpfulness, etc.
	Religion	Student narration showed that faith in the Creator, encompasses all virtues.	Righteous, Kind, Caring, Forgiving, Possessing Humility, Truthful, Honest, Just, etc.
	Parents	Parents care for us; they look after all our needs, they forgive us if we make mistake, they work hard to earn their living, they do not cheat other people, etc.	Love, Dutifulness, Caring, Hardworking, Honesty, etc.

	Teachers	Teachers care for us; they help us in our studies, they are happy if we do well, etc.	Affection, Caring, etc.	Dutifulness,
	Festivities	People visit each other and take part in group activities during Eid, Puja, Mela, Weddings, Community sports and drama.	Friendship, Cooperation, etc.	Fellowship, Volunteering,
Curricular/ Extracurricular	Curriculum	Students reflect upon selected pieces from their textbooks, particularly in Bangla, English, Social Studies and Religious Studies from Class I onwards and their understanding sought.	Love, Patriotism, Kindness, Empathy, Respect for diversity, Respect for environment, Courage, Wisdom, Duty, Sacrifice, Justice, etc.	Gratitude,
	Academic work	We come to class regularly, listen to the teacher, follow school rules, study at home, etc.	Punctuality, Attentiveness, Discipline, etc.	Regularity, Dutifulness,
	Debating Club	We prepare as a team instead of only individually, help each other, apply reason with each other, encourage those who are shy, and take responsibility given by the team, etc.	Confidence, Appreciating viewpoints, Team spirit, Commitment, No tolerance of bullying, etc.	Articulation, differing, Respect
	Sports Club	We practice regularly, work as a team; follow team decisions, persevere for team performance, we compete against strong teams, etc.	Commitment, Hard work, Courage, Compassion, No tolerance of bullying, etc.	Persistence, Respect for opponents, Team spirit,
	English Language Club	We help each other, practice regularly, follow club rules, undertake regular practice to excel, etc.	Confidence, Commitment, Hard work, Striving for improvement/excellence, etc.	Articulation, Persistence,

	Volunteer- ing Club	We volunteer our services for others, work without personal benefit, think of others and act accordingly, etc.	Caring, Compassionate, Tolerant, Active involvement for others' well-being, etc.
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The next part in the training process is to guide them to building Self-Image.

Students are exposed to the concepts of virtues in two categories: Moral virtues and Professional qualities (Moral Character and Performance Character).

Students are then asked to think of persons they respect and then to state why they respect that person. They are then asked what virtues their parents, their teachers and in general, the society expect of them. Students are then asked to create self-image in the light of the following:

- Virtues in people they respect
- Virtues that are expected from them by parents, teachers and the society
- Virtues they practiced in different activities

The students synthesize their own answers to create individual Self-Image. They are given a Form (Form B) to record their own desire of Self-Image. The form is filled out by students. A typical form submitted by students is shown below.

Form B: Figuring Self-Image

Question	Response
What are the expectations of Parents, Teachers, and the Society from you about your behavior?	Truthful, Hardworking, Responsible, Disciplined, Respectful
Persons you respect and why?	Loving, Helpful, Just, Good in what they do
From your response to the above questions can you create your Self Image? List the Moral and Professional Qualities that you should have.	Moral Qualities: Honesty, Kindness, Responsibility, Gratitude, Respectfulness, Humility Professional Qualities: Hard work, Patience, Courage,

The Leadership Group of Character Education shares the lessons on Character Building with the respective Club members. In this manner, 250 students of the School Clubs (50 student members in each of the five Student Clubs) become associated with the training. The whole student body then is exposed to the training through association and permeation; 250 students constitute a large enough critical mass for spread of the concepts through examples and permeation.

Practicing Virtues

VAB is convinced that young people can be molded into possessing enduring character. But practice to a considerable extent and in a consistent manner is needed to cultivate the virtues into a habit.

There is an instructive example of practice in the life of Benjamin Franklin. He was a self-made man having only two years of formal schooling and who became a journalist, an author, a statesman, a scientist and an engineer. At the young age of twenty, Benjamin Franklin set out to practice deliberately a set of thirteen character virtues he considered important to be a man of high morality. The following is a list of the virtues with brief explanations as paraphrased from his Autobiography:

1. **Temperance** — Avoid drug and other abusive substances.
2. **Silence** — Avoid trifling conversation.
3. **Order** — Determine priorities of your activities.
4. **Resolution** — Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.
5. **Frugality** — Waste nothing.
6. **Industry** — Do something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.
7. **Sincerity** — Think innocently and justly; and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
8. **Justice** — Speak out when you see wrong being done by others.
9. **Moderation** — Do not hit back with extreme language or force even if you can.
10. **Cleanliness** — Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes, or habitation.
11. **Tranquility** — Ignore petty matters in life.
12. **Chastity** — Respect opposite sex.
13. **Humility** — Imitate prophets and philosophers to be humble.

Here is how Benjamin Franklin practiced the above virtues, in his own words: “My intention being to acquire the habitude of all these virtues, I judged it would be well not to distract my attention by attempting the whole at once, but to fix it on one of them at a time; and, when I should be master of that, then to proceed to another, and so on, till I should have gone through the thirteen; and, as the previous acquisition of some might facilitate the acquisition of certain others, I arrang’d them with that view, as they stand above.”

Practice Sheet for Character Development

Following the Benjamin Franklin model, the students are guided to the idea of practicing some simple virtues to make them habit. A practice sheet is provided where the students would note their success in acquiring the virtue, but more importantly, their failure to comply with the required practice. They would continue to maintain the record till there is no failure in a month. Some of these habits are:

- Regularity in class attendance
- No anger with parents
- No anger with schoolmates and no bullying
- Listening to the teachers with attention
- Greeting people when they meet and saying thank you when needed
- Do at least one act of kindness in a day, for example
 - help an aged person cross the street
 - help finding something lost by a person
 - give a smile to a passerby
- Record club activities in a logbook as a part of developing good habits

Impediments to the Practice of Character in Real Life

Like the virtues, there are vices, the other side of the coin. VAB is not naïve about this and deals with the issue directly in the form of a discourse during the interactive training:

We find you truly young persons of character. You know the virtues you would demonstrate but you must also know the vices that are bad and should be avoided. You know what is right and what is wrong and you shall choose the right as persons of character. And if you cannot figure out what is right and what is wrong discuss with others, your schoolmates, teachers, parents, people you respect, etc. Your predecessors also promised to be persons of character and when you look around, you know people have admirable character traits. They are loving, compassionate and would come out to help you.

But you look at the country as a whole. Our country is mired in corruption. There is a reign of muscle power. As citizens of the country, you go to a government office, nothing moves without a bribe. You go

to the court, there are agents waiting for your money to get you to a lawyer of his choice. You go to a hospital and there are agents who promise to get you admitted if you pay some money. You want to set up an industry, you go through a maze of tables with “helping hands” only if you pay them, even though they are employed to serve you. And why is this so? There is a chain of corruption from top to bottom. And why is this so? Every one holding every chair was once a student like you, showing admirable traits of character. Where are those persons? Well, they were the same persons like you are here now.

What would you be when you sit on those chairs? It had been the same story all this time. Would you just be the same?

Should it be the same? If you do not want it to be the same, you need to understand why it has been the same so far.

We explain the need for controlling the vices inherent in human nature. We explain how Greed takes precedence over character and how corruption has permeated in all segments of the society.

We emphasize that the society cannot be transformed without changes in the character of the individuals making up the society.

And they are the individuals who can lead the transformation.

Like all practices, you start early and start small. Resolve to do a few things right and make it a habit and gradually, as you move up in your life, continue the same practice.

You make the right decision as an individual.

As more of the individuals make the right decision, a critical mass of people making the right decisions will emerge and social norms will change.

- You want to be yourself. You do not want to be the other person.
- Make your choices to match the person you want to be
- And when everyone in the society makes the “right choice”, **the society changes!**

Ethical Dilemma and Ethical Tests

Difficulties in practicing character virtues have been known from ancient times, even for persons of character. Philosophers and thinkers puzzled over the idea and there is a vast literature on ethical dilemma and ideas about how to overcome them. The dilemma arises because the issues at hand are not clear; they are not easy, they are complicated; there are ambiguities; and there is scope for bias, prejudice or self-interest. We shall take up a few simple cases to illustrate the application of some selected Ethical Tests.

Eight Ethical Tests

The following 8 questions can help us make a good ethical decision in any situation:

1. The Golden Rule Test: Would I want people to do this to me?
2. The Truth Test: Does this action represent the whole truth and nothing but the truth?
3. The What-If-Everybody-Did-This Test: Would I want everyone to do this (lie, cheat, steal, litter in the school, etc.)? Would I want to live in that kind of world?
4. The Parents Test: How would my parents feel if they found out I did this? What advice would they give me if I asked them if I should do it?
5. The Religion Test: If I have religious beliefs, how do they apply to this action? What would a respected member of my religion advise? Are there any religious texts that I could draw on for guidance?
6. The Conscience Test: Does this go against my conscience? Will I feel guilty afterwards?
7. The Consequences Test: Might this action have bad consequences, such as damage to relationships or loss of self-respect, now or in the future? Does this harm someone? Might I come to regret doing this?
8. The Front Page Test: How would I feel if my action were reported on the front page of my hometown paper?

Back to the Basic: Develop the Right Habits

Our digression to vices and corrupt practices in the society was to bring to focus the complexities in the real world of work. We recommend that students become aware of different aspects of ethical dilemma to appreciate the problems in the future. For now, they need only to work on the following:

- Decision to be a person of character
- Resolution that one shall practice virtues to make them habits

Students have to be encouraged to win over the habits of vices that one can identify and be a person of character.

And everyone must remember that it is the ultimate edict of all religions.