4-1-2010

Character Education in Schools

Tiffany Gray
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: http://dc.cod.edu/essai

Character Education in Schools

by Tiffany Gray

(Education 1100)

Abstract

The issue of whether morality should be taught in schools is brought to the forefront in this paper. The writer tries to prove that schools should have their mission deeply embedded and rooted in the moral dimensions of teaching. This paper suggests that teaching character should be just as important as teaching academics. Society will continue to be in a state of chaos until character is taught in schools again. In this way, education can be used as a way to significantly decrease moral decay from overtaking society. Teaching is a reflection of the morality of society, so education is inevitably caught up in moral debate.
"The moral purpose of education must precede and guide all others."
    -Nel Noddings

The Impact of Teachers

Abraham Lincoln stated, "A child is a person who is going to carry on what you have started. He is going to sit where you are sitting and, when you are gone, attend to those things which you think are important. You may adopt all the policies you please, but how they are carried out depends on him. He will assume control of your cities, states, and nations. He is going to move in and take over your churches, schools, universities, corporations. The fate of humanity is in his hands (Licona)." This quote adequately expresses the strong impact that teachers have on their students because they are entrusted with the development of their students. Given this information, should education exist without values?

Character Education: A Definition

The Character Education Partnership (CEP) defines character as understanding, caring about, and acting upon core ethical values such as respect, responsibility, honesty, fairness, and caring (Matera 2001, pp. 201). If we want students to make good judgments, it can only come as a result of good character. As Doctor Louis Stanciak put it, "it's what you do when no one is looking." This means that students must learn good character from somewhere, something, or someone, and education is a system that can be used as a vessel to achieve that good character. The basic requirements of character education are that schools and classrooms be psychologically safe and physically secure. Character education programs vary in purpose and scope because each interpretation and practice of character education is different (Benninga, J.S., Berkowitz, M.W., Kuehn, P. & Smith, K., 2006).

A Brief History of Character Education

Damon (2005) claims that society must realize that there should be no questions as to whether or not schools should teach morality. There should be no debate about it; a school will inevitably envelop its students in a moral climate. This just "comes with the territory," if a moral climate always exists in schools, then educators should work towards implementing good character into schools. Overtime, slowly but surely, education has lessened its grasp of teaching morality schools. Moral values got watered down and lost. Some schools were have become places were children are sent to learn academics and skills. By 1996, President Clinton, in his State of the Union

56

address, encouraged all schools to teach character education (Damon, 2005).

A Teacher's Role in Character Education

Before even beginning to discuss the implementation or effectiveness of character education, we must first change the way we teach our teachers. Post (1997), asserts that there must be greater emphasis on teacher training so that they will be able to help students meet situations that require moral judgments. Teachers should be trained to be able to make good decisions and moral judgments, but more often than not, this is not the case. As a result the majority of teacher education programs did not produce teachers with the necessary attitudes, skills, and abilities needed to give all students a quality education (Post, 1997).

Additionally, education should give students a sense of freedom to pursue their goals. In fact, schools function to aide students in achieving to their highest ability. Teachers have a crucial role in the socialization of students in regards to moral justice and democratic ideals. "[P]roviding equal access to knowledge for all students [is] a key imperative (Post, 1997)." Teachers must wholeheartedly believe that all students have the capacity to learn. Educators should develop curriculum that teachers can modify, as necessary, so that they can meet the needs off their students. Teacher education programs must produce teachers that value morality and are reflective thinkers. Teachers should also understand how important it is to display justice, care, and dignity to their students. Teachers must bear the knowledge, courage, and the commitment to evoke positive changes in schools. Teacher programs should consist of courses that are created with the intent to promote critical reflection and expound on their knowledge and awareness of diversity (Post, 1997). Teachers have to be able to make moral judgments of what they think is worth learning, and the methodology to achieve that learning (Pring, 2001).

To continue, it may be a good idea for teachers to get urban experiences before they begin teaching. By doing this, they will hopefully be able to fully understand what some to their students may be going through. They may encounter students that are just struggling to make it through their day, and teachers need to know how to handle and work with these types of students. This would also allow teachers to see just how strongly they impact people's lives, any little thing that they do can affect them greatly (Post, 1997).

Likewise, teachers can also experience the unfairness that occurs because of unfair allocation of resources. Because of this, all schools do not attract talented teacher evenly. These inequities affect the students greatly, and causes a socioeconomic division that often divides people more than nationality or race. This situation means that many times, the needs of minorities are not being addressed, especially in cities. Every student is different and every student will have individual needs and teacher have to address those unique needs. If this does not happen, then teachers and schools will fail to reach those students that are at risk for failure. Teachers should look at their teaching in terms of how the children are doing and benefiting from it, rather than how the teacher is doing (Post, 1997).

Just because there may be outside issues affecting students does not mean that teachers should excuse themselves from teaching. Hopefully, urban experiences will help teachers to recognize that when you begin making excuses for students, it limits what they can do, high standards still to have to be maintained (Post, 1997). Additionally, teachers must be fully educated about the different cultures that make up society. Teachers have to know about the values of cultures in society, order to operate morally and ethically (Hamberger & Moore, 1997).

Character Education Benefits Counselors

Britzman (2005), expresses that even school counselor's can benefit from implementing character education in schools. This article states that much of the work counselors do with students involves repairing psychological damage. This damage is a result of unhealthy choices and/or poor

57

character that if untreated, will destroy the moral framework of an academic environment. It follows that if character education was implemented into the curriculum that students would have a healthier environment and thus enhance their character. "The 2002 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth sampled 12,000 high school students across the United States and revealed the following results: (a) 74% admitted to having cheated on an exam in the past year, (b) 38% admitted to having stolen something from a store within the past year, (c) 43% believed one had to lie or cheat to get ahead and life…" It is important to keep in mind that these numbers may be even higher because not everyone is willing to admit when they do engage in unethical behavior. This data indicates that young people need a lot of assistance to help them become citizens that are socially responsible. This leads to schools blaming parents, parents blaming schools, and society blaming everyone else of the unethical behavior occurring in schools. Regardless of who is at fault, something must be done to change the behavior and even the mindset of the students in educational system (Britzman, 2005).

School counseling will only benefit by developing and promoting ethical values in schools. This will give way to a healthy school climate. Character education is a way to combat behavioral choices that are unhealthy and the negative consequences that come with them. This is, in fact, a great opportunity for school counselors to take more active leadership roles in schools (Britzman, 2005). This article introduced a very interesting concept to me, which was, that character education is a preventative initiative. I had never thought about it in this light before. Character education is a way to help prevent the side effects of unethical behavior.

<center>The Harmful Effects of a Lack of Character Education</center>

McDonnell (2008) claims that every aspect of our society has been inflicted with a crisis of character, this is especially true among young people. It seems like almost a plague upon youth of this nation, "problems of poor work ethic, drug [and alcohol] abuse, sexual activity, violence, lying, cheating, stealing, and bullying." The corporate world and even parents seem to have created a paradox. Both value education and honesty, yet they focus on such narrow measures of academic achievement, like test scores. In doing so, they disregard the character problems, like cheating, that have infiltrated our schools.

We should be looking for other authentic measures of both moral and intellectual excellence. The first step in implementing character education programs is to introduce students to the basics. This serves to get the students to accept, sometimes quite slowly, that everyone at the school desires to help them become a better person. This also helps students find meaning in their studies and, thus, increases their academic performance (2008).

To support this, one of the biggest results of a lack of morality taught in schools is cheating. Yet some teachers try to sympathize with student cheaters because they think that tests are unfair or flawed, or use some other excuse. Moral standards reflect basic human truths, and they should be passed on to students. As long as morality is taught in a way that promotes and enforces good character, then it does not matter much about how character education is implemented as long as it does not decrease academic achievement. This is why there are so many different methods and ways to implement character education into schools (Damon, 2005). This is so important because if children learn and get used to cheating at should a young age, then that is exactly what they will contribute to society, this will have detrimental and chaotic effects on society.

Character education is absolutely necessary because of the effects on society when there is no morality guiding student's actions. There are a variety of things that contribute to the growing lack of morality that has occurred throughout the twentieth century. The first is that many aspects of society condone behaviors that are not acceptable in the classroom. This causes children to be uncertain or confused about inappropriate and appropriate behavior in group settings. Children are also watching more television and they are being exposed to more and more adult-oriented materials. This simultaneously gives them mixed messages about the importance of good character and it

<center>58</center>

reduces the opportunity for "community" learning. Furthermore, parents no longer desire to be their child's role model; instead, they want to be their friend. Of course, it must be stated that parent involvement significantly increases student achievement. Not only do character education programs have a positive affect academically and socially, but it also affects long-term test scores positively (Brannon, 2008).

<div align="center">Lack of Research & Barriers to Character Education</div>

It is very difficult to create standards for evaluating the effectiveness of character education programs. This difficulty also makes research hard to do because evaluating character education programs is difficult because character education is such a broad concept. There is, however, some research that suggests that character education programs can have positive effects on academic and social development (Viadero, 2007).

An obvious hindrance to character education is that people perceive morality and religion to go hand in hand. However, this is easily resolved because of the law of separation and state applies to character education programs. Students may also become frustrated by the amount of class time given to character education, this is why character education programs must be relevant to the curriculum, there has to be some connection between morality and the curriculum (Colgan, 2003).

The way in which research is conducted to study the effectiveness of character education must be modified. This will benefit school counselors because they will obtain more information about the best ways to integrate moral education into schools (Britzman, 2005). There is a lack of research in character education. There is little research when it comes to the way to train teacher's o that they can develop professional morality (Post, 1997). Some view moral education as a questionable distraction from skill building and academic achievement.

Accordingly, parents may become wary and suspicious of teachers exercising their authority to influence the character development of their children. This is because that it places an enormous amount of trust and pressure on the teacher. Administrators may also be reluctant to give time to teaching morality because it takes time away from core subjects. Another barrier is that philosophical differences may arise in regards to the teaching of character education. Others think that character education is impossible to implement, so schools may as well not even try to include it in the curriculum (Brannon, 2008).

In order to promote moral maturation students must create richer relationships with their peers and their teachers. A way to do this that has proven effective over time is by enforcing the Golden Rule. "Asking me to do unto others as I wish them to do unto me requires me to foresee the potential effects of my actions on others." Teachers must also seek to form an emotional connection with their students. They should not see their teaching as purely for their own professional advancement; rather, teachers should see this as an opportunity to be instrumental and influential in a child's moral development. Students should also feel that their teachers are able to provide moral support (Nesteruk, 2007).

In her article "Too Much of a Good Thing", Cleaver (2007) asserts that more importance must be placed on how students feel about themselves. However, the teacher must remember that student achievement is more important than this. Students must be able to realize that their academic achievement is correlated with how much effort they put forth.

Good character education programs should have strong ties to the democratic principles of the United States Constitution. It is important to affirm citizenship over various ethnic, religious, and other differences. When properly taught character education can also be civic education. This is because the strength of democracy is dependent upon virtuous citizens. Students must learn to be socially responsible, and learn to respect the rights of others, even those that they may strongly disagree with (Matera 2001). Civic values should be taught so that students can become intelligent voters and independent thinkers (Yost, 1997).

<div align="center">59</div>

There needs to be more studies of the effect that character education will have on test scores, especially when it comes to low performing students (Benninga, et al., 2006).

Character Education: Today

When the No Child Left Behind Act was passed in 2002, it demanded that schools contribute more to student's academic performance as well as student's character. The National Education association and the federal government decided that schools have both of these responsibilities. (Benninga, et. al, yr). Pring (2001), introduces a completely new concept which is that "education itself [is] essentially a moral practice (Pring 2001, pp. 102)." Inspired by a speech from Lawrence Kohlberg, the writer decided that the practice and the aims of moral education should not just be a section of the curriculum; rather, education is a moral practice. This is such a vital concept that if it is not realized it can be quite dangerous. Firstly, schools became detached from morality. This results in a lack of a unifying ideal and no set of values to interact morally and critically. Secondly, there is a clear distinction from the ends of education and the way in which those means are achieved. This refers to the embodiment of moral claims and values, and what they are intended to promote. This should not be so; the means of attaining morality should be inseparable from the ends. Teaching is not just engaging students in activities and information that bring about learning; everything has to be relevant in order for someone to be "teaching." Students must be able to see the connections that are made within a class (Pring, 2001).

Furthermore, teaching should allow students to make sense of the physical, social, and the aesthetic world. Teaching is a moral enterprise that encompasses students in the impersonal and the personal world. The bridge between their impersonal and personal is made by the interpersonal interactions of the teacher and the learner. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of character education programs there must first be clearer standards of what is expected of teachers. This requires reasonable goals and specific targets and precise statements about what teachers should be able to achieve. There must also be some type of professional development that lines up with the standards and expectations of character education programs. We need must identify the problems caused by a lack of character education, identify how to achieve it, empower teachers, schools, parents, administrators, and legislators. We must also measure the quality of the results of character education programs produce; develop a partnership between society, schools, and the community. Finally, there has to be continuous review of the goals and targets, and the method in which they are attained (Pring, 2001).

Teachers should create a comfortable environment for students that allow them to seek and perceive who are, partly, in relation with other people and within society (Pring, 2001). When this happens students can become part of a learning community where they can continuously explore questions of value. In doing so, they learn that their explorations have no end. Society, specifically teachers must realize must recognize that everyone has the capacity for "moral seriousness." This refers to the ability to think seriously about relationships, their future, and about commitments and loyalty. The curriculum should consist of questions rooted in traditions of thought and experience that have been submitted and explored by others. At the same time, it should respect the thoughts and feelings of students as the struggle to find their place in society (Pring, 2001).

Final Thoughts

We can not play the blame game in our educational system. Whether knowingly or unknowingly with all teaching comes the values and concepts of exactly what it is to be humane. When a problem arises, it needs to be recognized, addressed and resolved. Instead of blaming people or institutions for the results of a lack of morality in schools, we should focus our efforts on finding

60

ways of successfully implementing character education into schools. Changes have to occur in parents, legislators, communities, and the media and educational system so that children are taught how to behave. Actualizing character education programs into schools is necessary in order to overcome this nation's crisis of character. We should build the moral futures of our children from the best wisdom that both the past and the present have to offer. Education must go beyond strengthening our comprehension of ethical concepts to actually promoting moral development. So again, I ask should education exist without values?

References

Brannon, D. (2008). Character education - a joint responsibility. *Education Digest, 73*, pp. 56-60. Retrieved November 7, 2008, from Professional Development Collection Database.

Benninga, J.S., Berkowitz, M.W., Kuehn, P. & Smith, K. (2006). Character and academics: what good schools do. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *87*. Retrieved November 7, 2008, from Academic One File Database.

Britzman, M.J. (2005). Improving our moral landscape via character education: an opportunity for school counselor leadership. *Professional School Counseling, 8*. Retrieved November 7, 2008, from Academic One File Database.

Colgan, C. (2003). Making character education work. *American School Board Journal*, pp. 34-35. Retrieved October 8, 2008, from ERIC database.

Hill, F. J., & Awde, N. (2003). *A history of the Islamic world.* New York: Hippocrene.

Dannon, W. (2005). Good? Bad? or none of the above? The time-honored, unavoidable mandate to teach character. *Education Next, 5*. Retrieved November 7, 2008, from Academic One File Database.

Hodgin, D. & Leuhrs. *The best of character*. Chattanooga: National Center for Youth Issues.

Lickona, T. (2004). *Character matters, how to help our children develop good judgment, integrity, and other essential virtues*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Matera, D. (2001). *A cry for character*. Paramus: Prentiss Hall Press.

McDonnel, S. (2008). America's crisis of character - and what to do about it. *Education Week*. Retrieved November 7, 2008, from Academic Search Premier Database.

Nesteruk, J. (2007). Contributing to our student's moral lives. *Change, 39*. Retrieved November 7, 2008, from Academic One File Database.

Post, D.S. (1997). The moral dimensions of teaching and preservice teachers: can moral dispositions be influenced? *Journal of Teacher Education, 48*. Retrieved November 7, 2008, from Academic One File Database.

Pring, R. Education as a moral practice. *Journal of Moral Education*, 30. Retrieved November 7, 2008, from Professional Development Collection Database.

Viadero, O. (2007). Proof of positive effect found for only a few character education programs. *Education Week, 26*. Retrieved November 7, 2008, from Professional Development Collection Database.

61