

Character Education, Prevention, and Positive Youth Development

Victor Battistich
University of Missouri, St. Louis

Schools today face enormous challenges in educating all of the young people in their charge. In addition to providing youth with basic academic knowledge and skills, and promoting their character development, schools have increasingly been called upon to play a primary role in helping to solve a variety of social problems among youth. Although, historically, schools have always had responsibility for both academic and character development, the sheer number of areas to be addressed in the curriculum today may seem overwhelming. This situation has recently become even more daunting with the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation, with its mandated "high stakes" testing and accountability system for demonstrating school effectiveness. However, the situation may not be as dire as it seems. In the past 15 years, a growing body of theory and research in the area of character education suggests that a well-conceived and conducted character education program may be an effective means of addressing all of these seemingly disparate goals. The purpose of this paper is to summarize and synthesize this evidence.¹

Research suggests that comprehensive, high quality character education, as defined below, is not only effective at promoting the development of good character, but is a promising approach to the prevention of a wide range of contemporary problems. These include aggressive and antisocial behaviors, drug use, precocious sexual activity, criminal activities, academic under-achievement, and school failure. Each of these problems, individually, has been addressed through a variety of approaches, and some of these approaches have been found to be reasonably effective, although many have not. However, there is increasing evidence that character education programs focused on the broader goal of promoting the overall positive development of youth are at least as effective as more specific programs aimed at preventing particular negative behaviors.²

¹ This research is not reviewed in detail here as several excellent comprehensive reviews have recently been published: Catalano, R. F., Berglund, M. L., Ryan, J. A. M., Lonczak, H. S., & Hawkins, J. D. (2002). Positive youth development in the United States: Research findings on evaluations of Positive Youth Development Programs. *Prevention and Treatment*, *5*, Article 15. Available on the World Wide Web: <http://journals.apa.org/prevention/volume5/pre0050015a.html>; Clayton, C. J., Ballif-Spanvill, B., & Hunsaker, M. D. (2001). Preventing violence and teaching peace: A review of promising and effective antiviolence, conflict-resolution, and peace programs for elementary school children. *Applied and Preventive Psychology*, *10*, 1-35; Greenberg, M. T., Domitrovich, C., & Bumbarger, B. (2001). The prevention of mental disorders in school-aged children: Current state of the field. *Prevention and Treatment*, *4*, Article 1. Available on the World Wide Web: <http://journals.apa.org/prevention/volume4/pre0040001a.html>; Payton, J. W., et al. (2000). Social and emotional learning: A framework for promoting mental health and reducing risk behaviors in children and youth. *Journal of School Health*, *70*, 179-185; Sherman, L. W. et al. (1998, July). Preventing crime: What works, what doesn't, what's promising. *Research in Brief*. Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice. Available on the World Wide Web: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij>; Solomon, D., Watson, M. S., & Battistich, V. A. (2001). Teaching and schooling effects on moral/prosocial development. In V. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (4th ed., pp. 566-603). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

² See, for example: Battistich, V., Schaps, E., Watson, M., Solomon, D., & Lewis, C. (2000). Effects of the Child Development Project on students' drug use and other problem behaviors. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, *21*, 75-99;

In addition to reducing the risk of involvement in negative behaviors, character education has the important additional benefits of helping youth to develop positive personal and social attitudes and skills that will help them to lead satisfying and productive lives, and to become active and effective citizens in our democratic society. From a policy perspective, this suggests that an effective character education program may be a more cost-effective approach to increasing learning, fostering prosocial behaviors, and preventing a variety of social problems than the implementation of multiple, more specific school-based programs aimed at influencing particular behavioral outcomes.

Although the concept of prevention is readily understood, the term character education means quite different things to different people. Before addressing how character education helps to prevent social problems, it is important to define what we mean by character and what we mean by character education.

What is Character?

To some, having character simply means “following the rules.” If you do what you are asked (or told), avoid becoming involved with drugs or gangs, do your schoolwork and graduate from school, and find useful employment, then you have character. This certainly is relevant to character, but is far from sufficient. As understood here, *character* refers to a much broader constellation of attitudes, behaviors, motivations, and skills. It is more than simply avoiding involvement in socially undesirable behaviors. Character includes attitudes such as the desire to do one’s best and being concerned about the welfare of others; intellectual capacities such as critical thinking and moral reasoning; behaviors such as being honest and responsible, and standing up for moral principles in the face of injustice; interpersonal and emotional skills that enable us to interact effectively with others in a variety of circumstances; and the commitment to contribute to one’s community and society. Stated simply, character is the realization of one’s positive development as a person—intellectually, socially, emotionally, and ethically. To be a person of good character is to be the best person that one can be.

It is important to strongly emphasize the social aspect of character. Having good character does not simply mean being competent as an individual. Good character also includes being committed to making positive contributions to one’s community, and to promoting a democratic way of life based upon justice, equality, and respect for all people. Good character also does not mean always conforming to the *status quo*, but requires “breaking the rules” on occasion if demanded by conscience.

What is Character Education?

Berkowitz, M. W. (2000). Character education as prevention (pp. 37-45). In W. B. Hansen, S. M. Giles, and M. D. Fearnow-Kenney (Eds.), *Improving prevention effectiveness*. Greensboro, NC: Tanglewood Research; Yoshikawa, H. (1994). Prevention as cumulative protection: Effects of early family support and education on chronic delinquency and its risks. *Psychological Bulletin*, *115*, 28-54.

Just as we define character broadly, we define character education as *the deliberate use of all dimensions of school life to foster optimal character development*. This comprehensive approach to character education utilizes every aspect of schooling—the content of the curriculum, the process of instruction, the quality of relationships, the handling of discipline, the conduct of co-curricular activities and the ethos of the total school environment—to foster good character in all school members. While recognizing the primary role that parents rightfully play in the character development of their children, we also affirm the essential role that schools must play in promoting students’ character development and preparing them to be effective citizens.

The goals of character education are thus essentially the goals of raising good children: youth who understand, care about, and act upon the core ethical values (such as diligence, compassion, integrity, and fairness) that make for a productive, just, and democratic society. As they grow in character, young people grow in their capacity and commitment to do their best work, do the right thing, and lead lives of purpose. Effective character education involves creating the kinds of classroom and school environments that enable all students, without exception, to realize their potential to achieve these vital goals.

The Character Education Partnership (CEP) has identified 11 broad principles as defining a comprehensive approach to character education:³

- Promote core ethical values as the basis of good character.
- Define character comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and behavior.
- Use a comprehensive, intentional, proactive, and effective approach.
- Create a caring school community.
- Provide students with opportunities to engage in moral action.
- Provide a meaningful and challenging curriculum that helps all students to succeed.
- Foster students’ intrinsic motivation to learn and to be good people.
- Engage school staff as professionals in a learning and moral community.
- Foster shared moral leadership and long-term support for character education.
- Engage families and community members as partners in character education.
- Evaluate the character of the school, its staff, and its students to inform the character education effort.

³ Lickona, T., Schaps, E., & Lewis, C. (2003). *CEP’s Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education*. Washington, DC: Character Education Partnership.

Character Education as the Core Concept of Positive Youth Development

For many years the disciplines of character education, civic education, moral development, social and emotional learning, service learning, and prevention have been distinct areas of scientific inquiry and educational intervention. Recently, however, these seemingly disparate areas of theory and school-based intervention have begun to converge. Although there is not yet complete consensus on terminology, many scientists and practitioners are coming to agree that this convergence is accurately represented by what we have defined above as comprehensive character education.

How Does Character Education Relate to the Prevention of Problem Behaviors?

Public schools in this country were founded to foster citizens capable of self-rule and contribution to the common good. Although the prominence of this educational goal has waxed and waned in the U.S. over the decades, the past two federal administrations, as well as most states and thousands of communities, have firmly supported the importance of schools' developing good character in youth.

Character education, done early and well, appears to put students on a path toward successful life outcomes, and is therefore an approach to primary prevention. A good character education program establishes a reinforcing system of positive influences that help youth to deal effectively with life and avoid becoming involved in negative behaviors. Moreover, it does so largely before such problems emerge, as opposed to trying to intervene after the young person has already become enmeshed in a social system that supports antisocial attitudes and behaviors.⁴

For many years, the field of prevention was focused on the idea that people involved in problematic behaviors had some individual "deficits" that put them "at risk" of such involvement. More recently, two alternative concepts have come to prominence—these are the notions of resilience and health promotion. *Resilience* refers to the fact that many people who are exposed to adverse life circumstances do not succumb to involvement in negative behaviors.⁵ That is, they appear to have assets or protective factors in their lives that enable them to cope effectively with environmental stressors. *Health promotion* is the educational enactment of resilience: the explicit attempt of schools (and other social institutions) to help children and youth to develop the capacities to succeed in life as individuals and members of society.

How is it that so many youth exposed to adverse life circumstances manage to survive, or even thrive, and what can schools do to promote this? A variety of evidence converges on the

⁴ This is not to suggest that having an effective primary prevention program will be sufficient to prevent all students from becoming involved in problem behaviors, or that youth who have already become involved in problem behaviors will not benefit from exposure to a primary prevention program. However, for students with relatively severe difficulties in life, and who may have become deeply involved in unhealthy actions, a targeted, secondary prevention program may also be required to prevent even more serious difficulties later in life.

⁵ See Werner, E. E., & Smith, R. S. (1982). *Vulnerable but invincible: A longitudinal study of resilient children and youth*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

importance of *belonging* as a critical component of doing well in life: that is, the feeling that one is a competent, contributing, and valued member of a prosocial group.⁶ This evidence comes from both basic research on effective schooling and evaluations of school-based intervention programs. Although not all of these studies have examined the same outcomes for youth, they collectively have examined effects on a wide range of contemporary social problems, and their findings consistently indicate that young people who attend schools where they feel accepted, competent, and valued are much less likely to become involved in problem behaviors.⁷

One important piece of this evidence comes from an ongoing longitudinal study of a nationally-representative sample of adolescents. This research has found that, along with positive relationships with one's family, a sense of connectedness to school is the most significant protective factor for every problem behavior examined, including alcohol and drug abuse, violence and delinquency, and early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy.⁸ Consistent with these findings, evaluations of a number of positive youth development programs for elementary schools have found long-term positive effects on students' involvement in problem behaviors. One example is the Seattle Social Development Project, an elementary school intervention that has followed program and comparison children into early adulthood. This study found significant positive effects on drug use, delinquent behaviors, and precocious sexual activity, as well as improved academic attitudes and achievement.⁹ Another is the Child Development Project, which has been evaluated in a number of studies and has been found not only to promote children's general positive development, but to have significant preventive effects on students' involvement in problem behaviors at least throughout the middle school years.¹⁰ Both of these

⁶ See: Baumeister, R. F., and Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, **117**(3), 497-529; Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research*, **70**, 323-367.

⁷ See: Battistich, V., & Hom, A. (1997). The relationships between students' sense of their school as a community and their involvement in problem behaviors. *American Journal of Public Health*, **87**, 1997-2001; Bryk, A. S., & Driscoll, M. E. (1988). *The school as community: Theoretical foundations, contextual influences, and consequences for students and teachers*. Madison: National Center on Effective Secondary Schools. University of Wisconsin; Goodenow, C. (1993). Classroom belonging among early adolescent students: Relationships to motivation and achievement. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, **13**, 21-43.

⁸ Blum, R. W., McNeely, C. A., & Rinehart, P. M. (2002). *Improving the odds: The untapped power of schools to improve the health of teens*. Minneapolis, MN: Center for Adolescent Health and Development, University of Minnesota.; Resnick, M. D., Bearman, P. S., Blum, R. W., Bauman, K. E., Harris, K. M., Jones, J., Tabor, J., Beuhring, T., Sieving, R. E., Shew, M., Ireland, M., Bearinger, L. H., & Udry, J. R. (1997). Protecting adolescents from harm: Findings from the national longitudinal study on adolescent health. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, **278**, 823-832.

⁹ Hawkins, J. D., Catalano, R. F., Kosterman, R., Abbott, R., & Hill, K. G. (1999). Preventing adolescent health-risk behaviors by strengthening protection during childhood. *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, **153**, 226-234.

¹⁰ Battistich, V., Schaps, E., Watson, M., Solomon, D., & Lewis, C. (2000). Effects of the Child Development Project on students' drug use and other problem behaviors. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, **21**, 75-99; Battistich, V., Schaps, E., & Wilson, N. (2004). Effects of an elementary school intervention on students' "connectedness" to school and social adjustment during middle school. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, **24**, 243-262.

programs have identified students' feelings of belonging to school as a primary reason for their positive effects.

The findings of these studies and related research clearly suggest that schools that focus on promoting the overall positive development of youth (i.e., character education) by creating caring and supportive environments where students feel that they belong also effectively prevent the involvement of their students in a variety of problem behaviors. But why should this be the case? As suggested above, the central issue is the importance of positive interpersonal relationships to human development.

The Critical Importance of Relationships to Positive Human Development

If we have learned nothing else about preventing negative life outcomes among our youth, we know that having a caring and supportive relationship with at least one adult is extremely important for healthy development (see footnote 5). Certainly for most youth, parents provide this essential relational context. Unfortunately, for many young people today, such positive relationships with a caring adult are not readily available within their immediate family or their surrounding community. This reality creates a more compelling reason for schools to fulfill their character development mission and to create the kind of social environments where students feel accepted, supported, and valued as contributing members of the school community and thus, ultimately, as members of our larger society.

The crucial point from the perspective of prevention is that schools must be places that foster students' positive development not just in academics, but in the emotional, ethical, moral, and social aspects of their lives as well. In short, schools must become health promoting environments, where young people acquire the abilities, inclinations, motivation, and values to succeed in their lives.¹¹ This, in fact, is what character education is all about. By providing youth with a supportive school environment, especially during their childhood years, their psychological needs to feel that they belong to a community where there they are competent and influential will be satisfied,¹² and they will therefore want to remain part of the school community and be inclined to adopt its positive social norms and values. Under such circumstances, the school is a social context where youth can acquire the abilities and knowledge they need to succeed in school (and later in life), and the motivation to become effective democratic citizens. Children thus are set on a developmental trajectory that increases their opportunities for positive life outcomes, and decreases their likelihood for involvement in problem behaviors (see footnote 10).

How Can Schools and Teachers Promote Positive Development?

¹¹ Battistich, V., Schaps, E., Watson, M., & Solomon, D. (1996). Prevention effects of the Child Development Project: Early findings from an ongoing multisite demonstration trial. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *11*, 12-35; Hawkins, J. D., & Catalano, R. F. (1990). Broadening the vision of education: Schools as health promoting environments. *Journal of School Health*, *60*, 178-181.

¹² See Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum; Also see footnote 6.

Fortunately, a number of school-based programs recently have provided convincing research evidence both of promoting children's character development, and of being effective approaches to building resilience and reducing risk for involvement in such behaviors as alcohol and drug use, aggression, and precocious sexual activity.¹³ These programs include interventions for pre-kindergarten through 12th grade, so there are research-based curricula and supporting staff development available for teachers from preschool through secondary school who wish to enact effective approaches to promoting positive youth development and preventing involvement in negative behaviors. Although these specific programs differ in many ways in their particular emphases and practices, they include several common elements that are consistent with CEPs 11 principles:

- *Build caring and supportive relationships in the classroom and throughout the school.* First and foremost, the school environment must be one characterized by safety, mutual trust, respect, and concern for the welfare of others. This begins, of course, with the classroom teacher, who needs to try to establish a positive, personal relationship with each of his/her students. This will not always be easy, but even with very difficult students it can be accomplished,¹⁴ and it establishes the essential foundation for positive development. However, while a positive teacher-student relationship is necessary, it is not sufficient. The teacher also must create an environment where relationships among students are caring and supportive. This can begin as simply as providing opportunities for students to get to know one another as individuals, and opportunities for students to work together toward common goals, such as through cooperative learning.
- *Model positive behavior* (i.e., “walk the walk, don’t just talk the talk”). An essential part of establishing a caring and supportive classroom environment is for the teacher to model caring and respectful behavior in his/her interactions with students. Whatever the rhetoric in the classroom, students are very attuned to their teacher’s actual behavior and will reflect on what they observe, not only with respect to the particular circumstances, but more importantly, with respect to their developing understanding of the nature of the world they live in. In the process of developing their own identities, students seek role models that help them to personally understand what it means to be a good person and effective citizen, and their teachers are influential in this process. Being a good role model also includes being an advocate (although *not* an indoctrinator) for basic social and moral values (see “moral discourse,” below). Thus, teachers not only should exemplify positive relationships in the classroom, but should express their own opinions about right and wrong when warranted by circumstances, provided that this is done from a stance of reason rather than simply authority.
- *Create opportunities for students to be actively and meaningfully involved in the life of the classroom and school.* Most schools are autocratic environments where students essentially

¹³ See: Berkowitz, M. W., & Bier, M. C. (2005). *What works in character education: A research-driven guide for educators*. Washington, DC: Character Education Partnership. Available on the World Wide Web: http://www.character.org/files/practitioners_518.pdf; Greenberg, M. T., Weisberg, R. P., O'Brien, M. U., Zins, J. E., Fredericks, L., Resnick, H., & Elias, M. (2003). Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through coordinated social, emotional, and academic learning. *American Psychologist*, *58*, 466-474; Also see reviews listed in footnote 5.

¹⁴ See Watson, M. S., & Ecken, L. (2004). *A matter of trust*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

have no say in how the classroom, much less the school, operates. Yet, as noted above, providing young people with the skills and inclinations they need to succeed in life as productive citizens in our democratic society requires that they have opportunities to develop these capacities. To do so, schools must become more democratic environments where students make decisions, act on them, and reflect upon the results of these actions. A well-established and effective approach to accomplishing this is through the frequent use of class meetings—at the beginning of the school year to involve students in establishing classroom norms and rules, and throughout the year to involve them in decision-making about classroom activities and in helping to resolve the inevitable problems that develop in school and other social settings.¹⁵ Class meetings also provide excellent opportunities for helping students to develop interpersonal skills and their understanding of democratic processes.

- *Teach essential social and emotional skills.* Although creating classroom practices, structures, and a positive climate are very important, this, in itself, is not enough for all children. An essential part of promoting students' positive development includes the direct teaching of social-emotional skills, such as listening when others are talking, recognizing and managing emotions, disagreeing respectfully, and resolving conflicts through non-violent means that respect the needs of both parties.
- *Involve students in moral discourse.* It has been persuasively argued that discussion about moral issues is the essence of educating children to be prosocial, moral people.¹⁶ Teachers need to engage students in meaningful dialog about what it means to be a caring, fair, and responsible person if they are to develop the understanding and skills they need to be successful in life, and avoid the pitfalls of involvement in negative behaviors. Young people are actively striving to understand themselves and the world in which they live, and they certainly need guidance to accomplish this. Because schooling, like any social enterprise, inevitably involves social and moral issues and conflicts, teachers can and should take advantage of these “teachable moments” to further develop their students' understanding of the meaning and importance of core social values. Class meetings provide one mechanism for engaging students in such discussions. Another is the use of literature and the media to involve students in dialog about what it means to be a good person and the potential outcomes of different life circumstances and decisions.
- *Make learning tasks meaningful and relevant to students' lives.* Although the academic curriculum may seem removed from the goals of character education and prevention, it is, in fact, a very important part of creating a school environment where students feel that they belong and of promoting their positive development. For too many youth, much of what they are asked to do in school seems an exercise that has little or nothing to do with their “real” lives. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that many youth lose interest in school and, too often, disengage from school and drop out. This is particularly true for young people

¹⁵ See, for example: Kriete, R., & Bechtel, L. (2002). *The morning meeting book*. Greenfield, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children; Developmental Studies Center. (1996). *Ways we want our class to be: Class meetings that build commitment to kindness and learning*. Oakland, CA: Author.

¹⁶ See: Oser, F. K. (1986). Moral education and values education: The discourse perspective. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching. Third edition* (pp. 917-941). New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

who are most at-risk of becoming involved in problem behaviors. One important way to keep this from happening is for teachers to help students to see how what they are learning *in school* is important to their lives *outside of school*. This can be done by engaging young people in discussions about how particular learning subjects will be important in helping them to achieve their personal aspirations, and by connecting the academic curriculum to their lives outside of school, such as engaging them with their families and community members in academically-relevant activities.¹⁷

- *Leave no child behind.* The full measure of a successful school includes educating *all* students to realize their full potential by helping them to develop their unique talents and abilities, and by inspiring their growth intellectually, ethically, socially, and emotionally. A student may be relatively poor at basic academic subjects (as assessed by current, norm-referenced achievement tests), yet be exceptional in music, athletics, or art. If, as suggested above, a sense of connection to school is critical to prevention and the overall positive development of youth, then it is imperative for schools to provide diverse opportunities for students to demonstrate their individual competencies. When multiple avenues exist for making a meaningful contribution to the school community and demonstrating one's talents and abilities, the proportion of youth who value their school and demonstrate the motivation and effort needed to do as well as they can at school is likely to increase, resulting in overall improvements in student performance in many areas, including "high-stakes" assessments.

Conclusions

The primary argument advanced here is that, by having schools focus on comprehensive character education—i.e., promoting the positive development of young people, not just academically but also emotionally, ethically, and socially—they may not only promote students' overall positive development as individuals and citizens, but also effectively prevent the occurrence of a wide range of current social problems among our youth. Research evidence from many well-designed and conducted studies indicates that this more comprehensive approach could be a much more efficient and cost-effective approach to prevention than the adoption of a multitude of individual programs, each of which is focused on a particular social problem. The scientific evidence in support of this viewpoint is now sufficiently broad and convincing that practitioners and policy makers should seriously consider the merits of this broader approach to helping our youth avoid the many pitfalls of life, and to developing their fullest capacities as caring and competent people, and as responsible citizens.

From a policy perspective, another important point is to emphasize primary prevention—to establish programs that put children on positive developmental trajectories early in life, before they have become deeply involved in problematic behaviors and are enmeshed in systems of negative influences that may be very resistant to change. Consistent with this recommendation, it has been known for many years that investing resources early in the course of children's development not only has a broad range of positive effects on developmental outcomes, but

¹⁷ See, for example: Dalton, J., & Watson, M. (1997). *Among friends: Classrooms where caring and learning prevail*. Oakland, CA: Developmental Studies Center; Developmental Studies Center. (1994). *At home in our schools*. Oakland, CA: Author.

results in significant reductions in monetary and other societal costs throughout the life course.¹⁸ Character education is such an approach to primary prevention and positive youth development, with the added benefits of fostering academic achievement and character development for all students.

Character Education Partnership would like to thank the following individuals for their work in preparing this literature; Kristin Fink, Thomas Lickona, Charles Haynes, Marvin Berkowitz and Roger Weissberg.

¹⁸ See, for example: Weber, C. U., Foster, P. W., & Weikart, D. P. (1978). *An economic analysis of the Ypsilanti Perry Preschool Project*. (Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, No. 5.) Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.