[WHAT IS CHARACTER EDUCATION]

Research Project Completed in Partial Fulfillment
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The Sage Colleges

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Introduction and Literature Review:

What is character education? What are the benefits of implementing such a curriculum? Has it been found to increase the prosocial behaviors of students in the classroom? How does a teacher, school, or school system teach character? What is the opinion of teachers on the use of character education strategies? What are the objectives of such curricula and which values of character are to be taught? Most important, what are the effects of these approaches on school-age subjects? Are there positive effects on behavior, attitudes, and self-esteem? The issues raised by these questions will be addressed in the following brief literature review of current research studies found in professional journals of education.

Values, character and moral education are terms that are often used interchangeably.

In the 1990s, the growing popularity of values or character education programs can be attributed to contemporary social issues such as working and one parent families, divorce, and increased violence and disruptive behaviors in school. Character education programs generally seek to improve behaviors, teach manners, and promote responsibility, cooperation, civil duty, self-esteem, respect and so on. Why should schools involve themselves in what can be a controversial endeavor, the transmitting of values to students? After all, there have been controversies in the media regarding sex education, drug and alcohol education programs, and school prayer. It must be pointed out that there is no such thing as an entirely values-neutral education. Schools and teachers model character everyday, either intentionally or by default. It is part of the “hidden curriculum” that is conveyed to students through acts as diverse as rule making and enforcement, cooperative grouping, discussing current events, reading literature, or using multiculturalism, among many other things. A recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup
Poll reported that 69% of the public thinks their communities could agree on a basic set of values to be taught in public schools, and 90% support teaching of universal or core values such as honesty, tolerance, and democracy. (Phi Delta Kappan, 1993)

Character education holds, as a starting philosophical principle, that there are widely shared, pivotally important core ethical values (such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility and respect) that form the basis of good character. (Lickona, 1993) Eminent philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, John Locke and John Dewey, along with more contemporary educators such as Kohlberg, Leming and Lickona, have articulated educational insights of enduring value to this topic. They were unanimous in assuming that adults, as either parents or teachers, should have authority and responsibility for shaping the character of children. In the 1960s, Lawrence Kohlberg advanced the theory of stage development of social and moral reasoning. Two strategies of the 1960s and 70s were values clarification and the moral dilemma approach. These were based on Kohlberg’s theory that as an individual progresses through the stages of moral reasoning, an indirect influence on behavior across situations is exerted. (Richards et al, 1992) Very little discussion has dealt with the demonstrated effects of these strategies on children. However, the use of moral dilemma discussions was found to advance a student’s moral reasoning stage to a higher one. (Kohlberg, 1981) Three things must be present in a classroom for moral stage progression to occur: controversial dilemmas, differing moral development stages, and Socratic questioning techniques. (Lickona, 1992)

Thomas Lickona, professor of education at SUNY Cortland, and operator of the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs (Respect & Responsibility), has reported on the success of character
education programs from across the country. The Child Development Project (CDP) in San Ramon, California, is likely the most ambitious and well-researched. Supported by an annual million dollar grant, CDP is by far the most extensive character education program in recent years. (Lickona, 1996) The following five components have been implemented in the three elementary schools that have participated as the intervention group for the study.

Cooperative learning; using children’s literature to develop empathy for others; exposing students to a variety of prosocial examples; involving students in helping relationships such as cross-age tutoring; and developmental discipline, aimed at fostering students’ moral reasoning and self control made up the CDP’s comprehensive school-based approach to character education. Statistically significant differences were found in classroom and playground behavior, social problem solving skills, and commitment to democratic values between the program and comparison schools. (Battistich et al, 1989)

A 1994 survey gauged the attitudes of teachers toward teaching values/character in the public schools. (Cheek and Parker, 1994) Twenty-seven Kindergarten teachers from rural West Virginia were surveyed and it was found that the majority was in favor of teaching character, using both implicit and explicit methods; those opposed to such teaching cited insufficient time as the reason.

A good case study of a character/values education intervention curriculum is found in Hogan’s research (1996). It was designed to change students’ sense of responsibility in regard to maintaining the classroom, completing homework, and communicating between home and school. Hogan, a language arts teacher for a fourth grade class in an urban
magnet school, taught the core value of responsibility in the following ways: presenting moral dilemmas for class discussion; a literature unit on heroes and heroism; cooperative grouping; class generated rules; and a community service project. At the conclusion, a student survey revealed that 100% of students (14/14) viewed themselves as more responsible after the intervention.

Abrams (1988) compared the values and value stability of emotionally handicapped and normal adolescents to find support for the idea that self-identity relies on a stable value system. It was asserted that the emotionally handicapped teenagers would have greater value confusion and less stable self-identity. It was found that very few values were ranked as significantly different by the two groups of emotionally handicapped and one group of normal teenagers. Value stability was measured by rho correlations (test-retest reliabilities). The difference in value stability was small.

Other studies explored the effects of community service on students' sense of civic responsibility (e.g., Rutter and Newmann, 1989); another used Kohlberg's theory and Socratic questioning techniques (e.g., Krogh, 1985). It is clear from the preceding summary of the character education literature that the body of research is varied and somewhat lacking in congruity.

It is apparent when reviewing the literature that there is a plethora of testimonials in support of character/values education, but there is a lack of solid, true research data to prove its merits. However, many schools across the country attempt character education
in their own way. The Cobb County School District in Marietta, Georgia is one such district that has since the fall of 1997 implemented a program that utilizes a district-wide “Word of the Week,” (a new value), classroom meetings, cooperative groups in place of competitive activities, and character-laden stories. The schools in which data for the following research project was collected set forth mission statements that utilize the philosophy of character education.

Method:

A survey regarding character education was randomly distributed in two elementary schools in the Cobb County School District in suburban Marietta, Georgia. Each survey consists of three parts. The first part of the survey required short, written answers from the respondents. Three questions were used to determine: 1) in what ways character education was implemented; 2) effects on teacher-student relationships; and 3) the impact, if any, on relationships among the staff.

The second part of the survey used a Likert-scale for rating the frequency of positive behaviors seen in response to character education. Fifteen items probed for various evidence regarding sportsmanship, respect for others and their property, and understanding of the character words of the week. The third part of the survey asked respondents to add any other comments or insights they had about the character education program.

Teachers, administrators, and all other staff members were invited to participate by completing the survey. However, only thirty surveys were made available to each school. The first elementary school received the surveys in May 1998 and disclosed to its staff
that the survey was being used for a graduate school project; the second school, which received the surveys in June 1998, was not informed. Each school is comparable in terms of student enrollment (498 vs. 726), test scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and income levels of students’ families (55.9% vs. 64% eligible to receive free/reduced lunches). Respondents were given two weeks to return their opinions.

Results:

Sixty surveys were distributed in all to staff members of both schools. Twenty-eight (28), or 47%, were returned completed. Kindergarten and first grade teachers make up 28.5% of the total teacher response, while second and third grade teachers account for 25%, and fourth and fifth grade teachers are 18%. 28.5% of the completed surveys are either from administrators, paraprofessionals, or did not indicate a grade level. The survey return rate is somewhat low. This is most likely due to the voluntary nature of the study and the fact that the surveys were distributed at the end of the school year, when teachers are ‘hit’ with much paperwork.
The implementation practices of the teachers using character education was assessed in the first part of the survey. The written answers were generalized into eight categories of practice:

1. Word of the Week- displayed on outside school sign; given each morning on the P.A. system .............................. 17 or 61%
2. Class Discussions .......................................................... 9 or 32%
3. Wall Displays/Calendar Time........................................... 9 or 32%
4. Recognition/”Caught Being Good”..................................... 4 or 14%
5. Stories/Character-laden Literature.................................... 1 or 3%
6. Journal writing.............................................................. 1 or 3%
7. Weekly vocabulary word................................................ 1 or 3%
8. Not used much/at all........................................................ 1 or 3%

*Many of the respondents listed one or more of the above activities, therefore, the percentages add up to exceed 100%.

It is evident from the above data that few teachers go beyond what the school sign and morning announcements do to promote character education. When teachers did venture beyond, they most often used class meetings in conjunction with bulletin board displays, calendar time morning activities, or recognizing it publicly when a student is “caught” emulating the character word. 14% used the words to recognize students’ positive behaviors, such as by use of a bulletin board. (“Sam was caught being responsible when he asked what homework he’d missed”) Only a few teachers synthesized the character words into reading and writing activities (9%).
Teachers were next asked to evaluate their relationships with students in light of character education throughout the 1997-98 school year. Again, the written responses were generalized into six categories:

1. Little impact/cannot detect........................................ 7 or 25%
2. Improved behavior................................................... 5 or 18%
3. Provided common language........................................ 5 or 18%
4. Recognized attributes............................................... 6 or 21%
5. Realized self as role model......................................... 2 or 7%
6. No response............................................................ 3 or 10%

Five of the twenty-eight participants were able to assert the positive effects of character education in improved behavior, and easier conflict solving. However, ten of the respondents either did not respond or felt there was little or no effect.

As for the effect of character education on staff relationships, 36% indicated no effect; 32% perceived positive effects, mostly due to raised awareness; and 32% had no response.

The second part of the survey contained a likert scale for rating fifteen items in terms of student behaviors after a year of character education. (See attached survey) As is common with most likert scale surveys, responses tend to remain in the middle, unless the respondent feels very strongly that the behavior is extreme. The likert scale allowed the participants a range in responses from Rarely (1), Sometimes (2), As often as not (3), More often (4), and Almost always (5).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>% Rarely</th>
<th>% Sometimes</th>
<th>% As often as not</th>
<th>% More often</th>
<th>% Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Peer Respect</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Property</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teacher Respect</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. School Res</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sharing</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Working</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Refraining</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Listen well</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Solve conflict</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Sportsmanship</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Vocab.</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Teacher Character</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Staff</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Parents welcomed</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Parent support</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thirteen of the 28 educators participating in the character education survey offered additional comments about the program used in Cobb County. Once more, their remarks were generalized and grouped into the following:

1. Needs a framework, need training, more time .......................... 9
2. Important endeavor; a good start; like it .............................. 5
3. Teachers already included it; already good role models... 3
4. Little effect evident.................................................................... 3

Discussion:

While there have been many individual and separate attempts to facilitate character education throughout the country, there has not been one overriding guide as to how such a program can be implemented to produce the greatest effects on students’ prosocial behaviors. From the surveys completed in Cobb County, many issues can be quickly identified. Since the program is little more than one year old, many respondents found any effects to be too subtle to claim success. Others gave their wholehearted support to the program, but felt it lacked a tangible framework. Many commented on the need for guide books. It was also shown that an increased parent component would be favored. Still others were confused as to how to incorporate the program into any already busy schedule.

Some positive outcome of the character education program was an increase in the recognition of positive student behaviors. On the wall of the first school was a “Caught Being ______________________ (honest, caring, diplomatic, etc.)” bulletin board with students
names highlighted. From the likert scale responses, seven school behaviors emerged with the rating **more often than not**:

- **#12** Teachers display good character .......................................................... 54%
- **#5** Sharing ................................................................................................. 39%
- **#4** Students respect school property ......................................................... 32%
- **#8** Students listen to one another ............................................................... 32%
- **#3** Respect is shown to teachers ................................................................. 29%
- **#10** Good sportsmanship ............................................................................. 29%

It should be noted that item #7 - students refrain from picking on each other - received 29% **more often than not** tally, but also the largest **rarely** count at 14%. This is an area of child behavior that teachers should further address in the classroom.
Conclusion:

Character education needs to develop a more coherent view that can integrate the available research, provide focus to the movement, and guide curriculum planning and research in a way that yields cumulative knowledge regarding the schools’ role in fostering character. (Leming, 1993, p70) Although there were a few studies each for the elementary, secondary, and undergraduate levels, that assessed the effects of values intervention programs, I found none that measured their impact on actual discipline and disruptive behavior changes. The various surveys, interviews, and questionnaires used in these studies evaluated attitude, opinions, values, and cognition. Most relied on self-reporting. Perhaps future researchers should incorporate data concerning disciplinary actions or time lost to disruptive behaviors in their studies. Also, surveys should be expanded to include not only teachers and students, but parents as well. The subjects used in the research studies thus far have included children from suburban, moderately affluent school districts. Future research into character/values education must make an effort to make sampling more randomized and diverse, so that results may be generalized to the larger population of school age children.

It may also be that a “one size fits all” approach to character education is unrealistic. What may work in an urban setting may not be appropriate for rural. Although there is an insufficient number of studies into the effects of various character education interventions, I personally am in favor of such efforts. From the study of undergraduate psychology students in the Ries study (1992), it is evident that the curriculum is correlated to an advancement in moral stage reasoning. From my own
experiences, I can say that a college level ethics course significantly increased my awareness of, and opportunities to reflect on, value-laden issues. This type of learning can be modified for use in elementary and secondary social studies classrooms. In addition, values education programs share an emphasis on cooperative group work, community service, multiculturalism, and open discussion brought about by values scenarios. These are endeavors that benefit students, schools, and beyond.
References


Cheek, M. & Parker, C. (1994). The effectiveness of teaching values implicitly as compared to teaching values both implicitly and explicitly at the kindergarten level: teachers' perspectives. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 372 863)


