Character Education in America's Schools

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Abstract

   Character education in American schools is experiencing a revival. Although the teaching of character waned from the 1960s through the 1980s, the rise in violent crime and a general feeling by the public that American children suffered a crisis in morals led to a resurgence of character education programs across the nation, with most states either mandating or supporting such education. Today, many schools are engaged in formal programs such as "Character Counts!" or the Heartwood Institute's "An Ethics Curriculum for Children." Other school systems use individually tailored programs. At the heart of most programs lie core principles such as honesty, respect, self-discipline, and perseverance. Parental and community involvement are also common components of the various programs. The Internet hosts numerous sites featuring character education ranging from bibliographies to web sites designed specifically for interactive use by children. Enormous responsibility is placed on teachers to provide an effective character education curriculum, but formal training in character education is limited.

Key Words: character education, values clarification, literature-based character education, character traits, life principle words, ethics curriculum, values statements

Overview and History of Character Education
in America's Schools

Character education has become the fastest growing school reform movement in the United States, according to Edgington (2002). Indeed, a perusal of the literature shows a growing concern with the issue of character education. The World Wide Web has a proliferation of sites devoted to the teaching of character education, from the United States Department of Education's calls for grant applications to sites with lessons plans for teachers to those designed to be accessed by parents of preschool and elementary school children (Marshall, 2003). Brown (2001) reports that 15 states mandate character education and 27 states receive grants from the U.S. Department of Education for issues related to character education. Some form of character education is believed to be taught in each of the 50 states (Clouse, 2001). The Character Education Partnership (2002) states that in June 2002, 14 states mandated character education through legislation, 14 states encouraged character education through legislation, 10 states supported character education but had no current legislation, and 11 states received federal grants to develop character education programs in their schools.

What is character education? Edgington (2002) states that the nature of character education itself is very subjective yet also quotes Thomas Lickona, "Character Education is the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue" (p. 113). Edgington further defines virtue as the set of core values on which a society must depend to persevere. Character education is not new. In fact, schools have been traditionally believed to be a cornerstone of character education from the earliest days of our country (Clouse, 2001; Edgington; Grater, 2002; Kristjansson, 2002; Leming, 2000; Milson, 2002; Milson & Mehlig, 2002). Clouse asserts that character education has been taught from time immemorial, then further states, "Character education is based on the universally accepted premise that adults know better than children what is proper and are therefore responsible for the acculturation of the children within their care" (p. 23). However, the history of character education in the 20th century has gone through several incarnations, falling out of favor in the 1960s through the 1980s. However, an increased interest in character education correlated with a rise in teen criminal acts both in and out of school (Minchew, 2002) and to the perception that irresponsible and destructive behavior is increasing (Williams, Yanchar, Jensen, & Lewis, 2003).

In the early days of our country, the teaching of character education was uncomplicated by separation of church and state issues. Clouse (2001) quotes from a 1931 book by King, *Fifty Hints and Helps in Character Education,* that

guided teachers of the 1930s and 1940s in teaching 31 qualities that compose good character. This book tells children that character is "what God and the angels know you are." Character education in general, according to Clouse, began to lose favor in the late 1930s and early 1940s for several reasons. A criticism of the harsh methods used to frighten the children, results of a survey of 11,000 students showing that character education had not affected their cheating behavior, a belief in the philosophy of social evolution, and the promotion of social adjustment all combined to defuse the impact of traditional character education programs. Kristjansson (2002) cites a plethora of possible causes of the decline of direct instruction in moral education, both in school and in the home, including *Sputnik* and the ensuing emphasis on science and technology, the hippie era denunciation of traditional values, and the interpretations of Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning which made the teaching of values seem developmentally inappropriate (Clouse; Kristjansson).

In the 1960s, the values clarification approach became more common (Clouse, 2001; Edgington, 2002; Milson & Mehlig, 2002). Values clarification is described as a process of allowing a child to clarify his own values without interference from another person. Milson and Mehlig note that it was believed that people experienced "values confusion" (p. 47). Thus it was important to teach people how to clarify their own values without pressure from outside sources. Sidney Simon of the University of Massachusetts and Louis Raths of the State University of New York developed values clarification techniques. During the 1970s, over 40 books dealing with values clarification were published. A practical handbook sold over 600,000 copies (Clouse). Values clarification is described by Edgington as a way of having students come to term with their own values systems. The students cite their preferences, reflect on them, and confirm or change their value choices. Teachers do not decide if the students' choices are correct. Williams et al. (2003) describe an example of a values clarification approach in use today. The Unified Studies program has been in place since 1975 in a Utah secondary school. This program takes a cross section of 65-75 students per year. They are given two entire days a week as part of a block program in which the various academic disciplines are integrated. Two teachers from different disciplines collaborate to teach this hands-on course. Lessons are described as real life and may involve problem solving and community building tasks such as hunting and stalking techniques, flower dissection, scientific writing, or windsurfing. Although the Unified Studies program was not originally conceived of as a character education program, but rather as an approach to instill a joy of learning, a long-term study of graduates of this program revealed that the effect of the program resulted in a clarification and internalization of personal values. Through interviews and

questionnaires, the recurring theme that teachers provided an environment conducive to the formation of desirable character traits emerged. Thus, the students experienced values clarification through active involvement in their learning, demonstrating that values were inculcated through life experience.

In the 1980s, Kohlberg's observations of Piaget's theories of child development, in particular the differing responses of older children from younger children to moral dilemmas, led to his development of six stages of moral development. His approach to character education was to present moral dilemma stories to the children, known as the moral judgment approach (Clouse, 2001). However, a widespread, growing concern with a rebellion against authority figures in general (Clouse) and a feeling that values clarification was detrimental to the whole area of character development (Milsom & Mehlig, 2002) lead to renewed calls for the direct teaching of character education in the schools. This was in contrast to the concept of character education during the 1980s. According to Cavazos (2002), President George H. Bush's secretary of education introduced the idea of adding values education into the schools whenever he spoke to groups. At the time, the idea was controversial because it was perceived to be imposing belief systems on children; this is the same period when bias-free textbooks were introduced in an effort not to influence young minds. Subsequently, during the rush to introduce direct instruction in character education in schools in the 1990s, schools were blamed for a general moral decline in young people because schools were believed to have "shirked their responsibilities for character education" (Milsom & Mehlig, 2002, p. 47). Leading figures such as William Bennett expounded on the need for character education in the schools. This, combined with support from the federal government, led many state governments and professional educational organizations to call for more direct teaching of character education. During the 1990s, creation of character education programs became a movement, fueled by a sense of crisis regarding the character of our young people (Leming, 2000).

Content and Approaches of Character Education Programs

The general dialogue about character education has resulted in a consensus that certain traits are desirable in a functional society. Traits such as honesty, kindness, fairness, respect, and responsibility are included in most lists of desirable traits. Edgington (2002) asserts that making societal changes has become an expectation of a teacher's duties. Many programs are being implemented in schools today and ready-made kits and programs are available. A popular method of inculcating character education into the curriculum is through the literature-based approach. Literature lends itself to the teaching of specific

moral dilemmas and the examining of specific character traits. Literature also spans a wide age span, from the ageless stories found in *Aesop's Fables* (Marshall, 2003), to the more complex issues in *The Old Man and The Sea,* by Hemingway (Minchew, 2002). Fralick and Beck (1997) have created an annotated bibliography of children's and young adults' literature. The list cites the ethical values addressed in each book, and appropriate grade levels are also given. This bibliography was edited by the journal *Teaching K-8.* The bibliography offers selections ranging from *The Little Red Hen* (cooperation, responsibility, K-12) to Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (justice, civic virtue, 7-12). Ryan and Bohlin (2001) recommend reading aloud to children every day, stressing the importance of choosing the finest in both adult and children's literature. The assertion is that literature discussions can help children identify desirable traits in the characters and help the students build empathy with the characters.

Minchew (2002) espouses the idea of teaching through the medium of sports literature. Sports literature, Minchew argues, "provides an avenue for values discussions" (p. 138). Minchew offers an undergraduate sports literature course and reports this venue "seemed especially to stimulate students' reading, discussing, and reflecting on the literature" (p. 138). Students who were normally reluctant to read reported a great enthusiasm for the sports literature. Minchew (2002) asserts that "sports is life speeded up…all of life's emotions appear in sports…in sports, life is crystallized and made intense" (p. 138).

An example of a literature-based program is the Heartwood Institute's "An Ethics Curriculum for Children," described as a literature-based approach which includes multicultural, read-aloud stories that teach ethical values to children (Leming, 2000). This program consists of three kits, each containing 14 trade books; seven character traits are dealt with by two books each. The books feature stories from many cultures and have a heavy emphasis on folktales, folklore, and fairytales. Of 42 books, only four feature white American characters. In this program, the concept of a character trait is introduced, a story is read to the students illustrating the trait, discussion follows, and an activity is performed by the students. The lesson is culminated by students writing about the concept.

Many schools are engaging in a formal program of character education such as CHARACTERplus, created in St. Louis, Missouri to unite the school, home, and community in a partnership to surround the children with character education (McKay, 2002). Created in 1988, this program now involves school districts in Missouri and Illinois, serving 450 schools, 20,000 teachers, and 400,000 students. McKay (2002) explains that the strength of the system lies in the design, promotion, and facilitation of the program, community support and resources, and evaluation of the program. Ten principles McKay

describes as being essential to the success of any character education program are (a) community participation, (b) character education policy, (c) identified and defined character traits, (d) integrated curriculum, (e) experiential learning, (f) evaluation, (g) adult role models, (h) staff development, (i) student leadership, and (j) sustaining the program.

Peterson and Skiba (2001) echo these principles as they examine ways to create school climates to prevent school violence. The tenets of parent and community involvement, the teaching of core values, and a proactive response to conflict resolution combine to form the basis of successful character education programs. Peterson and Skiba state that "parental involvement is positively associated with student success, higher attendance rates, and lower suspension rates" (p. 168-169). They further define specific traits to be instilled in children through character education programs as (a) self-respect, (b) a concern with other's feelings, (c) moral reasoning, and (d) values such as kindness, responsibility, and trustworthiness.

These traits are embedded in many character education programs such as "Character Counts!" Six pillars of character are at the heart of this program: (a) trustworthiness, (b) respect, (c) responsibility, (d) fairness, (e) caring, and (f) citizenship (Peterson & Skiba, 2001). The "Be a Character!" program of the Eagle Mountain-Saginaw Independent School District in Fort Worth, Texas teaches units on character traits such as citizenship, caring, and respect. The Curriculum Review (Character Counts, 2003) provides lesson plans to implement these traits.

Other theorists, such as Bulach (2002a, 2002b) recommend infusing the entire school and curriculum with character education. Memorization of poetry and of important historical selections such as the Gettysburg Address instill societal values in the child. Ryan and Bohlin (2001) recommend building a community of character by such methods as developing a school code of ethics. These are referred to as "values statements" by Peterson and Skiba (2001). Both embrace the notion that a schoolwide set of expectations is put in place, displayed prominently, used appropriately, and referred to frequently. Peterson and Skiba recommend direct instruction in the values statement to ensure that students fully understand the statement. They further recommend that students whose behavior exemplifies the values in the statement be publicly recognized. School bulletin boards proclaiming heroes, both in history and in the community, and school pride, evidenced by pride in the school environment and by school spirit such as school songs and mascots, all help to create a positive school climate (Brown, 2001; Ryan & Bohlin).

Brown (2001) expands on this sentiment by recommending using the library as a springboard for character education activities. Three steps are outlined to

begin this process; the first is to set a standard of behavior within the library. Examples include teaching about plagiarism and copyright laws. Second, the library environment should be infused with character education from the bulletin boards to morning announcements to special speakers. Third, the students should be taught the pleasures of volunteering. One example is students reading to nursing home residents or preschool age children. Tutoring, family fun nights, and wheelchair races are some other ideas proposed by Brown in which students can volunteer their talents. Fourth, publicize the students' efforts; let the students be a positive example for other students.

However, Bulach (2002a) cautions against simply using a character word of the month approach, especially if the same set of words are used year after year, creating boredom. Bulach contends that this approach is ineffective, but recommends that all people in a child's environment, from bus drivers to teachers to community members, model desirable traits. Bulach further recommends that the focus should be on behaviors rather than traits. While using the standard traits such as honesty, the focus is on the behavior, such as telling the truth, turning in money or items the students have found, and demonstrating that the student can be trusted. Under the umbrella of the trait of tolerance, students may refrain from making fun of students or try to understand students who are different or from another race. Forgiveness may be demonstrated by students accepting apologies from each other.

In fact, there appears to be a split between the "Word of the Month" type of character education instruction and the infusion of the entire school community approach. Hoge (2002), cites critics' arguments that the word of the month approach could be viewed as superficial. Hoge explores the connection between citizenship instruction and character education, noting a decline in such citizenship activities as voting, participation in civic activities, and a lack of social unity coupled with rising cultural diversity. In light of this, Hoge asserts that students should be taught the relationships between our ideals of citizenship and character development within the social studies curriculum. By examining current events such as the internment of prisoners after 9/11 and comparing it to the internment of Japanese Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor during World War II, students can be lead to use the principles of character education to bridge present and past events and to examine the actions of historical figures for the application of these principles (Hoge).

Bulach (2002a) notes that students engaged in the JROTC program exhibit more positive behavior on a measurement of 16 character traits. The reason proposed by Bulach is that character traits are modeled by instructors and older cadets. In fact, peer pressure, bonding, and the building block approach of the program in which older cadets serve as role models contribute to the success of

the program. Bulach asserts that the JROTC program is a behaviorally based, as opposed to a cognitively based, character education program. Responsibility can be reinforced by such behaviors as arriving in class on time or completing homework. Rather than studying the word of the month, the JROTC students observe and reinforce behavior by peer pressure. Bulach contends that in this program, everyone is engaged in shaping the behavior of cadets. He further asserts that measures of JROTC students' behavior indicate that behavior can be taught through a program such as JROTC, whereas a curriculum of isolated instruction in a character trait is prone to failure.

Obstacles and Implications

A multi-year inquiry into students' attitudes towards character education conducted by Revell (2002) indicates that children are complex beings who are influenced by the world they inhabit. In a study of magnet and non-magnet schools in Chicago where the students received almost identical character education, the students in non-magnet schools were more cynical towards the program, becoming increasingly cynical towards the message as they progressed through the grade levels. Students at both types of schools criticized the character education program, but in different ways. Students in magnet schools tended to be offended that it was thought they needed to be reminded to have these values, while students in non-magnet schools saw a conflict between the character education message and the reality of the world around them. Revell states that the belief that schools play a key role in forming character and values may be overly optimistic.

These various efforts at character education, however, "place enormous responsibility on teachers" (Milson & Mehlig, 2002, p. 47) who are identified as the crucial factor in the development of character. The effectiveness of any character education program rests on effective implementation of the program. Teacher commitment is at the core of any effective program (Peterson & Skiba, 2001). Bulach (2002b) cautions, however, that when the major responsibility for the implementation of character education falls on the teacher or counselor, the program may become less effective, since teachers or counselors do not have the authority to make other teachers follow the program. Thus, implementation may vary from teacher to teacher. Teachers' own sense of efficacy may also influence how effectively teachers implement a character education program. Milson and Mehlig note that Bandura explained teacher efficacy as consisting of two constructs: personal teacher efficacy, or how a teacher views his or her own abilities as a teacher, and general efficacy, or how a teacher believes that such issues as I.Q., family background, and school conditions can be

overcome. How efficacious a teacher feels about teaching character education is a result of a combination of both constructs. Milson and Mehlig designed an instrument to measure teachers' own sense of efficacy for teaching character education. Their results suggest that teachers feel confident about their ability to teach societal values with certain caveats. That is, there are students the teachers feel less confident about reaching, often, Milson and Mehlig contend, those students who most need the guidance. Brown (2001) asserts, "lack of character is nurtured at home and can't easily be countered by any character program" (p. 20). Bulach (2002a, 2002b) notes that, because of the breakdown of the family, more children enter school without effective training in character and behavior. Peterson and Skiba note that the behaviors of chronically disruptive children may not be affected by character education programs, though socially adjusted children may be reinforced for their behavior. Revell (2002) notes the lack of consensus about the effectiveness of character education programs, noting that much research in the field has been done by the developers of the programs themselves.

Grater (2002) notes the sense in our society that some things, such as bullying, are meant to be and cannot be changed. Peterson and Skiba (2001) echo this sentiment, noting that bullying is often ignored and tolerated, causing many victims to believe nothing can be done. Further, many students believe victims are partly to blame. Bulach (2002b) notes a slight difference between students' and teachers' reports of student behaviors because much of the bullying behavior tends to occur in places where the teacher is not present, such as bathrooms. However, Bulach notes that bullying behavior is thought to be a major cause of the increase of violence in public schools and that it is becoming an increasing problem in the workplace as well, noting the violent incidents in schools such as Columbine High School and Paducah, Kentucky in relation to mass killings in the workplace.

Milson and Mehlig (2002) report that teachers receive very little training in the teaching of character education. They report, however, that teachers who receive their training at a religiously affiliated institution report more confidence in their ability to impart values. Perhaps surprisingly, even these teachers report less confidence in dealing with children who exhibit character deficiencies, the children who should profit the most from character education. Williams et al. (2002), note that most teachers are not trained to think of tying character education to subject matter or in how to get students into realistic situations in which they can learn by character building experiences. Williams et al. quote a teacher of the Unified Studies program who asks what education classes ever address the dreams of new teachers who want to change the lives of their students for the better or trains teachers to make these dreams a reality.

Milson and Mehlig note that although there is support for the concept of character education for preservice teachers, there is little agreement about the methods or curriculum needed to accomplish this goal.

Teachers, however, do teach character, both good and bad, by example in the actions they take or refuse to take. Grater (2002) notes the difficulty in overcoming ingrained teacher behavior and reacting appropriately in the heat of the moment. Barlow (2002), coining the phrase "teaching by refusal," describes how he refused to show a video of a piranha snake eating a goldfish. He then goes on to recount the story of a wrestling coach who bit off the head of a live sparrow. This was done during a team trip, just for fun. The coach was at a loss to understand the uproar this incident caused. Barlow, however, states, "we teach character and morality by our daily conduct…we demonstrate it, not in instructional units, but again and again in the actions of our daily lives" (p. 48). We teach, he says, by those things we refuse to do.

Recommendations

Character education is a complex issue, one that has been wrestled with for many generations. The values and norms of behavior are passed from one generation to the next and the schools are charged with a great responsibility in this area. Although there is a general consensus that schools must do more to teach Character Education, there is little national or even statewide consensus into how teachers should approach this task. In perusing the literature and research into this topic, several themes have emerged. First, in an effective program, the community, schools, and parents are all engaged in the same effort. The entire environment from school bulletin boards to commercial billboards sport the same message, and wherever the child looks, the message is the same. Adults model exemplary behavior, and children are led towards appropriate behavior and recognized and rewarded for exhibiting such behavior. This type of coordination requires leadership, organization, training, and commitment of all those involved.

Although there are many commercial products available to schools in the area of character education, there remains a serious deficit of training programs at the university level into how to effectively teach character education. Many commercial programs boast of in-service training in the use of their program, and organizations such as the National Center for Youth Issues in Chattanooga, Tennessee conduct conferences which provide inspirational speakers and opportunities for training in youth issues. Yet there is a prevailing sense that many teachers and administrators stand alone in their quest to teach an effective character education program.

To achieve the goals of inculcating our youth with core values such as honesty, perseverance, and integrity, universities must accept the challenge of teaching preservice teachers how to implement character education without stumbling into the legal morass of proselytizing one's own religious beliefs. Preservice teachers could examine both the commercial programs available and the successful district-wide programs currently in place throughout the country. Further, it is evident that school districts which embrace a district-wide program that coordinates individual school's activities with other schools in the district and with the community in general offer the greatest hope of a successful and sustaining program. Therefore, it is imperative that parents, schools, and the wider community come together to determine the code of ethics the next generation will hand down to its children.

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