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Implementing Character Education into School Curriculum

by Alicia M. Chapman

(Education 1100)

The curriculum in schools is always changing. There are new advancements being made and new components being incorporated into the curriculum. However, for the most part, the subjects taught are relatively the same. Subjects like math, science, and language arts are not uncommon and are core concepts teachers are accustomed to covering each year. Today, a subject called Character Education has become a rising issue in schools, and it has slowly but surely begun to show its importance in the curriculum. This is due to the number of detrimental factors in the education system including: behavioral issues, disrespect, and bullying. The main problem lies in the fact that teachers, parents, and students alike are not accepting Character Education with open arms.

The main idea of Character Education is to improve the behavior and attitudes of students at school. According to Character Education, the application of social-emotional and character development (SECD) in classrooms is about teaching, practicing, and modeling essential personal and civic life habits and skills that are almost universally understood as making people good human beings (Character Education, 2010, p. 47). While many are arguing against its importance, others feel it would be very beneficial. Brannon interviewed National Board Certified Teachers (NBCT) at the Elementary school level in Illinois. She wanted more information on their Character Education program. Most of the teachers responded with many reasons why it would be a good program to implement (Brannon, 2008). One of the teachers said, "Society condones many behaviors that are unacceptable in the classroom. Therefore, children are often confused and uncertain about appropriate or inappropriate behavior in a group setting" (Brannon, 2008, pg. 57). Children are raised from a young age in very different ways. Often, their views of what is right and wrong are tampered with by the media and other negative influences. Unfortunately, some children are never taught right from wrong from their parents. Another issue Brannon talks about is that parents are not disciplining enough, but instead are trying to be their child's best friend. One teacher interviewed said, "Many parents do not recognize the importance of sound, thoughtful, and deliberate parenting choices. They are afraid of upsetting their child" (Brannon, 2008, pg. 57). Since the amount of children with behavioral problems and other attitude issues continues to be on the rise, Character Education is becoming a necessity (Brannon, 2008, pg. 59).

So what about the schools that are not supporting Character Education? Are they right in denying the principles behind this new subject? Professor Colgan discusses the resentment and negative attitudes toward the program. For many of the students, they feel it is a waste of their academic learning time (Colgan, 2003, pgs. 34-35). About 144 students at a high school in West Central Ohio were asked how they felt about Character Education. The results showed that 60% said a formal high school program for Character Education would not be beneficial. Mostly, for the mere fact that those who truly need the program would be unwilling to learn and change (Romanowski, 2003, pgs. 32-33). Sadly, this is why there is a rise in bullying prevention in the media. Students who have not received proper character development at home are acting out and disrespecting other students in school. This is a world-wide epidemic that is leading to many deaths of students through suicide. Social Emotional and Character Education is trying to implement useful programs in schools to spread awareness of this growing problem. Many programs address safe and drug-free schools, service learning, emotional literacy, violence prevention, bullying prevention, and other similar initiatives (Character Education, 2010, pg. 47). Sadly, these efforts are not enough. A

woman voices her concerns in Stiff-Williams article, saying that she fears for the safety of her son at his own high school. She recalled her son being called a “trashy nigger” by a peer, along with other types of bullying from several students (Stiff-Williams, 2010, pg. 115). She feared that her son was going in the wrong direction and was being steered down the wrong path because of the bullying he was enduring. The article continued to address the many problems in schools because there is no character development, leaving students helpless and left to face their peers alone. It can lead to early pregnancy, alcohol abuse, criminal behavior, and drug use. (Stiff-Williams, 2010, pg. 115). As educators and parents, we all share a concern that our children will risk their lives and futures by making poor or life-threatening decisions (Stiff-Williams, 2010, pg. 115). Issues such as these have increased the need for Character Education more and more.

Many students in high school feel they are being talked down to and treated like little kids. They end up mocking the program and not taking it seriously. Many react by ignoring the teacher, making jokes, sleeping, and goofing off (Romanowski, 2003, pgs. 32-33). The article by Romanowski covered the idea that many students do understand the moral dilemma, but do not act on it themselves. One of the students interviewed had said, “Everyone knows what honesty is. It’s just that many don’t want to be honest. We know what’s right and wrong. We just don’t do it” (Romanowski, 2003, pg. 33). It is very disheartening that students as old as high school refuse to take an issue like this seriously and act so immature. High school is their last chance before they enter the real world. If they haven’t learned right from wrong by now, what kind of hope is there for their futures?

Unfortunately, it is not just the students who are against implementing Character Education in school. Teachers also feel that adding this program to the curriculum is pointless. Imagine how the students will feel about it if their own teachers don’t even give it a chance. One student said, “I think we can all agree that the teachers trying to teach Character Education don’t have the character traits that they are trying to teach” (Romanowski, 2003, pg. 34). Some students and faculty have come to terms with incorporating Character Education into their lessons, but resent the idea of making it its own subject (Romanowski, 2003, pg. 34). So, what can schools do to make the program more appealing to faculty, and most importantly, the students? A few ideas to incorporate in teaching were shared in an article about Character Education. The first idea was to have conversations about character. This could be done by taking time to share personal stories, listening to other classmate’s experiences, and discussing real life dilemmas. The next idea is to demonstrate good character. Each student should work on their own character through self-control, helping others, and learning from their mistakes. The teacher should demonstrate positive character traits to be a good role model for the kids at all times. Teachers can help by reacting to real life situations. They could show positive and negative reactions to student behavior, correct students when they misbehave, praise them for good deeds, and encourage reading and writing to express feelings. All of these will aid in developing strong moral character traits (Character Education, 2010, pgs. 48-49).

Within the past few years, Character Education has become a more accepted plan. In 2008, the Character Education Partnership (CEP) determined 18 states have mandated Character Education, and another 8 have legislation that encourage teaching it (Stiff-Williams, 2010, pg. 116). More effort has been put in to making the program more successful. Character Education programs are having a positive effect on achievement, classroom behaviors, and long-term test scores (Brannon, 2008, pg. 56). It is also reducing many risk factors associated with failure in middle school and high school (Brannon, 2008, pg. 56). Many of the National Board of Teachers surveyed by Brannon agreed that Character Education was important, and building good character at a young age was just as important as academics (Brannon, 2008, pg. 56).

Character Education has come a long way and now includes many more key components (Colgan, 2003, pgs. 34-35). Colgan says the “what-should-you- do “scenarios that are being used to teach character must be relevant, interesting, realistic, and must also focus on hard-hitting issues

(Colgan, 2003, pg. 35). In Colgan's article, Principal Mary Kay Gallagher of Moraine Elementary School talks about her school's approach to Character Education. Each month, the school focuses on one specific character trait, some of which include: honesty, respect, and compassion. Students are rewarded and praised for good character and receive incentives such as getting an opportunity to raise the flag in the morning. The school even incorporates a Playground Management program where students work on helping other students work out conflict (Colgan, 2003, pgs. 34-35). A Washington D.C based Character Education Partnership thought so highly of her school's efforts that they named the school a National School of Character in 2002 (Colgan, 2003, pg. 34).

Many different strategies have been developed to continue to improve the design of the program. Modeling is a main component to the success of Character Education. Another successful idea is to have the students help write the rules for the classroom. Students can pick important character traits such as fairness, respectfulness, and honesty that they all feel are important to follow. Other constructive strategies proven effective for teaching Character Education include: direct instruction, cooperative learning, role playing, and service projects (Brannon, 2008, pg. 58).

Character Education can be a very tricky concept to enforce and expect to please everyone (Romanowski, 2003). However, the changing cultural climate has led to concerns about society's moral condition, prompting a reexamination of the schools' role in teaching values to students (Romanowski, 2003, pg. 32). Thankfully, after a lot of hesitation, things are starting to look in the right direction for the program. Faculty, parents, and students must work together to make the program work. It is a joint responsibility that requires a lot more than just the cooperation from the students. Since teachers and parents spend the most time with the students, they are responsible for instilling good morals and values in them (Brannon, 2008). It is everyone's responsibility-parents, teachers, community, and the media (Brannon, 2008, pg. 58).

It is recommended that schools should spend several days a week focusing on character development, even if it is just for ten minutes or so a day. After a while, students will be noticeably impacted. Character Education can help form a calm and relaxed environment where students can focus on learning (Brannon, 2008). There are several Character Education programs that have become more popular and recognized by many schools. They include *Character Counts*-Josephson Institute of Ethics, *Cultivating Kindness*-Ric Stueker, *Connecting with Others*-Rita Coombs-Richardson, and *Skillstremaining*-Arnold Goldstein (Brannon, 2008, pg. 59).

In the end, there is still much to be done before the education system can fully adapt to Character Education. However, it is important to realize the key strengths and benefits it has to offer, because when implemented properly, it can make a world of a difference. Keeping the thoughts and concerns of everyone involved when designing the character education programs will help gain acceptance and success (Colgan, 2003, pgs. 34-35). With more time and effort, Character Education can rise above all the criticism and come out on top, having positively influenced the lives of all students involved.

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