

Character education in the 21st century

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Abstract

Character education is a growing discipline in recent times with the intent of optimizing student's ethical behaviour. The outcome of character education has been seen in the continuous encouragement and preparation of a solid background of the leaders of tomorrow. The promotion of character education should not just be that of lip service but should be followed- up with a concrete action plan that will stand the test of time. In other words, education policy should take the lead to actualize moral education. The stakeholders, including parent and Administrators should join hands and work together in making sure that the student's exhibit good conduct and character in all aspects of their lives. The outline of this paper was to identify and define the place of character education in our education system reviewing of the Character Education Partnership's (hereafter CEP) eleven (11) principles of character education in the future, The Classroom/Activity-Based Character Education Program Implementation and finally the Models of Character Education: Perspectives and Developmental Issues, teaching Strategies and benefits of character education were also discussed.

Keywords: *Character education, 21st Century, Teaching*

Introduction

The 21st Century Character education is the intentional effort to nurture and develop in young people the core ethical and performance values that are widely affirmed and accepted across all cultures. To be effective, character education must include all stakeholders in the school community and must permeate the school climate and curriculum. Character education includes a broad range of concepts such as positive school culture, moral education, just communities, caring school communities, social-emotional learning, positive youth development, civic education, and service learning. All of these approaches promote the intellectual, social, emotional, and ethical development of young people and share a commitment to help young people become responsible, caring, and contributing citizens. Character education so conceived helps students to develop important human qualities such as justice, diligence, compassion, respect, courage and to understand why it is important to live by them. Quality character education creates an integrated culture of character that supports and challenges students and adults to strive for excellence. At the heart of a young person's development and education is character building which Essentially leads to the success of a democratic society. Educating the character helps to build civic virtue, compliance with laws, respect for the rights of others, and concern for the common good. More broadly explained, character education is about promoting moral virtues (honesty, compassion, empathy, and trustworthiness) and performance virtues (effort, diligence, and perseverance). Character education is about doing the right thing and the best work possible.

Defining Character Education

Character education has continued to evolve and develop since the establishment of the formal education system in America. Today, there are numerous working definitions of character education. One of the widely used definition is from the Character Education Partnership (CEP):

Character education is the intentional, proactive effort by schools, districts, and states to instil in their students important core, ethical values such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect for self and others.

Other sources also include that character education must be a deliberate approach:

Character education is any deliberate approach by which school personnel, often in conjunction with parents and community members, help children and youth become caring, principled, and responsible (ASCD formerly Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development).

The, now defunct, National Commission on Character Education expands its definition to include partnerships with community members:

Character education is any deliberate approach by which school personnel, often in conjunction with parents and community members, help children and youth become caring, principled, and responsible.

While these definitions discuss institutional responsibility for character education, other sources focus on a boarder definition:

Character education is the deliberate effort to develop a good character based on core virtues that are good for the individual and good for society (Thomas Lickona).

Essential Traits of Character Education “When we talk about character, we mean the inward values that determine outward actions; the mental model used for making decisions; the moral compass that guides your choices; who we are when no one else is watching.” – Character First Education.

There are numerous character building traits taught through character education. The CEP suggests that there are two major trait categories – core ethical values and performance values. As explained by CEP.

“The core ethical values enable us to treat each other with fairness, respect, and care, and ensure that we pursue our performance goals in ethical rather than unethical ways. The performance values, in turn, enable us to act on our ethical values and make a positive difference in the world.”

Core ethical values embody values like fairness, generosity, and integrity. On the other hand, performance values focus on values like effort, diligence, and perseverance. Together these two categories encompass a mutually supportive system to address character education.

In CEP’s report What Works in Character Education, they break down the skills as follows:

- a. *Social Skills and Awareness* – communication, active listening ,

relationship building, assertiveness, social awareness.

- b. *Personal Improvement/Self-Management and Awareness* – self-control, goal setting, relaxation techniques, self-awareness, emotional awareness.
- c. *Problem-Solving/Decision-making*.

While CEP focuses on performance character skills, other organizations take a more “traditional” approach to character building. CHARACTER COUNTS! A Coalition launched by Josephson Institute in 1993, focuses on six ethical values known as the Six Pillars: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. These values transcend cultural, religious, and socioeconomic differences. As stated by the President of Josephson Institute Michael Josephson, “character is ethics in action.” Similarly to the CEP, the ASCD discusses teaching children the “basic human values” including honesty, kindness, generosity, courage, freedom, equality, and respect. Through teaching these moral character traits the ASCD hopes that students will become “morally responsible, self-disciplined citizens.” The Character Education Network, an entity owned by Thinking Media, offers ready-to-use curriculum, activities, and resources to develop the following traits: responsibility, perseverance, caring, self-discipline, citizenship, honesty, courage, fairness, respect, integrity, and patriotism.

Character Education Best Practices

Within the field of character education, there are numerous approaches to best practices discussed in a variety of ways. They concern school-wide and classroom/activity-based character education program implementation. Both are relevant to expanded learning youth programs. School-wide Character Education Program Implementation Based upon research done on successful character education programs, organizations has formulated the best practices in implementing character development within the schools and community. Here are some examples:

CEP’s 11 Principals of Effective Character:

Arguably the most used guide among programs, the CEP has based its practices on effective schools. The 11 principals, and activity ideas, are as follows:

1. *Principal 1:* The school community promotes core ethical and performance values as the foundation of good character. Activities Associated with

Principal: Hold meetings with stakeholders to affirm core values and articulate the character-related goals through school.

2. *Principal 2:* The school defines “character” comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and doing. Activities Associated with Principal: Allow students to explore and express their feelings and experiences as they relate to the core values. Some specific activities include one-on-one and class discussions, setting goals, journal writing, and cross-age tutoring.
3. *Principal 3:* The school uses a comprehensive, intentional, and proactive approach to character development. Activities Associated with Principal: Create a plan for character education that may be taught in class, sports, meetings, and co-curricular activities.
4. *Principal 4:* The school creates a caring community. Activities Associated with Principal: Instil a sense of caring by incorporating numerous activities such as cross-age mentoring, cooperative learning, peer mediation, and anti-bully programs.
5. *Principal 5:* The school provides students with opportunities for moral action. Activities Associated with Principal: Provide opportunities to engage in positive and responsible action through activities such as student body governance and service learning projects.
6. *Principal 6:* The school offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them to succeed. Activities Associated with Principal: Challenge and encourage students academically through activities such as providing engaging content, critical thinking exercises, and experience based projects.
7. *Principal 7:* The school fosters students’ self-motivation. Activities Associated with Principal: Foster a culture of self- motivation by recognizing students’ character and presenting opportunities for them to excel and even help create the behavioural norms and rules.
8. *Principal 8:* The school staffs is an ethical learning community that shares responsibility for character education and adheres to the same core values that guide the students. Activities Associated with Principal: Include aspects of character education in staff planning and meetings allowing staff time to release and reflect on the core values.
9. *Principal 9:* The school fosters shared leadership and long-range support of the character education initiative. Activities Associated with Principal: Involve stakeholders (i.e., faculty, parents, students, community members)

in the feedback process by implementing a committee or task force and demonstrating clear lines of support for character education initiatives.

10. *Principal 10:* The school engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort. Activities Associated with Principal: Engage family and community members by opening up communication, creating leadership roles for parents and community members, and supporting other initiatives involved in the character building process such as after-school programs.
11. *Principal 11:* The school regularly assesses its culture and climate, the functioning of its staff as character educators, and the extent to which its students manifest good character. Activities Associated with Principal: Evaluate the character education initiative by setting and regularly assessing the culture, climate, and function of the “ethical learning community.”

Pathway for Comprehensive Character Education:

Anchored in the practices of CEP’s 11 Principals of Effective Character, the School for Ethical Education (SEE) created their own best practices called, Pathway for Comprehensive Character Education:

1. Identification of ethical norms as defined with a vocabulary of character by the school community (including administrators, teachers, parents and students),
2. Affirmation by the school community of an explicit character-education mission with ongoing support from an active leadership committee,
3. Creation of a school environment where students recognize their safety, belonging and ability to make a meaningful positive difference,
4. Integration of character vocabulary into the moral discipline of the school and its activities with specific attention to the development of intrinsic motivation in support of respectful/civil behaviour, fair conflict resolution and academic integrity,
5. Integration of a vocabulary of character within existing curricula to advance higher-order ethical reasoning,
6. Cultivation of age-appropriate student leadership and responsibility,
7. Promotion of community and service-learning opportunities,
8. Celebration of student and community examples of positive character,
9. Organization of on-going professional development that supports

- comprehensive character education,
10. Reflection about and evaluation of character-education practices.

Classroom/Activity-Based Character Education Program Implementation

Based upon research, scholars in character development have created their own best practices to teaching character education. These are summarized below.

Lickona's The 7 E's of Teaching a Character Trait : Dr. Thomas Lickona highlighted the best practices by creating "The 7 E's of teaching a Character Trait":

1. Explain it - define it, illustrate it, and discuss its importance.
2. Examine it - in literature, history, and current events.
3. Exhibit it - through personal example.
4. Expect it - through codes, rules, contracts and consequences
5. Experience it directly.
6. Encourage it - through goal-setting, practice and self-assessment.
7. Evaluate it - give feedback.

Ryan's The 6 E's of Character Education:

Similar to Lickona, Kevin Ryan created "The Six Es of Character Education:"

1. Example: Lead by example and teach through examples in literature and history
2. Ethos: Provide an ethical environment that creates character through allowing students to decide what's right and what's wrong.
3. Explanation: Offer explanations for regulations and moral norms and engage them in further discussion about moral decisions.
4. Emotion: Appeal to emotions and teach students to "love the right things".
5. Experience: Give students an opportunity to partake in moral actions such as service learning.
6. Expectation of Excellence: Expect and encourage the best out of students in every aspect of their life.

KIPP's Character Strengths:

Combining a bit of both the CEP and Lickona/Ryan's best practices, KIPP's Character Counts focus on the following character strengths:

1. Believe it and Model It – lead by example.
2. Name It – purposely explain and talk about it.
3. Find It – give opportunities to experience it.
4. FeelIt – create a welcoming environment.
5. Integrate It – implement character development into all aspects
6. Encourages It – expect and encourage the best.
7. Track It – set goals and measure success

Models of Character Education: Perspectives and Developmental Issues

1. Direct instruction: A direct instruction paradigm has origins in Aristotelian philosophy; it advocates inculcating the young with the virtues of society. There is a strong focus on the training of habits or virtuous behavior. (Ryan, Lickona, Berkowitz).
2. Indirect instruction: An indirect instruction paradigm focuses on building a child's understanding (Kohlberg) and socio-moral development (Piaget), which in turn emphasizes the interpersonal interactions of peers under the guidance of caring adults. (DeVries, Lickona, Watson, Berkowitz).
3. Community building: The community building paradigm focuses on the environment and caring relationships (Nodding) and on building moral communities. (Watson, Berkowitz)

Teaching Strategies:

1. Consensus building
2. Cooperative learning
3. Literature
4. Conflict resolution
5. Discussing and engaging students in moral reasoning.
6. Service learning

Benefits of Character Education

There are many benefits of character education. For instance, when discussing program outcomes, CEP's What Works in Character breaks it into 4 categories:

1. Risk behaviour.
2. Pro-social Competencies.
3. School-based outcomes.
4. General social-emotional functioning.

Ryan and Lickona discuss three benefits as:

1. Head: Understanding.
2. Heart: Caring about.
3. Hand: Acting upon.

The What Works in Character Education project found that several primary positive outcomes of character education included:

1. The reduction of sexual behaviour,
2. Increased socio-moral cognitive development,
3. Improved problem solving skills, and
4. Improved emotional competency - the reduction of violence, aggression, and drug use, and improved academic achievement (Character Education Partnership, 2003).

Schools with higher total character education implementation tended to have higher academic scores on academic measures for the year prior to their application, the year of their application and the subsequent two years.”

One school district discovered the power of character development, improved their school climate, and saw positive results and improvements in the following areas:

1. Student engagement, motivation and achievement,
2. Self-discipline, pro-social behaviour and interpersonal relationships,
3. Equity and respect for diversity,
4. Preparation for the workplace,
5. School culture, civility and feelings of safety,
6. School community partnerships,
7. Volunteer activities,

8. Civic engagement, and
9. Engagement in social justice issues

Conclusion

In closing, character education is not a slogan or a course but a mission that is embedded in the everyday school life. Schools function as an arena where students could practice good virtues and go beyond their school life. Most important, the promotion of character education should not just a leap service but has an action plan for practice. Other words, education policy should take the lead to actualize moral education in the school system. Taken together, parents, teachers, and administrators as stakeholders, should join this camp to encourage students to manifest those good values in their lives. The outcome of character education has always been encouraging, solidly, and continually preparing the leaders of tomorrow. This subject matter will require more studies particularly in the areas of similarities/differences in character education, and that of moral education. Finally, It was suggested the importance of the process of implementation of character education in different districts in order to fit the needs and goals of each community, thereby effectively influencing students' behaviours.

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