

Character Education: What Is It, How Does it Work, and How Effective is it?

For Policy Makers, Based on Emerging Research

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In an era of “high stakes testing,” policy makers face a daunting task: exactly which educational practices should they embrace in order to produce the desired results. Adding to this dilemma is that even the concept of “desired results” becomes a debatable issue. On one side, federal legislation demands that improved student performance become the criterion for instructional success: on the other, advocates for “social and emotional intelligence” point out that our schools truly have a responsibility to develop the character of our students. At a time when our nation is recoiling from the excesses of Enron, the question arises: do schools have a responsibility to develop the ethical character of their students, and is such training at odds with the march toward measurable academic success?

A growing body of research on character education is suggesting that this relatively recent renewal of the practice of teaching ethics and morality is showing a range of positive social and academic outcomes in schools. What is interesting is that three recent studies show that effective character education programs go hand-in-hand with academic success.

Advocates for character education point out that it benefits not only students—helping them develop moral judgment and other values needed for success in private and work life—but also society. And just as a democratic society depends on a citizenry that shares and acts on values such as justice, fairness, responsibility, and caring, so does a successful school community. Further, they argue, as schools become communities

where students are valued, the climate for learning and teaching improves along with the prospect for academic success.

How, a skeptic might ask, can schools teach these things? Aren't justice and fairness too fuzzy or too controversial for schools to take on? Aren't those the job of parents and religious institutions? Increasing numbers of educators and scholars feel that schools can and must teach these values, and are tackling these questions by acknowledging and partnering with parents and the broader community in the design of their character development programs.

Three recent studies of character education supported through the funding of the John Templeton Foundation and, in some cases, the Character Education Partnership provide insights into what constitutes a successful program. What distinguishes these studies is that they are research-driven, approaching character education scientifically from three vantage points. The first examines over 600 elementary schools in California that have adopted a character education program, the second studies the character education initiatives of 24 high schools that have received recognition for excellence, and the third examines 33 research studies on specific character education programs.

After providing some background on character education in the United States, this paper will focus on the findings from these three important studies.

Origins of the Character Education Movement

Schools and teachers have for centuries considered the molding of character as part of their mission, but ideas about which values should be taught, and how to teach them, have varied. In the United States, however, the past forty years have seen a variety

of forces that have discouraged schools from explicit moral teaching; by the 1960s they had basically abandoned the effort (McClellan, 1999). Recently, in response to increased youth violence, cheating, and risky behavior, a renewed interest in character education has emerged in schools and districts across the country.

A 1991 book by developmental psychologist Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character*, was influential in that renewal. It presented an approach that helped schools shed the baggage of religious and cultural traditions and move beyond theoretical debates (Lickona, 1991). Lickona made a strong case for the responsibility of schools to address “ethical illiteracy.” He focused on universal moral values, such as treating all people justly and respecting their lives, liberty, and equality—values that are not specific to religious tradition.

What Does Character Education Consist of Today?

Character education initiatives in the past decade have included a variety of approaches. Many schools and districts incorporate character education in the academic curricula, framing ethical discussions in disciplines such as English, social studies and science. Others utilize commercial programs that help to establish common language and goals. Some initiatives are comprehensive and address structures across the school such as supervision, discipline, and ways of working with students, while others take the form of books, websites, and other resources that educators can mine for ideas that they may implement in their classrooms.

All character education programs share the goals of:

- increasing students’ awareness of moral and ethical issues,

- affecting students' attitudes regarding such issues, and
- affecting students' actions.

There are programs that target specific behaviors—they aim to reduce rates of disciplinary action, cheating, teen pregnancy, drug use, and the like. Others may aim to promote positive behaviors, such as community involvement and civic participation. Still others focus more on developing social and emotional skills or on fostering complex thinking about ethical issues—and many incorporate multiple goals. Whatever form they take, such programs are widespread. As of 2002, roughly three-fourths of the states were actively encouraging schools to implement character education.

Does it Work—and How Can We Tell?

Character development and exhibited character traits can be difficult to measure, and the effectiveness of character education programs is only just beginning to be researched. “No Child Left Behind” legislation specifies that educational practice should be based on sound research; therefore, districts and schools that are looking to implement character education programs are eager to find research about its effect on academic performance. These three studies then, examined as companion pieces, provide evidence that suggests a correlation between effective character education and academic performance at all levels.

Evidence of Links to Academic Achievement

The first study explored whether character education programs can be linked to improvements in academic achievement in elementary schools (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2003). Many character education goals, such as developing self-

discipline and diligence, building an ethical learning community, or tackling risky behaviors, for example, could reasonably be expected to affect academic performance.

Benninga *et al.* reviewed existing studies of effects on academic performance and found a variety of evidence of small but discernable effects. Since most of the existing research they found addressed only the effects of individual programs, he and his colleagues sought to explore whether character education programs could be linked in a more generalized way to academic achievement.

Using the California School Recognition Program, designed to reward successful schools, the researchers examined a total of 681 elementary schools. They were able to compare scores on a rubric measuring traits of character education programs to scores on the SAT9 and California's Academic Performance Index (API), a numeric indicator for schools that summarizes the results of various statewide assessments. The team found that schools with the strongest character education scores tended to have higher academic scores by a small but significant margin.

The team found not only a correlation between the summary scores for character education and academic indicators, but also evidence that the benefits of the character education programs can linger for at least two years (Benninga *et al.*, p. 28). Moreover, Benninga and his colleagues identified three specific attributes of character education that had the strongest links with academic achievement:

- a school's ability to ensure a clean and safe physical environment,
- evidence that parents and teachers modeled and promoted good character education, and

- opportunities for students to contribute in meaningful ways to the school and its community (p. 28).

Examining Successful Programs on the Secondary Level

A second report, *Smart & Good High Schools: Integrating Excellence and Ethics for Success in School, Work, and Beyond* (Lickona & Davidson, 2005), identified practices with significant promise for character education at the secondary level. Beginning with a broad review of the literature on adolescent development, high school reform, and character education, the authors developed a framework for thinking about the characteristics of high schools that integrate ethics and excellence.

Twenty-four high schools that had received external recognition for excellence were examined. Lickona and Davidson's goal was to find successful strategies in these schools and to develop generalizations about effective practice. Using focus groups, classroom observations, interviews, observations of school-specific programs, and analysis of program materials and archival data, the team developed portraits of the schools and their practices.

The authors presented their findings in the form of six principles for developing an ethical learning community. "Smart and good" high schools:

1. *Develop shared purpose and identity.* Explicit expectations for personal behavior as well as academic achievement, such as an honor code, school motto, and school traditions provide important guidance for students.

2. *Align practices with desired outcomes and relevant research.* Offering staff and parents specific guidance about research-based strategies for meeting designated goals reinforces the school's efforts.

3. *Have a voice; take a stand.* When students are allowed a voice in the classroom and in school affairs, and faculty, staff, parents, and community members also have a voice, these opportunities for all to express their integrity and courage contribute to excellence and ethics in the school.

4. *Take personal responsibility for continuous self-development.* Adult members of the school community can set a critical example for students by promoting the value of striving for excellence, and of the ongoing self-reflection that is part of it; creating a culture of excellence in classrooms and school-wide, and fostering personal responsibility.

5. *Practice collective responsibility for excellence and ethics.* In a community that values ethics and excellence, adults and students need to intervene right away when others need support to succeed and do the right thing.

6. *Grapple with tough issues.* Collective responsibility for an ethical learning community entails a responsibility to confront institutional practices or issues that are at odds with the school's commitment to excellence and ethics.

Reviewing the Research

The authors of a third study, *What Works in Character Education: A Research-Driven Guide for Educators* (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005), looked instead at existing

research on character education programs and drew conclusions about the strategies that are most effective as well as ways to identify what made those programs successful.

The team identified 109 research studies that were potentially relevant, and found that 33 of them provided scientifically sound evidence that the program studied was effective. From these successful programs, they developed lists of pedagogical strategies and other characteristics, and collected data about how prevalent these strategies were.

The researchers found an overall success rate of 51%--that is, that approximately half the time positive change was found to result from the program studied. Among the areas in which the researchers noted the greatest degree of positive change were student socio-moral cognition (thinking about ethical and moral issues), pro-social behaviors and attitudes, sexual behavior, problem-solving skills, and drug use.

From this review, Berkowitz and Bier concluded that, when effectively implemented, character education programs of many kinds can have significant impact on young people, and that the effects can be quite long-lasting. The identified features characteristic of effective programs includes:

Professional Development. All 33 of the effective programs incorporated ongoing professional development.

Peer Interaction. All 33 also incorporated strategies for fostering peer interaction, such as discussion, role-playing, and cooperative learning.

Direct Teaching and Skill Training. Many of the programs included direct instruction about character as well as teaching of specific intrapersonal (e.g. self-management) and interpersonal (e.g. conflict resolution) skills and capacities.

Explicit Agenda. More than half the programs studied use specific language about character, morality, values, or ethics.

Family and/or Community Involvement. Including parents and other community members, both as recipients of character education and as participants in the design and delivery of the programs, was a common strategy.

Models and Mentors. Both peer and adult role models foster character development.

Integration into Academic Curricula. Nearly half of the effective programs are integrated with academic curricula in some way, most often in social studies and language arts curricula.

Use Multiple Strategies. All of the effective programs use a multi-strategy approach rather than relying on a single model or tool.

What Lessons Does Existing Research Offer?

What does this research add up to? The three studies discussed here took different approaches to the challenge of drawing conclusions about what actually works in character education. Nevertheless, their findings show a remarkable consonance. While each study generated a variety of lists of strategies and ways of articulating goals, a few key points stand out:

- Goals should be both explicit and ambitious.
- Professional development is critical.
- The whole school community should be involved, and everyone should have a voice.

- Adults need to be role models.

Research on the effectiveness of character education *per se* is just getting underway, but these three data-driven studies indicate that effectively implemented character education initiatives have a positive effect on student achievement, pro-social behavior, and the reduction in risky behavior such as drug use and teen pregnancy. States, districts, schools, and educators are increasingly placing character education on a par with other educational goals. Casting aside the misconception that it is just another frill, they are embracing character education as the pathway to improvement in school culture and performance. There are no magic bullets, but insights from these studies should provide an invaluable and practical guide to creating an ideal school in which ethical behavior and academic achievement go hand in hand.

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