Understanding Effective Character Education
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There are many sayings that remind us how we tend to revisit old ideas. “Everything old is new again.” “History repeats itself.” “And the seasons, they go round and round….” This is certainly true of character education, which under various names has ebbed and flowed for centuries in the Western world and elsewhere. After a short definition, this article addresses two critical questions: Does character education work? What does effective character education look like?

What is character education?

The term “character education” is simply the current term for a millennia-old issue. For our purposes here we will define it as the deliberate development, in schools, of youth’s tendency and capacity for responsible, pro-social, and respectful democratic citizenship in our society.

Character education is necessarily complex. It truly is rocket science. Developing a varied set of psychological components of character (conscience, empathy, moral reasoning, values, moral identity, etc.) requires a diverse and multi-faceted implementation strategy.

At its most molecular level, character education entails building a network of positive pro-social relationships (among students, among staff, and between staff and students, staff and parents, administrators and staff, and so on). At the more macro level, it is comprehensive school reform and entails all aspects of the school’s functioning, from its academic curricula to its discipline policies, to its governance structures, to its mission statement, to the adult culture of the school, and so on.

Does character education work?

This is difficult to answer with a yes or no, in part because “character education” is a term applied to a broad range of programs and strategies. A better question is can character education work, and, if so, under what circumstances is it most likely to be effective?

The short answer to the first question is…yes. Character education can work and it frequently does. What Works in Character Education looked at 69 research studies of 33 character education programs, concluding that character education both works and impacts a wide range of outcomes, including academic achievement. The U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse identified 13 programs with evidence of effectiveness. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning’s Safe and Sound reported that nearly half (34) of the 80 programs they
reviewed had either strong or promising evidence of effectiveness, and their more recent meta-
analysis of 213 programs further supports these conclusions.

Character education is much more likely to work when it is well designed, when it relies upon research-based principles and a meaningful conceptual framework, and when it is fully and accurately implemented.

In short (1) character education can work and frequently does, (2) effective character education impacts a wide range of student cognitive, affective, behavioral, and academic outcomes, and (3) we can identify which aspects seem strongly related to effectiveness. So let us examine what we know about the characteristics of effective character education.

What is effective character education?

In a recent review of research, I identified implementation practices that are most prevalent in effective character education programs:

Professional development. Given the complexity, it makes sense that to attempt to implement comprehensive school culture and pedagogical reform without adequate training is not likely to be overly successful. All effective character education programs include at least optional professional development. Professional development time and funding are at a premium in most schools, but somehow the time and money for investing in quality need to be found.

Leadership. A growing body of evidence has focused attention on the importance of school leadership in character education, and in school change and reform in general. School leaders truly need to value character education, understand deeply what it entails, and have the competency to be character education instructional leaders.

Mission-driven initiative. There are many reasons for investing in character education; however, whatever the reason, it must be part of the core mission of the school. Too many mission statements are merely token gestures to check off one more obligation, and have nothing to do with directing the life of the school. CEP’s Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education highlights the point that character education should be reflected in all aspects of school life. Charles Elbot and David Fulton’s The Intentional School Culture (2008) offers a detailed guide for how to move a school through phases of establishing a comprehensive mission-driven initiative.

Peer interaction strategies. One of the most common peer-strategy examples is class meetings, where teachers facilitate the entire class engaging in discussions of curricular content, classroom management, extracurricular activities, and current events. (See Caring School Community at www.devstu.org or Morning Meetings at www.responsiveclassroom.org for resources). Cooperative learning is another powerful method, and can be turbocharged for character education by positing
both academic and character goals for the cooperative lesson (see Blueprints for a Collaborative Classroom at www.devstu.org or the Cooperative Learning Center at the University of Minnesota: http://www.co-operation.org ). Other peer interactive strategies are elementary school cross-grade “buddying,” peer mentoring, peer tutoring, peer conflict mediation/resolution programs, middle and high school advisory or homeroom programs, student government, etc.

Social-emotional skill training. Creating the structures for peer interaction is one thing, but educators too often forget that students do not necessarily have the social-emotional competencies to effectively engage in respectful debate, work with a younger child, or manage their emotions. These competencies often require direct skill development/training. The field of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has done extensive work in this area (see the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning: www.casel.org).

Role models. Many effective character education programs explicitly incorporate role models, in two ways. The first is those we learn about. These role models may be fictional characters, historical figures, or contemporary and local heroes. The Giraffe Project is an excellent example of such a curriculum (www.giraffeproject.org). The second way is those we interact with. These are the adults in students’ lives. In the school they are administrators, teachers, and support staff. These people need to “walk the talk.” Teachers simply cannot effectively promote responsibility if they misplace student work or fail to deliver promised lessons or feedback on time.

Direct teaching. Most character education programs explicitly teach about character, morality, values, and virtue. Often they have a list of targeted character outcomes (the most common are respect, responsibility, fairness, honesty, and caring) and a curriculum about them. This is in a sense a “saliency strategy”; it makes the concepts prominent in the minds of students and the life of the school.

Intrinsic motivation. A common pitfall of character education is inducing desirable (including virtuous) behavior by rewarding students. Character is only truly developed if it is valued intrinsically. One third-grade class recently chose to reject an offered reward for good behavior in the cafeteria because they felt they shouldn’t do something for rewards but rather because it is the right thing to do. An example of this would be the use of developmental discipline rather than discipline through rewards and punishment to help guide internally-motivated character-based behavior (Watson, 2003). Developmental discipline focuses on building relationships and on long-term positive development rather than short-term cessation of undesirable behavior. A critical ingredient of developmental discipline is empathy induction: when evaluative responses to a child’s behavior (either laudatory or critical) include a justification that highlights the consequences of the child’s behavior for another’s feelings.
Integration into the core academic curriculum. Nearly every successful character education program claims to integrate character education into the academic curriculum. Some produce language arts and/or social studies curricula (e.g., the Child Development Project includes a multicultural literature curriculum; Facing History and Ourselves is a history curriculum focusing on historical genocide). Most character education programs merely claim integration, but instead they merely “wedge” a character lesson between two academic lessons. We encourage educators to “mine” the character content that already exists in their academic curricula and fully integrate character-based lessons into those academic lessons, by focusing on both character content and relying on character-building methods.

Serving others. Effective character education programs frequently focus on service and/or service learning or build in opportunities for students to serve others.

Family and/or community involvement. Both education in general and character education in particular benefit from enlightened participation by parents and other community members. At the simplest level, parents can be an audience (being informed by the school). Another form that involvement can take is parents as clients (parents provided with training and resources by the school). The most ambitious form of involvement (and what we recommend), however, is parents as partners: when schools truly collaborate with parents to design, deliver, and/or evaluate their character education initiatives.

Nurturant relationships. While it seems so obvious to prioritize the building and support of nurturant relationships with students, it often gets lost in the shuffle of other school-based pressures such as maintaining order and safety and promoting academic achievement. Such relationships come not only from making them a school or classroom priority, but from sustained contacts, learning about each other, and trust and trustworthiness. Furthermore, the focus on trust, trustworthiness and nurturance apply to child-child relationships (same and cross-age) and adult-adult relationships.

High expectations. Often, those outside character education see it as “soft,” as setting low standards for academics and behavior. In fact, effective character education mirrors effective parenting for character. It entails high but attainable expectations for both academics and behavior, but does so in a nurturing and supportive environment.

A pedagogy of empowerment. If we are to prepare our students to be effective participatory members of a democratic society, we need to let them experience the power of their voices especially advocating for the common good. This means we need processes and structures for unlocking student voice in ways that are authentic and safe. Class meetings, as mentioned above, are one way to do this. And empowerment is not just for students; rather, it applies to all members of the school community.
Conclusion

I noted above that character education is rocket science. As this summary suggests, character education is a potentially powerful tool in the critical process of child and adolescent development, a process in which schools must (and inevitably will) play a central role. Being proactive, comprehensive, collaborative, and scientific about it will only make the character education initiative likely to be more effective. Our world’s future depends upon the character of its youth and how that will manifest itself when they become adult citizens. Intelligent, comprehensive, effective character education will significantly contribute to the positive future our world needs.

References and Selected Research on Character Education Effectiveness


References


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