Is There a Place for Character Education?

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Abstract

Recent trends in school curricula place a heavy focus on the improvement of basic skills test scores. As a result, the role of character education has been diminished. This article provides a rationale for the incorporation of a character education program within the school curricula, a working definition of character education, and the role of teachers and parents within a character education program.

What is character education? Why is it important? Should it be among the subjects taught in schools today? These are just a few of the questions being posed by educators and parents of elementary school students in this time of high stakes testing.

According to John Douglas Hoge in his article, "Character Education, Citizenship Education, and the Social Studies", character education can be defined as, "…any conscious or overt effort to influence the development of desirable individual qualities or traits" (Hoge, 2002). Thomas Lickona says that "good character consists of knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good" (Welton, 2005). In short, we want to draw specific characteristics out of our students and teach them how to use those traits in their everyday lives. We want them to be "good people"! But why? Why is it important that children become "good people"? In his article, "Character Education in America's Public Schools", Derek Davis states, "A concern about the ongoing problem of suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, and school shootings and other forms of violence among teens has also awakened many to the benefits of character education" (Davis, 2006).

Character education is the way a teacher talks, the behaviors that are modeled, the conduct that is tolerated, the deeds that are encouraged, and the expectations that are transmitted. In an educational world that is increasingly geared toward attaining high scores on standardized tests, all this talk about behavior and problem solving might seem out of place. However, character education is also a deliberate effort to help people understand, care about, and act upon core ethical values. It is not simply telling children what to do, one of the many myths surrounding character education. In fact, character education encourages children to become independent thinkers who are committed to moral principles in their lives and who are likely to do the "right" thing, even under challenging circumstances. Character education is a program that can be implemented in order to turn students into respectful, responsible, contributing members of society.

Another common question being asked is, "Why is it the schools' job to teach these values to children?" Many critics of character education in schools maintain that parents and family members should be responsible for instilling morals in children. However, society needs to ask what principles does a child learn when his/her parent physically abuses other family members? What values does a child learn if parents use illegal drugs? There are many children for whom these types of events are daily occurrences. Parents or other family members may be modeling poor judgment and angry, dangerous behavior. The school setting may be the only place that students can escape these acts.

Additionally, researchers from Bristol University claim that teaching character education helps pupils' to develop as learners and may also improve their academic achievement. They also claim that this type of education can improve pupils'

communication skills, which would make them more self-confident and independent. It can produce a trusting environment in the classroom. With the help of federally subsidized grants to measure the efficacy of character education, the research measuring the ethical conduct of our youth should improve (Ryan, 1999).

Although character education is appropriate and effective in schools, there are drawbacks. In the past few years, much emphasis has been placed on test scores in schools. Educators are now focusing more and more on "teaching to the test" to ensure the rise of test scores, and thus, a rise in government funding. With all of this added stress, it may be hard to find time to include character education in the curriculum. Stephan Ellenwood states, "Because there are always many other pressures, school and state legislatures often make a conscious choice to focus heavily or exclusively on the development of academic talents thereby leaving matters of each student's character growth to others" (Ellenwood, 2006). It is crucial that teachers not only include character education in their daily lessons, but they model being a "good person" for their students. They must demonstrate patience and kindness with children and show them the importance of "treating others how you want to be treated". This does, however, mean that teachers need to demonstrate these qualities in and out of school. To their students, teachers are always 'on'. If a child encounters a teacher outside school, it is important that the teacher still be displaying appropriate, moral behavior to set a good example.

Some opponents to character education in elementary schools claim that it violates the separation of church and state. According to Ellenwood, these adversaries believe that, "…values derived from more subjective and elusive matters of emotions, ethnicity, religion, culture, and family. In a society that places such a very high value on

individual freedom, many American school teachers became reluctant to assert any values" (Ellenwood, 2006). It is true that many religions place high importance on values and morality. Does this mean that only those who follow a certain religion are "good people"? While religious beliefs do affect the values of a person, people who are not associated with any religion can also be kind, compassionate, respectful, etc. Teachers are capable of teaching character education without bringing religion into the mix. They do not necessarily need to talk about God or other religious figures to teach children about morality, decision-making, and consequences.

Perhaps one of the most overlooked aspects of incorporating a character education program is to provide educators with the necessary tools and knowledge to complete it. According to Andrew Milson and Lisa Mehlig, "…proposals for a return to more direct approaches to character education place enormous responsibility on teachers. They are called upon to serve as positive role models, to seize opportunities to reflect on moral issues within the context of the curriculum, to create a moral classroom climate, and to provide students with opportunities outside of the classroom to practice good character through service programs, clubs, and peer tutoring" (Milson & Mehlig, 2002). If teachers are going to be expected to include character education in these areas, they need proper training. This will ensure that they are comfortable with the topic and knowledgeable about how to implement it. Universities need to make certain that their teacher education programs are emphasizing character education and strategies for applying it in classrooms. For in-service teachers, school districts should create programs and workshops of the same nature. This will ensure that students are receiving character education, and that teachers are properly prepared to facilitate it.

Another important aspect of character education is parent cooperation. Although school has a central role in developing students' character, the most profound impact on students' development comes from their families, notably their parents — whether we look at social, moral, behavioral, or academic development (Berkowitz, 2005). The single best predictor of student success in school is the level of parental involvement in a child's education. The benefits of parental involvement include improved academic achievement, reduced absenteeism, improved school behavior, greater academic motivation, and lower dropout rates (Berkowitz, 2005). The students will find the transition between home and school to be much easier if the same values and morals taught at school are also echoed at home, and vice-versa. One particular way schools can bring parents into the equation, as a positive aspect, is to act as a resource to the parents. Many schools provide parents with training on topics related to child rearing, for example, positive discipline, bullying, and risky behavior (Berkowitz, 2005). Parents should be well aware of the values and ethics their children are learning about during the school day. Some teachers even ask parents to set character goals for their children for the school year. Progress is charted and reported back to the parents on a consistent basis. Creating an easy transition between home and school will make the students feel more comfortable and will aid in the progression of their character development (Gilness, 2002).

An interesting way to implement character education is to use literature or historical figures as models. Tony Sanchez states that, "To help our young people develop into reflective and concerned citizens, we must allow them, with our guidance, to evaluate and choose their heroes for the qualities that help us fulfill our citizenship

obligations. As social studies educators, one of our missions must be to identify those individuals who give us the right direction and provide the inspirational link that can allow us to become heroes" (Sanchez, 2006). Sanchez suggests using figures such as George Washington to model morality to children. Using historical figures as role models can be effective, but there is a major weakness to this practice. Many history books emphasize white, male figures in United States history above others. This can create a problem for students that are of a different culture, ethnicity, and/or gender. Young people need to have heroes that represent themselves and where they come from. It is easier for children to relate to someone who looks like them and has similar backgrounds. Young girls also need to know that women play an important role in United States history as well as current events. Sanchez states, "An inherent danger in promoting the values of historical figures is the equally dangerous issue of political correctness. In this era of cultural/gender awareness, the promotion of culturally diverse men and women has practically become an expectation, in part due to the assertion that a focus on 'traditional' figures is not only token but also shallow, inaccurate, one-dimensional, and ethnocentric. It is divisively referred to as advancing 'great white male hero' history" (Sanchez, 2006). Character educators need to be sure that their students have a variety of historical figures to emulate and use as a model.

Teachers can integrate character education values into their everyday curriculum in just about every subject. For example, while studying a piece of literature, the teacher may ask the students to examine the characters. What are their strengths and weaknesses? What things do you admire about the character? What things bother you about him or her? What do you think you would have done if you were this character and

placed in the same situation? What you ever had to deal with a similar situation in your life? By asking these questions and encouraging a group discussion, morals and values can come into the light. From there, the students can share their ideas of right and wrong. In history classes, students should not just learn about what took place. They should be given the opportunity to learn about why it happened. Students should also be able to express what they think about it—to make ethical judgments based on their knowledge. After all, history is not simply a timeline of events; it's about people making choices that affected other people and those choices had ethical and moral dimensions that often produced profound consequences.

There is little doubt that character education needs to be addressed in one way or another in every school in America. Our children are constantly bombarded with tragedies and controversial topics at increasingly younger ages. They need guidance and a decision-making process to help them deal with the issues and values of society today. Theodore Roosevelt once said, "To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society." We, as educators, need to take responsibility for guiding our students to become caring, responsible, and respectful people. As simplistic as it sounds, these children are the future of our country.   Educators need to ensure that students are exposed to the necessary values and ideas to be able develop into "good people", not only for the personal gain of the child, but to make our society a better place for everyone. We need to remember that, character education is not one more thing on your plate. It is the plate!

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