

5-7-2007

# “Like Produces Like”: John Heyl Vincent and His 19th Century Theory of Character Education

Catherine Ganiere  
*Brigham Young University*

Scott L. Howell  
*Brigham Young University*

Richard Osguthorpe  
*Boise State University*

## “Like Produces Like”: John Heyl Vincent and His 19th Century Theory of Character Education

Catherine Ganiere, Brigham Young University  
Scott L. Howell, Brigham Young University  
Richard D. Osguthorpe, Boise State University

---

### Abstract

An examination of late 19th century writings about character development by popular educator and revered Methodist bishop John Heyl Vincent (1832–1920) sheds additional insight on early character education theory. Vincent is best known as the cofounder of the Chautauqua movement in 1874. However, his theoretical constructs for character development merit not only acknowledgment in the discipline’s official history but also further investigation and discussion by today’s scholars. The constructs identified from early writings suggest that effective character education occurs in both the home and the school and requires parents and teachers who model good moral character. This article posits the importance of a teacher’s moral character as the central idea of Vincent’s theory of character education, and it provides one example of how theories of character education at home transitioned to theories of character education at school during this important time period.

---

**D**uring the late 1800s and early 1900s, as America transitioned from an agrarian to an industrialized society, leaders struggled to preserve traditional values of character in the newly emerging society. Formal schooling became increasingly important during this period as a means of supporting and sustaining character education efforts in the home. John Heyl Vincent, cofounder of the popular Chautauqua movement, sought to provide a general education for the masses and through it develop “personal and social” character in the young. His early ideas and teachings on character development—even theoretical

---

*Catherine Ganiere is an instructional designer for the Department of Independent Study at Brigham Young University.*

*Scott L. Howell is the director of Evening Classes and an adjunct associate professor for the Department of Instructional Psychology and Technology at Brigham Young University. His research interests include assessment, measurement, and distance education.*

*Richard D. Osguthorpe is an assistant professor in the College of Education at Boise State University. His research interests include the moral dimensions of teaching and learning, moral education programs and curricula, and the pedagogy of educational foundations.*

---

constructs—provide an important perspective matched only by his better-known contributions to adult and continuing education.

Analysis of Vincent's writings on character education and development reveals three constructs: (a) character must be taught in the home, (b) as well as in school, (c) by teachers (including both parents and formal educators) who exemplify and possess good moral character. This article posits the importance of a teacher's moral character as the central idea of Vincent's theory of character education, and it provides one example of how theories of character education at home transitioned to theories of character education at school during this crucial time. Of particular interest is Vincent's belief that teachers must be of good moral character in order to teach moral character to their students. The purpose of this article, then, is to better understand the historical nature of this commonly held belief in the context of formal education and schooling. The first section of this paper provides some historical background on Vincent's life, the second section describes his teachings on character development and education, and the final section suggests implications for his work.

### **Vincent's Early Home Life and Education**

**J**ohn Heyl Vincent was born on February 23, 1832, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, to Mary Raser and John Himrod Vincent (Vincent, L., p. 7). Both of Vincent's parents were from Pennsylvania, but they met and married in Alabama, where his father's business prospered. His mother's opposition to slavery and desire to be closer to family persuaded his father to dissolve the business and relocate his family to Pennsylvania when Vincent was five years old (Vincent, L., p. 33). Vincent's mother manifested her religious piety through her charity, prayerful and humble nature, economy, neatness, fidelity, self-sacrifice, self-control, and the sincerity she exhibited in her daily life (Vincent, J., 1912, p. 75). Vincent professed that his mother's exemplary nature greatly influenced him, and throughout his life he acknowledged her as "[his] first teacher, [his] best teacher, and the inspirer of [his] life" (Vincent, J., 1912, p. 71), thereby showing the profound influence of his mother's character on his own.

Over the next few years, the family moved around Pennsylvania due to his father's struggle to find gainful employment. After 1844, his father opened a general store in Lewisburg, which was not as profitable as he had hoped, so he accepted a position as postmaster at Chillisquaque. Since his father held two jobs, Vincent helped by working in the store when not attending school (Vincent, J., 1910, p. 14). At the age of 15 Vincent taught school and continued to teach throughout his life. At age 20 (1852), his mother passed away and his father moved the family (Vincent's three siblings) to Erie, Pennsylvania, for better work opportunities, while Vincent went to Newark, New Jersey, to teach and pursue the ministry (Vincent, J., 1912, p. 72).

#### *Home Life*

His parents' daily Christian acts modeled for Vincent "a certain strength of character, [and] a powerful commitment to basic values" (Stewart, pp. 22–23; McClellan, p. 21). Vincent's Methodist upbringing influenced his own character development through basic Methodist tenets: acceptance of God, experiences with forgiveness of sins,

---

and living in a manner becoming a true Christian through conversion and showing Christ-like love toward others (Barclay, pp. 314–315). His parents embraced these principles. Strict in self-discipline and interested in Christian living, Mary Raser and John Himrod read scripture, prayed, sang hymns, and discussed religious teachings daily in their home.

Accordingly, they observed the practice of 19<sup>th</sup> century character development “by exhibiting a constant Christian virtue in their own lives and through daily readings and exhortations to children designed to increase piety and teach proper conduct” (McClellan, p. 20). Frequent discussions of Methodist doctrines on personal salvation, discipline, and holiness in his home also helped instill in Vincent a deep love for others and a desire to pursue a life of holiness and discipline (Vincent, J., 1912, pp. 74–75). Vincent’s religious upbringing and modeling his parents’ own character are certainly evident in the formalization of his ideas on character education and development.

### *Education and Schooling*

Due to his mother’s belief that God had consecrated him for His work—and Vincent’s own desire to further explore and teach Methodist doctrines—Vincent decided to join the Methodist ministry at age 18 (Vincent, J., 1912, p. 76). Although one of nine children, Vincent had with his mother “special and most impressive conversation and prayer” (Vincent, J., 1910, p. 185, 465). These intensely personal moments of teaching and communication with her taught Vincent the means and effects of living a self-disciplined, moral life, which he later viewed as integral to functioning as a positively contributing member of society. Vincent considered the home to be the primary location for instilling moral understanding. His mother modeled altruism, influencing his decision to gain an education and teach others. According to Vincent, his father’s discipline, integrity, study of books, and frank and loving watch-care exemplified true character. The importance of these examples is reflected in his belief that “the molds of character are laid during the first twenty years of one’s existence” (Vincent, J., 1890a, p. iii).

Although most Methodist families discouraged the reading of popular fiction, the Vincent family owned and read several classic and religious books (Vincent, J., 1912, pp. 73–74). Until he finished community school at age 14, his learning was “supplemented by required reading from his father’s highly valued library” (Vincent, J., 1912, pp. 73–74). This library enabled Vincent’s study of classical history and religious books, which aided in his own character development: he learned discipline, attention to detail, and proper oral and written expression, among other characteristics. By age 15, Vincent had read and studied almost everything in his father’s collection, from *Robinson Crusoe* and Pollock’s *Course of Time*, to Pope’s *Essay on Man* (Vincent, J., 1912, p. 74).

Being an avid reader, Vincent later actively applied these principles learned at a young age by seeking self-education rather than formal education [1857], which introduced him to various works by Emanuel Swedenborg (Vincent, J., 1912, pp. 78–79). His study of this 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher contributed to his belief that religion and daily life are inseparable and that all education—not just religious—is sacred. He truly believed and later advocated through the Chautauqua Literary Scientific Circle (CLSC) that education was the only way the individual and then society could be sanctified.

Methodist doctrines, including the pursuit of holiness, personal salvation, and proper personal ethic, became for him not only a personal concern but also the goal of his

---

social activism (Vincent, J., 1910, p. 1264). Vincent believed that he could sanctify society through his teachings and demonstrated his theory by living his life “for civilization, for better government, for a more thorough and symmetrical education, with a sense of responsibility for a better social order, for wiser education, having the spirit of self-sacrifice for the public good” (Vincent, J., 1910, p. 528).

In 1874, Vincent’s determination took form in his effort to improve Sunday school instruction within the Methodist-Episcopal Church. Through Sunday school education Vincent felt he could influence the masses and improve society: “Whatever the mysterious relations and interdependence of soul and body, education is the development of the individual to the end that he may secure a true character” (Vincent, J., 1890b, p. 13). His initial plan included inviting Sunday school teachers to an intense two-week program taught by religious authorities at Lake Chautauqua, New York (Vincent, J., 1885, pp. 24–25). The success of the first summer program led to its expansion to an eight-week course of study for any interested person, regardless of denomination.

Chautauqua’s initial success as a summer program indicated the demand for instruction and resulted in the subsequent establishment of CLSC in 1878, enabling adult learners and the parents of youth to continue learning year-round using a correspondence-course format. The Chautauqua movement continued to grow, ultimately augmenting the education of millions of Americans. Vincent believed that it was educated parents who could best influence a child’s development of personal and social character (Vincent, L., p. 138), and CLSC literature persuaded “members to be models . . . for Christian character for the new generation” (Kniker, p. 253). Vincent and his Chautauqua program helped “revolutionize both religious and secular adult education” (Scott, 1999, pp. 390–391; see also Simpson, p. 18). Vincent’s contributions to adult and continuing education are matched only by his manifold writings on character education and development.

### **Vincent’s Teachings and Theory**

**A**ccording to Vincent, character development occurs in various places and throughout a person’s life (Vincent, J., 1885, reprinted in 1971, p. 12). He believed that it was the interdependent influences of home and school that form character during the first 20 years of life. Most importantly, Vincent taught that teachers (or parents) must possess good moral character in order to teach moral character to their students (or children).

#### **Character Taught in the Home**

Vincent emphasized the importance of home being “the best school system ever devised” (Vincent, J., 1898, p. 3). As such, the parents become teachers and must have character in order to train their children in character development. The responsibility of parents includes training children “by word or action” in what Vincent proclaimed to be “the highest function on earth” (Vincent, J., 1887, p. 83). Parents’ influence through word and deed provides a child’s first encounters with education and the “object-lessons of the most effective character” (Vincent, J., 1887, p. 12). Vincent attributes what a child learns about character to his or her parents’ example and lessons: “There are teachers at home, and in every part of the home” (Vincent, J., 1890b, p. 28). In addition, the home

---

environment provides the atmosphere in which children are guided by their parents “in the pursuit of knowledge and in the development of character” (Vincent, J., 1898, p. 3).

The instruction a child receives in the home lays the foundation for his or her individual future life. Vincent states, “What young life makes of itself determines very largely what later life and old age are to be. The molds of character are laid during the first twenty years of one’s existence” (Vincent, J., 1890a, p. iii). Vincent’s goal was to uplift society and help build the character of civilization by building “personal and social character” in the young. Those skills identified by Vincent ranged from manners to morals, including

how to eat, how to drink, how to breathe, how to walk, how to run, how to play, how to obey, how to stop, how to wait, how to help, how to resist, how to reason, how to deny themselves—in a word, how to be self-governed in physical, intellectual, moral, and social life. They should have education by experience in all these things before they think of “going to school,” long before they are five years old. (Vincent, J., 1890a, p. 65)

Vincent would agree that instruction in “the home life makes or mars the growing character of the child” and the hope of civilization rests with “the future of the growing boys and girls of today” (Maule, p. 1). Home provides the place in which individuals develop character. He wrote, “If the essential qualities which penetrate all business relations are cultivated at home in early childhood, we shall have more honesty, more thoughtfulness, more economy, more stability, more generosity in every community” (Vincent, J., 1890a, p. 65).

However, Vincent knew that schooling in the home was not enough, stating, “home should constitute itself a right-hand helper of the public school” (Vincent, J., 1890b, p. 54). On another occasion he said that formal schooling “must supplement the best work of the best parents, and be a substitute where parental effort is lacking or defective” (Vincent, J., 1890b, p. 59). Vincent saw character education as a team effort that would require the best efforts of family, school, and community working together to successfully inculcate character in the young.

### *Character Taught in the School*

Vincent continued to emphasize throughout his life that a person develops character through a well-rounded education. When speaking of Abraham Lincoln, he said that Lincoln’s character was “a tribute to the patriot and a glorification of the type of schooling that produced him” (Vincent, L., p. 179). Vincent knew that the development of Lincoln’s character was attributable to the whole of those “conditions and special agencies” to which he experienced at home, in the classroom, and elsewhere. Vincent puts forth his somewhat formal theory of character development, and the important role of the art and science of education, with these words:

The art of education is the selection, application, and regulation of the conditions and of the special agencies which act upon human nature in the development of personal and social character . . . . The science of education is a systematized

---

knowledge of human nature, with a view to the understanding and use of the conditions and special agencies which operate in the development of personal and social character. (Vincent, J., 1890b, pp. 12–13)

While Vincent might agree that “education should not merely confer competence, it should also shape character” (Laney, p. 19), he would likely argue that education should first shape character and then attend to competence.

The structured environment of a school atmosphere, by its very nature, instills in students a sense of discipline. In the classroom setting, the act of disciplined study and learning in a rule-based setting helps train students to become master over self by disciplining will and developing character. Vincent believed that

True education is the education of the will . . . knowledge that one may have wisdom in the use of his will; and gives practice in self-direction and control that one may have a ready, steady, strong, and unflinching will . . . we must educate rational beings to think, choose, and act in a rational way. (Vincent, J., 1890b, p. 18)

Through formal schooling, an individual is continually fortified by discipline and “his character. . . receives a certain force . . . [that] he can the more easily do, or deny himself” (Vincent, J., 1890a, pp. 12–13). Vincent asserts “the secret of character” to be a “thorough discipline . . . on the great doctrine of will-force” (Vincent, J., 1890a, p. 227). Contemporary character educators and scholars have acknowledged anew the role that “will-force” has in defining character (Dalton and Henck, 2004, p. 4), and Vincent explains how character and will are developed and strengthened:

When one strengthens himself by reflection and resolution at a single point of his character he receives a certain force of resistance at every point. . . . He gets into the way of obeying. And it is a good way to get into. Every hour holds a chance for a fight against Self when a fellow has declared war and is bent on success. (Vincent, J., 1890a, pp. 12–13)

The strengthened individual—by reflection, resolution, and obedience—is then inspired to learn new subjects and skills, instilling “a growth of interest . . . a refining, elevating influence upon [his] character” (Ehrlich, G., p. 179). Hence, formal schooling then provides the “means of discipline in the highest qualities of character” and motivates the student to more learning—even lifelong learning (Vincent, J., 1885, reprinted in 1971, p. 4).

#### *Character as the Primary Qualification to Teach*

Vincent’s recognition of the school’s role in character development included more than simple instruction in the highest qualities of character. He taught that a teacher’s display of good moral character, even in seemingly benign actions, contributes to an overall school culture that affects the moral development of students: “dress and manners have teaching power” in concert with “the intellectual, moral, social, yea, even

---

the physical atmosphere which surrounds us” (Vincent, J., 1890b, pp. 34, 40). To administrators of multiple school boards he stressed that teachers should “be polite, neat, gentle as well as accurate in speech, and competent to teach by manners, tones of voice, and personal character as really as by direct class instruction” (Vincent, J., 1890b, p. 35). In this way, Vincent drew attention to the influence of a classroom’s moral environment, and he accentuated the importance of a teacher’s moral manner in helping students embrace character traits observed in their teachers and surrounds.

Vincent’s theory of character development rested on the belief that teachers expose students to new ideas through the “power of personal influence” (Vincent, J., 1887, p. 726). He maintained throughout his writings that those who wish to engage in the moral development of the young must first possess “personal character,” and then be encouraged “to hold the truth and to love it. . . . The man who would awaken and control an audience must himself be a reality, and the truth he uses must be to him a reality. *Character is everything*” (Vincent, L., pp. 179–180, emphasis added).

Character was everything for Vincent, and he believed it should be a prerequisite for teaching. Without it, a teacher could not effectively teach character to students—as a teacher is to “have seen the verities concerning which he is to testify. These must be inwrought into his personal character” (Vincent, J., 1883, p. 8). Most telling, and in his own words, a teacher must possess “mental, moral, and spiritual qualifications that he himself may have the kind of light he wishes to shed upon the pupils. . . . *Like produces like*” (Vincent, J., 1887, pp. 74–75, emphasis added). Put another way, Vincent’s job description for a teacher might read: “a man of character, with knowledge, moral conviction, and spiritual insight” to “perform a service affecting the . . . character of his pupils” (Vincent, J., 1887, pp. 74–75). Thus Vincent believed that teachers of character produced students of like character, positioning a teacher’s character as the paramount virtue in effectively developing character in students.

### Conclusions and Implications

Vincent’s theory and teachings shed important light on contemporary efforts to educate for character. First, they provide an example of how character education transitioned from the home to the school during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, showing the strong influence of religious doctrine and teachings on this transition. For Vincent, character education begins in the home and is supplemented later in the schools: “intelligent homes help intelligent teachers . . . render[ing] [their] services indispensable to the well-being of society” (Vincent, J., 1890b, p. 59). He theorized that personal and social character is developed during the first 20 years of life. He also suggested that character should be taught as part of a broad education that includes all truth—secular and religious. “The school has power, its power is slight unless it co-operates with other educating forces” (Vincent, J., 1893, p. 40). Vincent saw the whole of life—people and places, formal and informal, secular and religious—as the classroom and laboratory in which character is developed. Thus his teachings suggest more research is needed on the relationship between these “other educating forces” and the school’s character education efforts (especially in light of the increasing secularization of schooling).

---



Second, Vincent's theory and teachings have important implications for the practice of character development in institutions of higher education. While most of Vincent's writings about character education focus on teachers and students in the elementary and secondary grades, he also, along with others involved in the Chautauqua movement, considered higher education to be a character crucible:

College life is the whole of life packed into a brief period, with the elements that make life magnified and intensified, so that tests of character may easily be made. It is a laboratory of experiment, where natural laws and conditions are pressed into rapid though normal operation and processes otherwise extending over long periods of time are crowded to speedy consummation. Twenty years of ordinary life, so far as they constitute a testing period of character, are by college life crowded into four years. (Vincent, J., 1885, p. 174)

Vincent's idea of college as a character crucible, coupled with his teaching that the "molds of character" are engraved during the first 20 years of a person's life, suggests an interesting role for the practice of character development in higher education. Not only does he extend the potential influence of the school into the college years, but he also posits the college experience as having an important role in testing and refining that character. In other words, Vincent's argument appears to challenge various empirical studies that suggest a much shorter time frame for developing character (Peck & Havighurst, 1960) and a more diminished role for schools (Hartshorne & May, 1928–30), but it aligns with contemporary theories that suggest "higher education [has] a significant impact on students' moral and civic development" (Ehrlich, T., para. 17). His description of early moral development laying a "mold" to be filled later with character from the college crucible provides a fundamental shift in how researchers and practitioners might re-conceptualize their work at the college level in a way that places the tensions between theory, research, and practice in greater relief.

Third, and finally, Vincent emphasized the importance of a teacher's character in developing a student's character. He believed that there is a strong relationship between the moral character of a teacher and the moral development of a student, that teachers must possess the traits of character they hope to engender in the students they teach. It is a time-honored belief, with Aristotelian roots, and it relies on a host of old adages and sayings: "actions speak louder than words," "practice what you preach," etc., but it is a difficult belief to assess and validate empirically (Osguthorpe, 2005). Vincent's work provides one example of how this theory made its way into schools and offers historical context for a claim that is widespread in the literature related to the moral dimensions of teaching (Fenstermacher, 1990; Noddings, 2002; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; and Ryle, 1972). As contemporary theorists and practitioners argue, one of the great challenges in the field is "determining the most appropriate measures for assessing character outcomes" (Dalton & Henck, p. 3). Considering the pervasiveness of claims suggesting a teacher's moral character affects a student's development of moral character, Vincent's work suggests that more research—combining historical, philosophical, and empirical methods—is needed in order to determine just how great the putative effect might be.

---

The study of character education and its early American proponents is bolstered by an examination of the life and teachings of John Heyl Vincent. Vincent has done what playwright Richard Sheridan has written, “I leave my character behind me” (p. 230). Vincent leaves not only his noble character behind, but also important implications for the contemporary practice of character development and education.

### References

- Barclay, W. C. (1950). *Early American Methodism 1769–1844, history of Methodist missions*. New York: The Methodist Church.
- Dalton, J. C., & Henck, A. F. (2004). Introduction. *Assessing character outcomes in college*, 122, 3–6.
- Ehrlich, G. (1956). Chautauqua 1880–1900: Education in art history and appreciation. *The Art Bulletin*, 38(3), 179.
- Ehrlich, T. (2006). The impact of higher education on moral and civic responsibility. *Journal of College and Character*, 2. Retrieved May 1, 2007, from <http://www.collegevalues.org/articles.cfm?a=1&id=37>
- Fenstermacher, G. D. (1990). Some moral considerations on teaching as a profession. In J. I. Goodlad, R. Soder, & K. Sirotnik (Eds.), *The moral dimensions of teaching* (130–151). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Hartshorne, H., & May, A. (1928–30). *Studies in the nature of character: Vol. 1 studies in deceit; Vol. 2 studies in self-control; Vol. 3 studies in the organization of character*. New York: Macmillan.
- Kniker, C. R. (1969). *The Chautauqua literary and scientific circle, 1878–1914: An historical interpretation of an education piety in industrial America*. Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University.
- Laney, J. T. (1984). The moral authority of the college or university president. *Educational Record*, 65(2), 19.
- Maule, M. (1884). Education of women. *Woman’s tribute*, 1(5).
- McClellan, E. B. (1999). *Moral education in American schools and the shaping of character from colonial times to the present*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Nelson, J. (1996). A subtle revolution: the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle in rural midwestern towns 1878–1900, *Agricultural History*, 70, 663.
- Noddings, N. (2002). *Educating moral people: A caring alternative to character education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Osguthorpe, R. D. (2005). *On the relationship between the moral character of a teacher and the moral development of a student*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan. 2005.
- Peck, R. F., & Havighurst, R. J. (1960). *The psychology of character development*. New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Ryan, K., & Bohlin, K. (1999). *Building character in schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ryle, G. (1972). Can virtue be taught? In R. F. Dearden, P. H. Hirst, & R. S. Peters (Eds.), *Education and the development of reason* (434–447). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Scott, J. C. (1999). The Chautauqua movement: Revolution in popular higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 70(4)..
- Scott, J. C. (2005). The Chautauqua vision of liberal education. *History of Education*, 34(1), 41–59.
- Sheridan, R. B. (1998). *The school for scandal and other plays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Simpson, J. (1999). *Chautauqua: An American utopia*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
- Stewart, S. M. (1977). *John Heyl Vincent: His theory and practice of Protestant*
-

- religious education from 1855–1920*. Doctoral dissertation, Notre Dame University.
- Vincent, J. H. (1883). *The Sunday-school normal class*. New York: Phillips and Hunt.
- Vincent, J. H. (1885, reprinted in 1971). *The Chautauqua movement*. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press.
- Vincent, J. H. (1887, reprinted in 1907). *Chautauqua: A popular university*. XXXX: Yale University Library.
- Vincent, J. H. (1887). *The modern Sunday school*. New York: Phillips & Hunt.
- Vincent, J. H. (1890a). *Studies in young life: A series of word-pictures and practical papers*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls.
- Vincent, J. H. (1890b). *A study in pedagogy: For people who are not professional teachers*. New York: W. B. Ketcham.
- Vincent, J. H. (1893). *Brilliant selected from the writings of Bishop John H. Vincent*. New York: H. M. Caldwell.
- Vincent, J. H. (1898). *The church at home: A scripture lesson, hymn, and prayer for each day in the year*. New York: Eaton & Maine.
- Vincent, J. H. (1910). The autobiography of Bishop Vincent. *Northwestern Christian Advocate*, April–November.
- Vincent, J. H. (1912). How I was educated. *The Chautauquan*, June, 69–80.
- Vincent, L. H. (1925). *John Heyl Vincent: A biographical sketch*. New York: Macmillan Company.
- Yanikoski, R. (2004). Leadership perspectives on the role of character development in higher education. In J. C. Dalton, T. R. Russell, & S. Kline (Eds.), *Assessing character outcomes in college*, 122, 7–23.
-