

Special Topics in Education: Current Issues in Education

Character Education and Its Effect on
the Moral Fiber of Youth

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Exactly what is character education? How does one go about giving a definition? It is a catch-all term that integrates ethics, moral, life skills, one's function and place within the community, school, and problem-solving abilities with other individuals. Character education tends to be broad sweeping in its application, and one would have a difficult time in attaching a precise definition because of its multi-faceted aspects (Otten, 2002).

An Explanation

In areas of morality, individual and societal dimensions are addressed and how one goes about in developing a standard of right and wrong. The teachings of Jesus, Confucius, Plato, and Aristotle give clear examples regarding specific virtues that are commendable in our modern society, and how to go about restoring them (Algera and Sink, 2002).

Civic education inculcates the opportunity to become an active citizen for good in the community, studies regarding how our civil rights were developed, and the principles and values that make for a stronger republic. Opportunities are given in classroom lessons, in addition to outside, practical experiences.

Basic societal attitudes and values for the good of the community are identified and taught in such a way so that all the parts are connected together into a cohesive whole; mind, attitudes and actions are incorporated in a holistic way. Moral meaning and development are saturated in the classroom so that students will be shaped in all aspects of their character (Otten).

So exactly what is it about character education that has caused a resurgence in recent years? Has society lost its moral bearings so much so that culture honestly does not know right from wrong anymore? Is there a growing trend to seek truth and honestly make a difference in the lives of our children, and maybe even our own? Is it possible that the increasing moral decline can, in some part, be stemmed, and possibly be reversed? There are some basic questions

that should be asked regarding character education to see if it is a valid educational program capable of changing the youth of society for the better.

What are the historical precedents for character education?

From a historical placement, American moral education began with our nation's first settlers; the freedom to worship and raise their children according to the dictates of their conscience, as well as according to the Scriptures, was of paramount importance. The Bible was their primary text, and their code of morality was based soundly upon it. Thus, a foundation of moral education, character training if one pleases, was passed down from generation to generation for over 200 years. The common school expanded their teaching of moral education, and incorporated aspects of republican government training, ideas in relation to the Protestant work ethic, the ideals of being a good citizen, as well as the opportunity of abundance and economic opportunity. Although the predominantly Protestant view of morality persisted, training was given from both historical perspectives, in addition to morality stories (Algera and Sink).

Whose values will be taught?

Herein lays the sticky issue, especially for educational institutions. Concerns are often brought up by those who believe that values which are non-reflective of the community will be the curriculum of indoctrination. But of what benefit would this be to the community, if the shared values found to be true of the community as a whole were not taught? The values that should be taught by the character education curriculum should be in direct harmony with the values that are inculcated in the home (Otten).

What is the training's core values?

According to University of Illinois Extension, located at <http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/SchoolsOnline/charactered.html>, their stated purpose is to assist young people in the following areas:

- Develop good self-esteem as a product of responsible behavior
- Assume responsibility for their actions
- Know "right" from "wrong"
- Respect the rights of others
- Maximize their use of time and talents
- Work cooperatively with others
- Develop decision-making and problem-solving skills
- Use self-discipline to achieve goals
- Resist negative peer pressure

Their website states that more than 5,000 teachers and 93,000 students have attended character education training.

According to Cletus R. Bulach (2002), associate professor of Department of Educational Leadership and Professional Studies at the State University of West Georgia, Carrollton, a survey was conducted in 1997-98 in the surrounding communities near Atlanta, Georgia, to come to a determination of those character traits which were most valued by the community and should be implemented as part of the curriculum in the local schools. In the survey, he interviewed parents, teachers, and members of the clergy and obtained their feedback. Those areas which parents and teachers felt most importantly about were, in order of importance, 1) respect for self, others, and property; 2) honesty; and 3) self-control/discipline. The clergy felt that the issues of most importance were 1) perseverance and diligence; 2) motivation; and 3) empathy.

The remaining areas were cooperation, responsibility, dependability, and accountability; integrity and fairness; kindness; forgiveness; perseverance, diligence, motivation; compassion

and empathy; courtesy and politeness; patriotism and citizenship; tolerance of diversity; humility; generosity and charity; and sportsmanship. As an educator, I can see nothing wrong with training in these areas, as they contribute to the respect and better treatment of mankind.

What is the success of character training programs in improved behavior?

According to research completed in 1997, many schools with successful character education programs have observed fewer disciplinary referrals for misbehavior, improved school attendance, fewer student drop-outs, and higher performance scores on standardized achievement tests. If schools become welcoming, supportive places for students, then those same students stand a greater degree of being in attendance, focused on their work; as such, overall achievement is likely to improve (Otten).

Dr. Bulach found that program implementation for everyone in the school community would be well worth the time to incorporate. Bullying, violent outbreaks would decrease, because students will be more sympathetic, tolerant, kind, compassionate, and forgiving. In the same manner, faculty/staff would be model examples to follow in their incorporation of the traits. Improvement in the climate and culture of the school is likely to occur. With these improvements in student behavior and school culture, the result should be improved student achievement and test scores, as well (Bulach).

According to Gloria Rambow Singh (2001), 90% of students that she surveyed showed increased understanding of the six character traits five months after having been taught. Class behavior improved, misbehavior occurred less frequently and was unlikely to escalate as the character vocabulary was used to resolve a problem. Her experience was that her class was calmer, and more positive. In addition, a higher moral code was adopted by the students in conflict resolution; the qualities were taken home and affected the home situation, not just left in

the classroom. Her feelings were that “character education cannot resolve all the world’s evils, but it can improve classes and give students skills needed to become successful as adults.”

In another real life example, Bob Hassinger (2002) of Halifax Middle School in Pennsylvania incorporated his “Discovery Process” in place seven years ago. The results have been staggering: in-school suspensions dropped 82%; out-of-school suspensions dropped 66%; fights cut 50%; drugs have vanished, and discipline referrals have changed from behavior-related to homework and accountability issues. His groups are diverse, made up of natural leaders, good in athletics, and those with a “good moral compass.”

Why is Character Education reemerging?

A multiplicity of factors explains this question. Among many reasons are increased violence, increasing voter apathy on the political circuit, and a lack of interest of the community’s residents. Character education integrated into the school community is a strategy to help re-engage our students, deal with conflict, keep students on task in the learning environment, and reinvest the community with active participation by citizens in political and civic life (Otten).

What are some perceived problems with implementation?

According to Linda McKay (2002), director of CHARACTERplus, in an article entitled “Character Education with a Plus”, she enumerated several areas that are essential, based on thirteen years of data. These are some of the areas that I perceive to be difficulties in implementation.

- Curriculum integration: how can the traits be incorporated at all levels?
- Evaluation for effectiveness: are regular evaluations conducted to determine if the desired results are being achieved?
- Adult role models: are there adults who will live what they say and will model them systematically and intentionally, so the program will not fall apart?

- Staff development: is there significant time and resources allocated to create and implement on an ongoing basis?
- Student leadership: are there enough students that can be involved in the planning, implementation, and corresponding activities?
- Program sustaining: is there a high level of commitment, adequate funding, and networking opportunities for the teachers who are implementing the training?

My perspective on application and concluding thoughts

Character training is needed to restore the lost moral fiber of our nation. Can it take us back to where we used to be? One can hope and do what is needed to make a difference. As an educator, I seek to make a difference in my classes through personal modeling, explaining what I believe Jesus teaches in His Word. I base the principles of character education solidly on the foundation of the Bible; in that, I believe that I am making a difference with my students' lives as they prepare for the future.

References

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