Character Education: Efficacy of Character Development Initiatives in High School Settings

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Character Education: Efficacy of Character Development Initiatives in High School Settings

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Character Education: Efficacy of Character Development Initiatives in High School Settings.

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Abstract

An outcome study of a character education program (CEP) was conducted in a high school setting, in order to illustrate efficacy of high school character development initiatives. This study measured character education performance outcomes by comparing the survey results and record reviews of high school students before and after the implementation of a CEP. Over 300 students in grades 9-12 completed the pre-survey, and over 300 participants completed the follow-up character education profile. Follow-up participants have taken part in a CEP for two years, prior to completion of the School as a Caring Community Profile. Performance outcomes were measured based on three factors. These three factors included teachers show respect to parents and students (factor 1), students helping students (factor 2), and students respecting students (factor 3).

No mean differences in school climate factors from 2002 to 2004 were noted; however, a slight change in anticipated mean direction for students helping students (factor 2) was indicated. A correlation analysis between character education factors and school performance resulted in significantly positive results correlating the CEP to increases in all measured academic areas. In addition, factor 1 - “Teachers showing respect to parents and students” was negatively correlated with school absenteeism. A multiple regression analysis of three predictor variables serving as predictors accounted for 13% of the total variance. These factors were discipline, factor 1 - “Teachers show respect to parents and students”, and absences. Further research limitations and indications are also discussed.
Character Education: Efficacy of Character Development Initiatives in High School Settings.

The heightened interest in schools contributing to the development of character through character education programs has once again come to the forefront of discussion among educators. This literature review examines the history, theory and methodology, populations, current use and effectiveness of today's model of character education. Based on this overview, a synopsis of current character education programs will be formed, gaps in current research identified, and suggestions made as to how we may better focus our research efforts in order to determine the efficacy of high school character education programs.

Definition & History

Character education is a controversial topic that has been explored, researched and implemented in schools since the beginning of the twentieth century. Such initiatives attempt to translate the concept of character development into strategies that can be implemented in order to attain, what are often institutional outcomes. Definitions of both character development and character education vary, and tend to be tailored by the community and institution in which they are implemented. An inclusive definition of character development is, "The growth of those aspects of the individual that represent his or her ethical worth, including behavior, cognition, affect, values, personality, identity, and skills that are not moral themselves but support moral functioning" (Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999). In 2000, the National Commission of Character Education broadly defined character education approaches as, "Any deliberate approach by which school personnel, often in conjunction with parents and community members, help children and youth become caring, principled, and responsible." (Williams, 2000, p. 1)
Many character education programs intend to examine and address the personal values, social interactions, and civic responsibilities that children and youth struggle with during their school years, by recognizing that educators have an integral role in furthering the moral development of responsible adults in the society we live in (Williams, 2000). While varying approaches to character education exist, practitioners are united in one common goal: to motivate and support students in the process of considering community standards, while developing their own moral standards. In order to attain this goal, practitioners must consider the enormous pressures from society that are often to the contrary of the very values they hope to instill. Creating an awareness of the individualized constellation of strengths and weaknesses that form and reflect on who we are, independent of external cultural forces is often considered by researchers to be the true mark of character. (Schwartz, 2000) Character education programs have become one tool that can be used by schools to aid students in this process.

Development of Children’s Morality

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, character education focused primarily on codes of conduct and group activities within school clubs. Programs such as the “Children’s Morality Code” emphasized key areas to focus on, such as self-control, good health, kindness, sportsmanship, self-reliance, duty, reliability, truth, good workmanship and teamwork (Leming, 1993). During this period, schools attempted to integrate these codes of value into all aspects of student life in an attempt to reinforce the practice of the virtues through repetition and peer influence. These didactic approaches were implemented throughout the 1920’s and early 30’s. In the late 1920’s, the Institute of Social and Religious Research undertook the most detailed and
comprehensive inquiry to date, assessing over 10,000 youths via survey and interview, as to the nature of character and the school's role in its development. Findings indicated that with respect to honesty and deceit, no relationship was found between membership in an organization that purported to teach these codes and the ability to predict student behavior. Researchers attributed the discrepancy to several factors, including the impact of situational effects and the fact that moral reasoning did not necessarily translate to conduct. The results yielded by this inquiry raised serious questions as to the effectiveness of heavily didactic approaches to character education (Leming, 1993).

Hartshorne and May (1928) also conducted several studies in the area of character education throughout the late 1920's and 1930's. Their series of research examined the overall nature of character specifically in the areas of deceit, service, and self-control among children in grades five through eight. Later studies also analyzed the overall organization of character in similar and dissimilar situations for children in the same age group (Hartshorne & May, 1930). Results of their research indicated that children, in general, learn to become honest or dishonest as a response to certain situations. This indicated that children's conduct represents an achieved association between a certain type of situation and a certain type of response. Researchers argued that once a child built a connection between one of these codes and a certain type of situation, there was little evidence that building a child's sensitivity or awareness to these factors would change the outcome (Hartshorne & May, 1930).

Cognitive-Developmental Theory of Moral Reasoning

By the 1950's, character education initiatives were sparsely found in American schools. A resurgence in this area was sparked by Kohlberg's cognitive development
theory of moral reasoning in 1966. This stage theory was influenced by the notion that human beings develop philosophically and psychologically in a progressive fashion. Kohlberg's work demonstrated that people progressed in their moral reasoning (i.e., in their bases for ethical behavior) through a series of stages. Kohlberg's classifications included six stages, which were generally classified into three levels (Barger, 2000).

These classifications can be outlined in the following manner:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>STAGE</th>
<th>SOCIAL ORIENTATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-conventional</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Obedience and Punishment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Individualism, Instrumentalism, &amp; Exchange</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conventional</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>&quot;Good boy/girl&quot;</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Law and Order</td>
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<td>Post-conventional</td>
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<td>Social Contract</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Principled Conscience</td>
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Kohlberg's stage theory provides a powerful tool for understanding how children and adolescents think about and resolve moral problems (Power, 2002). This theory raised the moral dilemma discussion once again with obvious educational implications, and together with values clarification, it dominated the field of moral education for the next 20 years (Nucci, 1989).

Kohlberg (1975) also took part in a series of studies that examined the development of moral reasoning as it pertains to a child's view of justice or fairness. This research centered on the concept of a "Just Community School", and discussed the positive effects that a democratic school community can have on students' moral development. This type of community would be ruled not by an aristocracy of teachers
and staff, but by a democracy of teachers and students engaged in philosophical
deliberation about the good of their community (Power, 2002).

Kohlberg’s democratic community involved several aspects of student inclusion,
such as: a participatory democracy with teachers, students having equal rights, an
emphasis on conflict resolution through consideration of fairness and morality, and
inclusion of developmental moral discussion in the curriculum. Kohlberg and
colleagues’ approach to establishing the Just Community School was governed by two
essential features of the apprenticeship model: a learn-by-doing approach that gave
students regular opportunities to practice democratic decision-making, and a training
approach that provided direction and guidance. In order to implement the daily practice
of democracy within the school community, Kohlberg emphasized the importance of
using consistent procedures and organization for implementation. Some of these
included establishing weekly community meetings between the students and staff to
discuss community problems and to adopt rules and policies, establishing a fairness
committee that reviewed infractions of rules and conflicts between students or staff, and
the inclusion of real-life exposure to the democratic process (Power, 2002).

Results of this extensive project concluded that changing the peer culture required
much more than simply leading stimulating moral discussions. Practitioners needed to
seize all opportunities to convince students they were part of a cohesive community
(Kohlberg, 1975). Further, it was critical that each student accept responsibility for each
other and for the school community’s future. Researchers further stated that in order to
be successful, programs must challenge our students to commit themselves to a higher
good and that by doing so, foster the development of moral responsibility and civic
engagement (Power, 2002). While this work provided significant implications in the field of enhancing moral reasoning, it did little to provide data, based on measurable outcomes.

Kohlberg's research provided a more defined view of the specific factors contributing to the development of successful character education programs. The procedures that he recommended have been translated and made more adaptable to a variety of school settings by several other researchers.

Arbuthnot and Gordon (1986) hypothesized that adolescents at risk for juvenile delinquency would benefit both cognitively and behaviorally from an intervention designed to accelerate moral reasoning development. Their study involved forty-eight adolescents (age 13-17) who had been identified as aggressive and/or disruptive. These adolescents participated in a moral reasoning development program that consisted of a 45-minute session once a week for up to twenty weeks. Changes in behaviors such as behavior referrals, tardiness, academic performance, and police/court contacts were measured in order to determine its effect. Results indicated that the maturity of socio-moral reasoning (as indicated by Kohlberg-based stage scores) of youth could be improved as a result of weekly, guided moral discussion groups. In addition, various behaviors of the participants improved as an apparent result of the cognitively based intervention. Researchers concluded that behavioral change can be effected through development of the underlying structural bases of decisions (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1986). This research supported earlier findings and provided measurable outcomes in support of their findings.
Also during the 1960's and 70's, the moral dilemma discussion approach recommended that teachers facilitate student reasoning, assist students in resolving moral conflicts, and suggested that these discussions take place in an environment that contained conditions essential for moral reasoning stage growth. In contrast to earlier findings, researchers found that while the moral dilemma approach appeared to raise moral reasoning and result in fewer conduct problems, it was of little practical use in influencing students' overall long-term behaviors (Leming, 1993).

Blasi (1980) presented a broad discussion of the conceptual and empirical issues that concern the relations between moral reasoning and moral action. His research review presented a summary of opposing views, their contrasting assumptions and implications as to the relations between moral cognition and moral action. This summary examined research relating moral reasoning to delinquency, honesty, altruism, conformity, and other real-life moral behaviors. Blasi concluded that while these studies supported the cognitive-developmental perspective overall, the support needed to be qualified and interpreted in each of the different areas. He also emphasized the importance of clarifying the meaning of consistency between moral cognition and moral action and the need for a process approach.

As a result of the expansive research in the area of moral reasoning, today we have several tailored approaches for enhancing moral reasoning in a school setting. Two such approaches are Goldstein’s Prepare Curriculum and Aggression Replacement Training (Goldstein, 1999). The Prepare Curriculum is a series of coordinated psycho-educational courses designed to teach a variety of pro-social psychological skills to children. Previous programs had demonstrated that skill performance could potentially
increase in up to 90% of participants. However, skill performance, especially on an enduring basis, in real-world settings was a much less reliable outcome. The Prepare Curriculum and corresponding Aggression Replacement Training successfully enhanced the generalization of gains for participants, and are widely used in school and alternative settings today (Goldstein, 1999).

**Values Clarification**

The values clarification approach has provided another theoretical perspective to the successful development of student value systems. This approach became well known in the late 1960’s and 70’s, and focused on helping students use both rational thinking and emotional awareness to examine personal behavior patterns and to clarify and actualize their values (Huit, 2004). In this model, teachers only facilitated the process, were not to influence students with personal opinions, and were to respect whatever values the students arrived at. The intent of values clarification programs is to help students define for themselves what they value by emphasizing that “valuing” is a process of self-actualization, involving the ability to choose freely among alternatives, reflecting on consequences, and prizing and acting upon one’s choices (Huit, 2004).

In order to achieve this goal, students were guided through a seven-step process, intended to assist participants in clarifying their own values. This process often included steps such as: (a) Prizing and cherishing; (b) Publicly affirming, when appropriate; (c) Choosing from alternatives; (d) Choosing after consideration of consequences; (e) Choosing freely; (f) Acting; (g) Acting with a pattern, consistency, and repetition (Simon, Howe & Kirschenbaum, 1972).
While many practitioners embraced the concept of values clarification, research findings were inconsistent. Researchers Simon, Howe, and Kirschenbaum (1972) reported that most of the strategies involved in values clarification are applicable to any age level, and are also adapted for use by parents and group leaders for use inside and outside classroom situations.

In 1978, Harmin, Raths, Simon and Merrill coauthored one of the first statements of the theory and techniques for implementation. This publication was highly influential in the field of values clarification and is widely referenced today. Researchers provided data supporting the effectiveness of the values clarification approach, citing the benefits of emphasizing "valuing" as a process, rather than focusing on the content of curriculum delivered. This, they reported, allowed students to develop their own value system, independent of outside influence and resulting in stronger gains that generalized more to real-life situations (Harmin, Raths, Simon & Merrill, 1978).

Values clarification strategies, however, have been widely criticized by researchers for providing only a framework of theory, and little content to assist practitioners in implementation. Other criticisms include a failure to distinguish moral from non-moral value issues, use of methods which jeopardize students' privacy rights, reliance on assumptions and methods of approaches to therapy, and absence of persuasive research to support claims of effectiveness (Lockwood, 1977). Leming (1993) provided a review of research in the area of values clarification. He concluded that overall, findings indicate that the values clarification approach showed no significant changes in influencing student's development in several areas. Additionally, while students were
receptive to the approach due the freedoms it allowed, overall cultural norms often prevailed in what students deemed their own value system (Leming, 1993).

For the past 30 years, moral reasoning and values clarification approaches have continued to evolve in the form of character education programs. In addition to some of these basic approaches outlined previously, programs that addressed character-related student behavior began to emerge. Approaches that were formerly considered to lack content or looked only at moral development as a general construct, now became more tailored to meet the changed issues of the cultural milieu. Issues such as divorce, self-exploration and experimentation, and increasing diversity dictated the need for more comprehensive character education initiatives. Based on this, character education programs began to emphasize both content and process.

Two primary areas of focus became sex and drug education programs. While each focused its efforts in different arenas, both types of programs aimed to mold specific values and behaviors within the youth population. Value-based sex education programs, such as “Not Me, Not Now” aimed to encourage responsible sexual behavior, and were found to have some influence in changing adolescent attitudes and abstinence behavior. Along the same lines, drug education programs, such as Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) attempted to deter students from using drugs and alcohol. These programs evolved over the three decades in a continuum of strategies including scare tactics, teaching students problem solving and decision making, developing positive health-related attitudes, and educating students on peer and society-related pressures. Overall, the “social influences” strategy was found to yield the greatest results. This
strategy aimed to develop students’ skills in dealing with their peers and various pressures they may feel to use drugs or alcohol (Leming, 1993; Williams, 2000).

Throughout the nearly 100-year progression of character education programs, key issues have led to both the lack of implementation and the debate about their effectiveness. These issues are of a moral and practical nature and can be put into six main categories: (a) morality is a private matter and should be taught by the family and the church, not the school; (b) moral issues are so individual that schools can not possibly teach about all the ones relevant to the students in the school; (c) many educators lack the character or the competence to nurture morality in students; (d) morality comes to us from a divine source and cannot be taught in a secular context; (e) teaching character education in schools will make religion become part and parcel of public schooling, and (f) the time necessary to teach character will come at the expense of what is most essential-the academic subjects (Williams, 2000). For years, many of these concerns have led educators, parents and communities to question the role of character education programs, and debate whether educators should be able to teach values in the school.

Today, character education is one of the fastest growing reform movements in PreK-12 education. While these programs carry with them some of the foundational pieces and controversy of the past, they also incorporate a new focus and momentum. Given the inherent influence that educators have on student character, today’s programs no longer ponder the question of whether educators need permission to teach values, and instead forge ahead with the consideration of how the educator can influence student’s character development effectively, so that the impact is positive (Williams, 2000).
Nature of Current Character Education Programs

In order to better understand the current use of character education programs in our schools, it is important to understand common theoretical perspectives, methods for teaching and implementing them, and core values on which C.E. programs focus. As recently as 1999, the National Commission on Character Education outlined five theoretical perspectives on the use of character education programs. These included Watson's community of care, DeVries's constructivist approach to sociomoral development, Berkowitz's child development perspective, Lickona's eclectic approach, and Ryan's traditional perspective. While these five approaches contain differences in theoretical origination, they all emphasize that an effective character education initiative must include direct instruction to indoctrinate the virtues of society through habits, indirect instruction to build children's understanding and socio-moral development, and a community environment that focuses on caring relationships and morals (Williams, 2000).

These same theoretical approaches agree that regardless of perspective or focus, educators must serve as models for students in all character education programs. Teaching strategies that are commonly recommended include consensus building, cooperative learning, inclusion of literature, conflict resolution, discussing and engaging students in moral reasoning, and including a component for learning the value of service (Williams, 2000).

In order to outline an inclusive and comprehensive approach to character education, theoretical perspectives and teaching strategies must come together in an approach that supports the value systems and logistical realities of the institutions in
which they exist. DeRoche and Williams (2000) reviewed the components of effective P-12 character education programs in the United States, and assembled a general framework for a comprehensive program approach. According to their research, effective programs have the following nine components in one form or another: (a) Vision is a critical indicator of the degree of emphasis in actual character education implementation; (b) Standards guide the creation, implementation, and evaluation of programs, while acknowledging the current climate of accountability in schooling; (c) Establishing expectations by coming to a consensus on the values to be taught, and listing the outcomes; (d) Implementation criteria guide stakeholders in creating a community that supports the initiative; (e) Leadership is the most essential element for initial and ongoing success; (f) Understanding what resources exist and which are available to the program to make it successful in classrooms, schools and communities; (g) Teacher knowledge and commitment; (h) Partnerships with parents, teachers and community members build more adult engagement, and greater and longer lasting effects; (i) Formative and summative assessments are found helpful in ensuring the longevity of programs (DeRoche & Williams, 2000).

Ron Kinnamon (2003) the chairman of the “Character Counts!” Coalition outlined what many of the leaders in the character education field consider the six core values of programs used today. These values are Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring, and Citizenship. Since these values transcend religion, race, gender, and economic circumstances, they provide a fundamental way to bring people of all types together in agreement. Because of this universal impact, many states have already either
mandated or strongly recommended that character education be part of school curricula and youth development (Milson, 2000).

**Current Program Use & Findings**

Today, there is a vast market of character education programs available to educators and communities. Programs tailored for elementary, middle, high school, and college can be found in nearly every community, hundreds of websites, and throughout character education research. Many web-based programs are accessible to an unlimited number of students and teachers. In addition, researchers have examined the goals, key components, and effects of several widely-used character education programs.

Character Counts, is one of today's most widely-used character education programs. A variety of services related to this program are available online. The program is based on six pillars of character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. It is used nationwide by over 500 organizations, and works with thousands of trained adults who work with children in camps, schools, and youth organizations. Their goals are to develop good character and positive youth development nationwide. ([http://charactercounts.org](http://charactercounts.org), 2004)

Philip Fitch Vincent and the Character Development Group provide online services and support for a variety of character education workshops. The services available are targeted to cultivate respect, responsibility, and caring in schools by focusing on five key concepts: (a) Rules and Procedures; (b) Cooperative Learning; (c) Teaching for Thinking; (d) Quality Literature; and (e) Service Learning. The Character Education and Development Group has provided character education services for the last twenty years, and in more than 25 states. ([http://charactercounts.org](http://charactercounts.org), 2004)
The Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO) program has been used primarily in elementary and middle school environments. Schultz, Barr, and Selman (2001) examined the effectiveness of this program for 346 students, in 14 FHAO classes. The findings demonstrated that the students in FHAO classrooms showed increases across the school year in relationship maturity and decreases in racist attitudes and self-reported fighting behavior. Overall, researchers found that FHAO can be a, "Powerful force in promoting positive interpersonal and intergroup relations in children’s development." (Schultz, Barr & Selman, 2001, pg. 27)

Unified Studies is a school program that was created to “impact the life-styles” of eleventh and twelfth graders by providing high-involvement learning, and focusing on real life experiences in and outside the classroom. While this program was not explicitly created for the purposes of character education, character development emerged as one of the most important outcomes graduates associated with their experiences in the program. Williams, Yanchar, Jensen, and Lewis (2003) conducted a multi-year study on the long-term effects Unified Studies had in a high school setting. Researchers surveyed and interviewed students that had been exposed to Unified Studies throughout their education. Findings suggested that the Unified Studies program helped students develop character attributes by providing a desirable character education environment. Specific results helped students develop an appreciation and respect for others and the environment, while helping them prepare for higher education. Due to its positive results, this program is considered by the researchers to be a model for character education at the high school level.
In 2000, Astin and Antonio reported their results from a multi-year study of character education initiatives within college and university environments. Their research compared and contrasted effects in two groups: men’s reported outcomes versus women’s, and initiative outcomes within a religious environment versus non-religious university environments. Researchers reported that after four years of college, women exhibited higher levels of civic and social values, had done more volunteer work, and indicated a greater ability to understand others. Women also reported significantly greater increases than did men in cultural awareness, strengthening their religious beliefs and convictions, and the importance they gave to raising a family. Researchers also reported that both males and females within religious-affiliated settings had higher scores on a majority of the measures of character development. Astin and Antonio concluded that in order for institutions to effectively impact character development in students, two criteria must be met: (a) Institutions must provide specific curricular and co-curricular (experiences outside the classroom) opportunities for students that aid in self-awareness, the appreciation of cultural complexity, and the development of awareness of societal needs; and (b) Character development activities and attitude must not only be present, but must permeate or dominate the culture of the college or university.

Arthur J. Schwartz, the director of character education programs at the John Templeton Foundation, supported this conclusion in an interview with the Chronicle of Higher Education in 2000. Schwartz stated that colleges and universities can have a tremendous impact on students’ character, and that institutions and faculty are inescapably a moral influencer, who should take on a continuous and conscious effort to guide students. He stated that a challenge for higher education is to establish character
development as a high institutional priority, and that this is a necessity for true effectiveness.

Researchers have focused their efforts on several other components of current character education programs. One area of interest has been examining the experience of both students and teachers involved in such initiatives, and factors that may affect their experience. Revell (2002) interviewed almost 700 children from a wide variety of schools and ages, in order to investigate how children in public schools viewed character education programs in America. The results of her study indicate that despite a similar program of education, teaching attitudes, and teaching materials, the most marked difference between the children's responses correlated strongly with the type of school they were attending, public, private, or vocational. Researchers concluded that the social and political background, used to determine which school a student attends, does have an impact on the way an educational program is received and understood. Revell's research further raised the concern that with so many other factors contributing to the formation of beliefs and behaviors in children just how influential can schools expect to be in this area.

Research has indicated that elementary and middle school teachers feel efficacious about most aspects of character education (Mehlig & Milson, 2002). In addition, teachers who earned their undergraduate degrees from private, religiously affiliated universities have a greater sense of efficacy for character education. Overall, research has dispelled the notion that teachers are uncomfortable or uncertain about their abilities to be character educators. To the contrary, most teachers in elementary and middle school environments feel capable and confident in their abilities to provide
character education to their students. Instead, teacher concerns are focused more on the needs for more training and institutional support (Mehlig & Milson, 2002).

Romanowski (2003) examined 144 high school students’ perspectives regarding the need for character education, program effectiveness, student and teacher resistance, pedagogical issues and concerns, and suggestions as to what works. A summary of Romanowski’s findings suggests that students believed there is little need for character education because they are already familiar with the superficial level of character traits that are being taught. Additionally, they felt that the topics discussed in character education programs are irrelevant to their lives, too simplistic, and more suited for elementary and middle school. Students engaged in various forms of resistance because they viewed character education as being forced upon them, and cited cases of teacher resistance, lack of involvement, and poor role modeling as reasons for its ineffectiveness. Overall, students felt that character education approaches need to be updated with relevant topics, interesting guest speakers, class discussion and the use of popular culture in order to be more accepted and effective.

According to this study, high school students were able to clearly articulate both their concerns and suggestions for improving current character education programs. Romanowski provides six suggestions for improving character education programs at the high school level: (a) Character education must be taught at appropriate levels with appropriate teaching strategies; (b) Faculty and students must develop accurate understandings of church and state in order to better address controversial topics; (c) Character traits should be integrated into the existing curriculum; (d) Administrators and teachers must develop complex understandings of the workings of student resistance; (e)
Administrators must gain faculty support; and (f) Administrators should use students’ ideas and input to develop and assess character education effectiveness.

Efficacy of Programs

Qualitative and quantitative data gathered by interviews, surveys and empirical research indicate that overall character education programs within the elementary, middle school, and post-secondary education environments are viewed as efficacious by students and staff. Empirical data also indicates that most values targeted by such programs are positively affected by program implementation. This may be one explanation as to why character education programs are more consistently implemented in these school environments.

Limitations of Current Findings

In contrast, research at the high school level appears to be mostly opinion-based in nature, comprised primarily of interviews, surveys, and spontaneous conversations. From this type of research it is not clear if the efficacy results of character education programs in elementary, middle, and post-secondary settings generalize to high school. This is due in part to the absence of qualitative data for high school settings. On one end of the continuum, students viewed CE programs favorably and reported that character education had a positive impact on some of their core values. Other research reports that student and staff members want to see great strides made in order to improve efficacy. This research indicates that students view CE programs unfavorably and see little effect on their values or behaviors. While this opinion-based research provides some indication of the acceptance of current high school programs, it is not evidence-based on measurable changes in conduct.
In short, empirical research has not been conducted in order to measure performance outcomes of character education in high school settings. While researchers attempt to make suggestions for improvements in high school programs, these suggestions are unable to reflect the true outcomes of the programs themselves. As a result, several questions remain unanswered about the efficacy of character education programs in high schools. Some areas to further explore include: how the values targeted by these programs are affected by program implementation, which values are positively or negatively affected, and whether certain values positively affected by character education programs can be generalized to other populations.

Research Questions

Research in the area of character education has focused primarily in elementary, middle school, and higher educational environments. Overall, there have been a limited number of empirical studies done with high school adolescents, and no research that has determined outcome measures in order to indicate efficacy. This research was conducted in order to examine whether high school character education programs have an impact on how youth behave in school, interact with teachers and peers, and perform academically.

This study will provide data that analyzes the extent to which three main factors within the sample are affected: (a) Teachers show respect to students and parents; (b) Students help students; and (c) Students respect students. These factors reflect students’ perceptions of their relationships with teachers, parents and peers. An additional need for the study is to determine whether character education factors are related to students’ school performance. More specifically, are the factors (teachers’ respect to students and
parents, students helping students, and students respecting students) related to discipline and academic growth.
Method

Sample

This study was conducted in a suburban public high school in Upstate New York. The public school chosen represented a blended population of both suburban and urban families. This school was selected because school administrators agreed to participate in the study. Permission was also granted by both administration and homeroom teachers to gain access to students in grades 9-12 during homeroom.

The sample consisted of students in grades 9-12 enrolled during the 2002 and 2004 school years. A total of approximately 300 students participated in both pre- and post-testing. The gender and ethnic statistics for this sample will be identified as data is analyzed. All participants were administered the measures described below.

Procedure

Pre-test questionnaires were administered to the students during homeroom in May, 2002. At this time a record review was also conducted. These pre-test measures provided baseline information of students’ perceptions their relationships, school problem behaviors, and academic performance.

Following this collection of data, a Character Education Program targeting seven virtues was implemented for grades 9-12. The intervention involved a forum that was held every morning for the first four minutes of homeroom. The forum was facilitated by the Assistant Principal and all high school students were required to attend. Each session presented information focused on one of the seven, targeted virtues: 1. Be Positive, 2. Begin with an End in Mind (planning and organization), 3. Put First Things First, 4. Think Win/Win (positive alternatives), 5. Seek first to understand, then to be Understood
Character Education

6. Synergize (work together), and 7. Sharpen the Saw (empowerment through enhanced skills, knowledge and abilities). Each topic was discussed for one month, during the homeroom forums.

In addition to the daily forum, these virtues were reinforced visually throughout the school. A cartoon character named “Character Ed” and created by one of the school’s art teachers, was depicted on posters at main entrances and high traffic areas. Each poster illustrated “Character Ed” with a slogan emphasizing one of the targeted virtues.

Post-test questionnaires were administered to students in May, 2004. At this time, a follow-up review of records was conducted. These post-test measures provided comparison data for the sample population.

Measures

The School as a Caring Community Profile is a 43-item instrument that was developed by “The Institute of the Fourth and Fifth R’s” (reading, writing, arithmetic, respect, and responsibility). This Likert-type scale was used for both the pre- and post-tests and assesses various components of self-concept, relationship perception, and overall understanding of targeted virtues. Specifically, the measure provides feedback on student perceptions of themselves in relation to their parents, their teachers and their school.

Performance outcome results were treated as independent groups and mean differences were determined (Pre-test means vs. Post-test means). In addition, a principle components factor analysis of the School as a Caring Community Profile was conducted with a varimax rotation. This ensured that researchers were able to use factors that accounted for all variance, in order to provide more accuracy in outcome measures.
Lastly, data gathered during record reviews was used to conduct correlations for School Problem Behaviors and Academic Performance, in relation to Character Education.

Other conditions within the sample environment that could affect external validity were also considered during analysis of data. No significant environmental changes within the school and community did not occur during the implementation of the intervention. This allowed researchers to attribute increases or decreases in factors to the Character Education Program.
Results

The mean differences in school climate factors from 2002 to 2004 are illustrated in Table 1. None of the factors resulted in significant mean differences; however, a slight change in anticipated mean direction was noted for factor 2 – “Students help students” and factor 3 – “Students respecting students”.

Data is presented that investigates the relationship between school performance and school climate factors in Table 2. All three factors were significantly positively correlated with academic performance and ranged from .24 for English, to .11 for Social Studies. In addition, only factor 1 – “Teachers show respect to parents and students” was negatively correlated with school absenteeism.

A significant step-wide multiple regression resulted (F3, 289 = 14.84, p ≤ .001) with three predictor variables serving as predictors, accounting for 13% of the variance. These were discipline, factor 1 – “Teachers show respect to parents and students”, and absences (see Table 3).
Discussion

The research on character education typically indicates that C.E. programs positively affect character/value development within elementary, intermediate, and post secondary schools. Opinion-based research at the high school level has produced mixed results, providing little guidance to the improvement of these programs. The results of this efficacy study provide qualitative data that supports some benefits of character education programs in a high school setting. Findings indicate that upon implementation in a high school setting, Character Education programs are positively correlated with academic achievement in all content subject areas measured. The C.E. program also resulted in a slight increase in students helping other students (factor 2), and students respecting other students (factor 3). In addition, all three factors were negatively correlated with incidences of discipline and absenteeism. While we didn’t see change in all variables measured, we clearly see that the C.E. program implementation effectively supported an increase in student achievement, and student interaction, as well as decreased student discipline incidents and student absences.

When considering the variables in this research that were unaffected, possible limitations of this study include whether the intervention was strong enough or whether the measure used in this study was sensitive enough. Perhaps increasing the amount of time for implementation between measures, or completing before and after correlation studies of specific individuals exposed to the program, would demonstrate more consistent results.
Regardless of these considerations, this research supports that Character Education programs have an important impact on the overall academic achievement of high school students.

The literature on character education also provides contradictory information as to whether teachers and students agree on the components that make up a truly “effective” C.E. program. We did not directly determine whether students and teachers in this high school setting viewed the C.E. implementation in the same manner. In general, the results were positive for those promoting character education; however, the instrument did not determine whether teachers and students share the same efficacy beliefs. This question remains for future research. Further research into the nature and effectiveness of programs that exist in high school settings may provide a model for the development of character education with the adolescent population. Furthermore, studies that investigate the specific features of character education programs that are considered beneficial by both teachers and students, may provide better guidance as to the creation of C.E. programs that are both effective in attaining their goal, and in maintaining support from staff members and students alike.
References


Table 1

*Group Differences in Character Education Factors Over Time*

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Table 2

*Correlation Between Character Education Factors and School Performance*

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<th>Character Education Factors</th>
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<td>Tardy</td>
<td>-.05</td>
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<td>Absent</td>
<td>-.13**</td>
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<tr>
<td>English</td>
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<td>Science</td>
<td>.22**</td>
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<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>.17**</td>
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* p < .05.  ** p < .01.
Table 3

*Multiple Regression Analysis: Predicting Academic Achievement with School Behavior Problems and Character Education Factors*

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<thead>
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<th>Predictor Variable</th>
<th>R</th>
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<td>.11</td>
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</table>

* p < .05. ** p < .01.