

Much has been written about character education. In fact, schools and school districts across the United States and in other countries as well, are responding to the public's concern about the behavior of children and youth. Some parents and teachers feel they are doing a good job teaching values and prosocial behavior to children, when in reality they are not as effective as they could be. Many teachers are looking for models, guiding principles, strategies, and techniques that will transform character education into an inseparable part of their curriculum. *According to Gene Carter, ASCD Conference, Israel, September, 1999*, "Schools are an important indicator of the well-being of our democratic society. They remind us of the values that must be passed on to young people in order for them to think critically; to participate in decisions that affect their lives; and to transform inequities that close down democratic social relationships."

Over the years, teachers, parents, and educators in general, who are interested in character education seem to ask themselves the same foundational questions. These questions are at the core of educating the minds and hearts of children and young people. Because of its subjective nature, research in the area of character education has been used to develop many of the programs that are available to schools and parents today; many

programs attempting to integrate the teaching of character education with the teaching of language arts/reading.

This research attempts to shed additional light on the value of teaching essential character traits in a planned, systematic manner, whether this teaching takes place at home, at school, or out in the community.

The dictionary defines character as “a distinctive trait, quality, or attribute; one’s moral constitution; the pattern of behavior or personality found in an individual.” A person develops these traits or qualities early in life through his or her experiences and relationships. Through these experiences and relationships certain traits are formed that guide that person’s behavior and actions. Martin Luther King described it this way: “I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

Character can be broken down further by saying that each person has a personal character and a civic character. *Personal character* is what predisposes one to do that which is right, to be a good and ethical person, a person who knows right from wrong. *Civic character* encompasses traits such as respect for laws, responsibility, fairness, justice, and participating in public affairs. Because the scope of good character is so broad, there is a

wide variety of traits or values to choose from, whether you are a parent, a teacher, or concerned citizen. The important point here, as stated in the Aspen Declaration of Character Education (1992), is that “the present and future well-being of our society requires an involved, caring citizenry with good moral character... people do not automatically develop good moral character; therefore, conscientious efforts must be made to help young people develop the values (traits) and abilities necessary for moral decision-making and conduct.”

Where and when does this process of acquisition of character begin? According to Jean Piaget, being the first to explore children’s moral decision-making, determined that preschoolers are in a stage called Morality of Constraint (Piaget, 1932,1965). At a very young age, children begin to develop character traits based on their own personal experiences and relationships--very early in life. This tells us that parents and primary caregivers are very critical to this type of development.

Several decades after Piaget, another researcher, Lawrence Kohlberg, began a lifetime study of human moral development. His research concurred with Piaget in most respects. His belief was that as children acquire cognitive abilities they also develop the ability to think about moral issues in more and more abstract ways. He also believed that moral

development could be facilitated if a person is exposed to reasoning that is slightly higher than the level on which he is thinking (Kohlberg, 1984).

So where do the schools fit it; or is their help really needed? One might think that if character is learned, and if it involves one's experiences and relationships, then schools have a role to play. Schools are the one place where children and youth come together to learn, examine, and apply character traits. Today this process in helping to facilitate the development of good character traits is called "character education." Much research has been done in this relatively new field already. Here are a few examples: Ryan claims that the popularity of the word character and character education results from its emphasis on the concepts of "socialization" (Ryan, 1986). Kirschenbaum points out that character education is now the preferable term for the teaching of traditional values and moral virtues (Kirschenbaum, 1995). According to Berreth and Berman, character education "is helping young people develop a sense of social responsibility....; helping students understand, through experiences, that what they value matters and that living these virtues (responsibility, respect, self-discipline, integrity, and empathy) lend meaning and richness to their own lives." (Berreth and Berman, 1997).

And what about our communities? Do they have a role to play? It seems that children need to see a connection and relevance about the subjects they are taught in school in order to give them meaning. Just as other subjects need to be relevant to children, so does character education. Children (even the very youngest) need to see a connection between personal values and civic values. They need to see and practice the connection between the Golden Rule and service. Gene Maeroff describes it this way:

“Connectedness operates in several ways to equip young people with the social capital that helps them negotiate their success. On one level, connectedness means gaining a feeling of belonging so that children regard themselves as part of the school process. On another level, it means developing ties that they can use to thread their way around obstacles. This sense of connectedness is strengthened by bonds that the school establishes with home, neighborhood, and community.”(G. Maeroff, 1998).

Partnerships are critical to a school’s character education efforts because it takes families, agencies, and whole communities to raise a child with good character. Schools probably should not attempt to engage in the character development of children without involving parents and others.

Parents, in turn, cannot do it without the help of family, friends, and the institutions that serve them and their children.

Lastly, should we be more concerned about our children's character development today than we were a generation ago? According to J.

Leming, "The impetus for character education is drawn from the observation that there is a crisis in society because of the culture's inability to transmit a set of core values and virtues to youth."(J.Leming, 1994).

After reading headlines in newspapers across our nation about the young killing the young; about bullying, harassing, hazing, incivility, and bad language; about cheating, lying, and stealing, it causes one to be more than just a little concerned. Statistics show that disintegration of the family unit is on the rise; there is more concern for safety in our schools and streets, and a pervasive erosion of ethics, virtues, and good character is also evident in our culture. Books and articles have been written about the isolation of the young from the adult world and about a self-centered culture where the demand for rights outstrips the need for responsibility.

One good argument for character education efforts in schools and communities is to address these disturbing trends and instead, teach moral reasoning, emotional control, prosocial behaviors, and positive personal and civic values.

In making their case for character education, Ryan and Bohlin offer five “arguments” that favor character education in our schools. The first they call “the argument from intellectual authorities” from Plato to Dewey to Kant. Second, the founding fathers of this nation made a strong case in favor of character education. Their third argument focuses on state laws and mandates; their fourth is the courtroom of public opinion. Polls have apparently told us for years that the public wants school to teach values. The fifth argument is what they call the “inevitable argument”. That is, it is unlikely that student can go thorough 12 or so years of schooling without their character and values being affected by their school experiences (K. Ryan and K. Bohlin, 1999).

Current research suggests that the teaching of good character to young children cannot be taken for granted; it must become a priority and a mandate in our homes and schools and communities.

Character education programs are reporting positive results regarding the school climate, discipline, teacher morale, parent involvement, greater liking for school, greater empathy for others, better skills in resolving conflicts, better student behavior and attitudes in general. It seems you can't go wrong or get too much of character educations.

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