# Research-Based Character Education

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Whereas character education is not new, scientific study of its effectiveness has been only sporadically implemented during the past thirty-five years. Much of the application of character education is therefore not informed by a scientific knowledge base. This article introduces a scientific perspective on character education and a summary of the research base examining the student impact of school-based character education. From this research base, general principles of effective practice are derived. This in turn is used to offer suggestions to practitioners and policy makers for the improvement of school-based character education.

*Keywords:* character education; research; best practice; character development; effective schools

Character education is not new. In fact, we can probably date it back at least to Socrates. Even in the United States, it goes back as far as the founding of the colonies (and likely farther in Native American culture) (McClellan 1999). But character education has historically been a practice and not a science (Berkowitz 2002). In other words, there has been an abundance of educational methods and curricula generated but comparatively little research on its effectiveness. There was a flurry of interest in the first third of the twentieth century (e.g.,

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Denver Public Schools 1929; Dewey 1909; Griggs 1906; Haviland 1921; MacCunn 1920) and even some substantive research on the topic (Hartshorne and May 1928-1930). Nonetheless, interest in character education waned in the middle third of the twentieth century, and little research was done. In the past thirty-five years, contemporary researchers have turned their expertise and attention to character education. Hence, a substantial body of information has begun to accrue concerning the effectiveness of character education. This article will examine some of what we now know about effective practice.

## What Is Character?

It is difficult to discuss the effectiveness of character education without first considering its goals. The central goal of character education is the development of character in students. Therefore, before we address the research on effective character education, we need to consider what we mean by character and its development. Character can be defined in various ways and is indeed used in different ways in common speech. We consider someone "a character" if they act atypically. We also commonly refer to "having character," but sometimes that character is "good" or "bad." It is unlikely that a school that proposes a character-education initiative is interested in either generating a "bunch of characters" or promoting the development of "bad character" in students. What we really mean in this field when we invoke *character* is sociomoral competency. Character is the complex set of psychological characteristics that enable an individual to act as a moral agent. In other words, character is multifaceted. It is psychological. It relates to moral functioning. In the first author's *moral anatomy*, seven psychological aspects of character are identified: moral action, moral values, moral personality, moral emotions, moral reasoning, moral identity, and foundational characteristics (Berkowitz 1997).

This is likely not a complete taxonomy, but it helps to understand that when one functions (or fails to function) morally, it may be due to any one or some set of these psychological characteristics. For instance, if two equally well off people individually find a wallet with money and identification in it, and one returns it intact while the other takes the money and discards the wallet (perhaps even bragging to his or her kids about how clever it was to take the money), we can imagine many reasons for these different responses to a moral situation. Person A may have more highly developed empathy and feel for the person who lost the wallet. Or Person A may have a heightened sense of moral sensitivity and be more likely to notice that this is a moral issue to begin with. Or Person A may have more mature moral reasoning leading to a better understanding of what the right action is. Or Person A may be better at perspective taking and is able to put himself or herself in the shoes of the wallet's owner. Or Person A may have been raised with a different set of values. Or Person A may have a more highly developed conscience. Or . . . Or . . . In fact, it may be due to some set of these characteristics. The point is that character is complex, multifaceted, and psychological and that it comprises the moral side of a person.

Each of these characteristics develops over the life span and especially in childhood and adolescence (Damon 1988). The predominant impact on this comes from family (Berkowitz and Grych 1998; Lickona 1983), but schools can also be a developmental force (Berkowitz and Grych 2000; Lickona 1991; Gottfredson 2001). For families or schools to influence character development optimally, they need to understand the complex nature of character and to apply effective principles that have been empirically shown to positively impact the development of the many parts of the moral person.

## Does Character Education Work?

This frequently asked question is very difficult to answer, not because there is not ample research on the topic but because, in a sense, it is the wrong question. The term *character education* is applied to such a wide array of educational initiatives that it is difficult to generically answer whether such a mixed set of programs "works."

Character education varies from a limited set of stand-alone and homegrown lessons to fully integrated, comprehensive school-reform models. Many teachers and/or schools simply create some lessons or recognition programs for good character. Others adopt packaged curricula or programs that themselves may vary from a small set of lessons to a comprehensive school model. Others cobble together elements of other initiatives, perhaps adopting a packaged classroom-management program and overlaying another packaged prevention program with a homegrown integration of character issues into their literature or social studies curriculum. And so on.

Furthermore, much of what would count as character education is not even labeled as such. Service learning, social-emotional learning, and prevention programs all share significant features with character education and could be considered forms of character education. For our purposes, if a school-based initiative targets character development, as we have defined it above, in either its program design or its outcomes and goals, then it is a form of character education. Indeed, the field would be well served by a superordinate term that could encompass all of these more parochial fields: something like *positive youth development* as a rubric for character education, service learning, social-emotional learning, and so on. Unfortunately, the professional organizations that represent each of these subfields have invested too heavily in their respective names to make such an integrative move likely.

The best answer to the question of whether character education works is to simply state that quality character education does work. In other words, character education can work, but its effectiveness hinges upon certain characteristics. This is what the rest of this article will address: what are the features of effective character education?

Before we turn to that question, however, it is worthwhile to note the wide array of outcomes that have been demonstrated by effective character education. Character education has been demonstrated to be associated with academic motivation and aspirations, academic achievement, prosocial behavior, bonding to school, prosocial and democratic values, conflict-resolution skills, moral-reasoning maturity, responsibility, respect, self-efficacy, self-control, self-esteem, social skills, and trust in and respect for teachers. Furthermore, effective character education has been demonstrated to reduce absenteeism, discipline referrals, pregnancy, school failure, suspensions, school anxiety, and substance use. Clearly, when it is effective, it works. What we need to know is what makes a character-education initiative effective or ineffective.

## What Works in Character Education?

Most of what follows is the product of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation titled "What Works in Character Education?" The results reported here, however, are preliminary as that project has not been completed. The results are supplemented with work by others, most notably an excellent review by Solomon, Watson, and Battistich (2001).

### *Quality of implementation*

It seems self-apparent, but one of the most critical factors in the effectiveness of character education is the faithfulness with which it is implemented. Typically, it falls to classroom teachers to implement character education, and typically, they are not adequately trained to implement it accurately or completely. Research has consistently demonstrated that for character education (or any form of intervention for that matter) to work, it must be fully and accurately delivered (Colby et al. 1977; Kam, Greenberg, and Walls 2003; Solomon et al. 2000). Whereas this point may seem so obvious that it is not worth repeating, the fact of the matter is that many programs and program evaluations fail to monitor the level and quality of implementation and likewise fail to build in adequate safeguards to maximize the likelihood of full implementation. Effective character education requires fidelity in implementation, therefore implementers need to ensure such fidelity.

A subissue of this concern with implementation quality, and one that has not been adequately addressed in the research literature, is exposure. Given the high mobility rates in many schools, quality implementation may still not be effective if students are not present during implementation. Most researchers do not examine the levels of exposure of students in character-education initiatives. While it seems fair to assume that students with greater exposure will benefit more from character education than will students with low exposure in the same schools, the relationship between exposure and outcomes may not be straightforward (Allen, Philliber, and Hoggson 1990; Solomon, Watson, and Battistich 2001).

*Comprehensive, multifaceted character education*

Many effective character-education initiatives represent comprehensive, often schoolwide or districtwide, multifaceted approaches. Programs such as the Child Development Project (and its derivative Caring School Community; http://www.devstu.org; Solomon et al. 2000), Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (http://www.esrnational.org; Aber et al. 1998), and the Seattle Social Development Project (Hawkins et al. 1992) are multicomponent models that include classroom management, curricular, social-skill training, parent involvement, and/or school-reform elements. This is not to say that monolithic initiatives cannot work; rather, that comprehensive initiatives seem to be particularly effective, especially when character is broadly defined and diverse outcome goals are targeted.

*Character is the complex set of psychological characteristics that enable an individual to act as a moral agent.*

*Student bonding to school*

Under a variety of different names (bonding, attachment, belonging, relatedness, connection, etc.), it has been demonstrated that from preschool through high school, the emotional attachment of a student to his or her classroom and school is a critical mediating factor in the effectiveness of character education (Berkowitz and Bier forthcoming; Osterman 2000) and of students' general engagement in school (Furrer and Skinner 2003). At the preschool level, Howes and Ritchie (2002), through a series of studies, have demonstrated that children with more positive interactions with and more secure attachments to their teachers were more positive, more gregarious, engaged in more complex social play, had demonstrated more advanced cognitive activity, and showed more ego resiliency. Research on the Child Development Project (Solomon et al. 2000) has revealed that the effectiveness of this elementary school program is mediated by the degree to which students come to perceive their classrooms and schools as a "caring community." Furthermore, in an earlier study, they report that students' sense of the classroom as a community is significantly related to teachers' emphasis on cooperative strategies and focus on prosocial values (Solomon et al. 1997).

In middle school, when students perceive their teachers as supporting respectful student interactions, having high expectations, being supportive and fair, and

avoiding a reliance on negative messages and behavioral rules, the students show increased self-efficacy, self-regulation, character development, and academic achievement (Ryan and Patrick 2001; Wentzel 2002). In a series of studies on a national high school data set, it was demonstrated that attachment to parents and school were the two main predictors of reduced risk behavior (Resnick et al. 1997). Furthermore, the school predictors of student bonding to school were found to be positive classroom management, tolerant (nonharsh) disciplinary practices, involvement in extracurricular activities, smaller schools, good physical health, and avoidance of cigarette smoking (Bonny et al. 2000; McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum 2002).

Clearly then, when designing and implementing a character-education initiative, it is of great importance to intentionally target students' phenomenological perspective of the school (and classroom) as a caring community and their subsequent emotional bonding to the school and classroom, as both a goal and a measured outcome or mediating variable.

### *Leadership is key*

One of the factors that practitioners will repeatedly affirm is that the school leader is the most critical individual in the success or failure of a character-education initiative. Certainly, it is possible to create an island of sanity within a classroom in a school that does not meaningfully embrace character education (Urban 2003), but that serves only the students who pass through that classroom. To positively impact an entire school, the school principal's role is essential (DeRoche and Williams 2001; Lickona 1991).

The Character Education Partnership identifies three important aspects of character: understanding, commitment, action. While these are intended to apply to the student developmental outcomes of character education, they can apply to staff development as well. An effective principal needs to (1) "get it," (2) "buy into it," and (3) "live it." In other words, leading a school of character requires that the principal first fully understands what quality character education entails (most do not). Then the principal must really commit to this vision and truly want to make it happen under his or her watch. Finally, the principal must have the requisite skills to enact quality character education and then to live it out both personally and programmatically.

PATHS (Greenberg et al. 1995), a well-researched character-education program, recently reported that principal "buy-in" (interest/commitment) was one of two critical factors necessary for effective implementation (Kam, Greenberg, and Walls 2003). But buy-in is only part of this triumvirate of leadership attributes. Whereas some identify the task of character-education leadership to be largely exhortation (Murphy 2002), others argue that the core function of school leadership goes much deeper. Valentine, Trimble, and Whitaker (1997) argue for leader competency. Jackson and Davis (2000), in a blueprint for middle school reform, argue for the principal to be a "principal change agent" who relies on staff empow-

erment and democratic governance as the path to school improvement and student flourishing.

This is precisely why groups like the Character Education Partnership (http://www.character.org) and the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (http://www.casel.org) have targeted initiatives for school-leader training. In St. Louis, a collaborative of the University of Missouri–St. Louis and the Cooperating School Districts has been offering yearlong academies in character education for five years (Nance et al. 2003). It is clear to us running these academies that school leaders need to learn the why ("head") and the how ("hand") but also often need to develop the commitment and motivation ("heart") to lead a character-education initiative effectively.

### *Character education is good education*

In the current climate of high-stakes standardized testing in schools, quality education is taking quite a beating. Schools are skewing their curricula toward the narrow content of tests, in some cases actually dropping entire subject areas that are not being tested that year. Schools are becoming pressure cookers where adults and students feel oppressed. Teaching is moving toward rote memorization of whatever is expected to be on the test.

Character education, on the other hand, entails many of the central tenets of quality education. The Hope Foundation (http://www.communitiesofhope.org) has identified six characteristics of high-performing schools, which include having a shared vision and goals, using collaborative teams, and developing leadership capacity at all levels. A recent study of three at-risk schools that excel academically (Ancess 2003) identifies the characteristics of success, which include shared governance, strong leaders who empower others, norms of interpersonal respect, close caring relationships among staff and between staff and students, and maximal opportunities for success for all students. The characteristics identified by both of these reviews align strongly with many of the characteristics of comprehensive character education: student empowerment, constructivist principles, collaborative learning, opportunities for student reflection, a focus on the deep and powerful truths of human experience, and applications of course content to real-life projects (e.g., service learning). It is therefore not surprising that quality character education turns out to be good education in general and that educational reforms like service learning and constructivist education are found not only to promote academic achievement but also to foster student character development as well.

Likewise, it is not surprising that quality character education results in academic gains for students, something that has been demonstrated repeatedly in research (e.g., Aber, Brown, and Henrich 1999; Allen et al. 1997; Battistich and Hong 2003; Character Education Partnership 2000; Elliott 1993; Flay, Allred, and Ordway 2001; Kiger 2000; Twemlow et al. 2001). All of these studies focus on the academic effects of particular character-education programs; however, a recent study of 120 elementary schools in California used a more generic definition of character edu-

cation and found that quality of character education is significantly related to standardized test scores (Benninga et al. forthcoming).

### *Character education as primary prevention*

In both the scholarly and the practical literatures, a strong distinction is made between school-based prevention and character education. However, this appears to be a false dichotomy for two reasons (Berkowitz 2000). First, the two tend to share many features. Second, character education has been systematically demonstrated to be an effective form of prevention, especially primary prevention.

Character-education programs like the Child Development Project have reported significant reductions in violence and substance use (Battistich et al. 2000). Effective prevention programs such as Life-skills Training (Botvin et al. 1997) and All Stars (Harrington et al. 2001) incorporate character-education elements. Other prevention programs have been demonstrated to both reduce risky behaviors and promote positive character development (e.g., Allen et al. 1994; Kam, Greenberg, and Walls 2003; Taylor et al. 1999). Clearly, the distinction between prevention and character education is murky and character education is an effective form of primary prevention.

### *Staff development*

Staff involvement and commitment to character education is critical to effective implementation, just as it is to all instructional innovations or educational reforms (Hinde 2003). Kam, Greenberg, and Walls (2003) report that implementation of PATHS depended heavily on teacher commitment.

One of the vastly underutilized components of quality character education is staff development. Typically, this is so either because the delivery systems were never built into the character education model or because it is just too expensive (in terms of both money and time). Many effective character-education models either require or strongly recommend staff development or offer it as an option (e.g., Child Development Project, Responsive Classroom, Community of Caring, Facing History and Ourselves, Learning for Life, Life Skills Training, Reach Out to Schools).

As with principals, if staff do not understand the initiative, they will likely implement it ineffectively or reject it for the wrong reasons. If they do not value it, then they will not implement it effectively (if at all). If they do not know how to implement it, then again they will likely implement it ineffectively.

### *Direct skill building*

From a variety of theoretical perspectives, the training of interpersonal, emotional, and moral skills is critical to effective school-based character development. The traditional approach to character education (Benninga 1991; Wynne and Ryan

1993) has long relied upon an Aristotelian principle that character is formed in large part through habitual behavior that eventually becomes internalized into virtues (character). Traditional social-emotional learning (Greenberg et al. 1995) has relied upon more behavioral models of learning and development and therefore depended heavily on classroom lessons that directly teach social and emotional skills. This same approach has been dominant in much of the school-based prevention literature (Tappe, Galer-Unti, and Baily 1995).

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Furthermore, it is clear that many of the initiatives and models that incorporate direct skill training are quite effective. In many cases, direct skill training is a module in a more comprehensive approach to character education (Hawkins et al. 2001; Weissberg, Barton, and Shriver 1997). This works particularly well when training those skills upon which the comprehensive approach relies, for example, teaching listening skills so that cooperative learning can be effective, or teaching peer conflict-resolution skills so that class meetings can be effective.

*Parent involvement*

More and more schools are recognizing that they need to be proactive about incorporating parents into the life of the school and into their children's learning in general. Principle 10 of the Character Education Partnership's 11 Principles of Effective Character Education (Lickona, Schaps, and Lewis 2003) asserts that "schools must recruit parents and community members as full partners in the character-building effort." CHARACTERplus (http://www.csd.org), based in St.

Louis, Missouri, explicitly involves parents throughout the character-education planning and implementation process. In CHARACTERplus schools, parents, teachers, and community representatives jointly identify and define the character traits their schools will emphasize. There is also a burgeoning literature demonstrating the power of parental involvement in children's academic achievement and character development (Patrikakou et al. forthcoming), and many character education programs build in aspects of character education that encourage or require parental participation. They have specific parent-involvement components that engage the parent and child in educational activities at home; teachers then follow up on these activities in the classroom, strengthening the connections between home and school (e.g., the Child Development Project and Positive Action). Other character-education initiatives would be well served to explicitly target parent involvement as a necessary component of an effective character-education approach.

### *Student reflection on social and moral issues*

Sizer and Sizer (1999) emphasize the importance of students' "grappling" with moral issues. In fact, the Kohlbergian approach to moral reasoning (Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg 1989; Reimer, Paolitto, and Hersh 1983) is largely predicated upon the institutionalization of peer moral discourse (Berkowitz 1985). A substantial body of literature has demonstrated that programmatic peer moral discourse is an effective means of promoting the development of moral-reasoning capacities. Furthermore, Berkowitz and Simmons (forthcoming) have argued for the integration of such strategies in content areas such as science education as a way of bolstering character education and academic learning.

Character education often includes study of moral and ethical issues, whether through heroes curricula such as the Giraffe Project or the Raoul Wallenberg Project or through literature-based character education such as the Heartwood Project, KidzLit, or Voices of Love and Freedom. Research suggests that a central element in effective use of moral content in character education is to employ pedagogical processes that rely on structured, respectful peer discussion of those issues. As noted elsewhere in this article, staff development in how to create social norms for respectful disagreement and social-skills training are important for the effective inclusion of such peer moral-discourse experiences.

### *Adults as role models*

One of the more elusive aspects of character education is the impact of adult behavior on student development. We know quite clearly from social psychology how powerful observing the behaviors of valued others can be on one's own development (Bandura 1977). It is also clear from research on professional education that the primary influence on the ethics of soon-to-be professionals (e.g., medical students) is the ethical (or unethical) behavior of the professionals who train them (Pelligrino 1989). Furthermore, the research on parenting and children's character

development frequently demonstrates the power of parental role modeling on children's character, for example, on their altruism (Eisenberg and Mussen 1989) and self-control (Maccoby 1980). But there is little research on this powerful factor in schools. One exception is the work by Ryan and Patrick (2001) who report that teachers who are perceived by students as expecting respectful relations in the classroom had students with increased self-regulatory skills. Anecdotal evidence about such a relationship between teacher behavior and student character abounds. Principals repeatedly report that the easiest way to get students to clean up the debris in the school yard is for the principal to begin to do it daily. Students soon follow suit without being asked or told to do so. Elementary school teachers, especially at the primary grades, frequently report that the easiest way to know what kind of teacher you are is to either watch your students playing school or ask one of them to lead a lesson.

## Closing Thoughts

It is clear that character education is an effective means of promoting both student social/moral/emotional development and academic achievement. As one scrutinizes successful character education initiatives, it is also clear that (1) character education is good education and that (2) character education comes in a wide variety of forms. Some of those forms are effective and others are not; however, there is great variety in the forms of character education that do succeed. Nevertheless, it is important to examine those characteristics of effective character education to identify the "active ingredients" that make them work. This discussion has attempted to highlight some of those ingredients: comprehensive, multifaceted approaches; approaches that target and succeed at promoting student bonding to school; committed and informed school leadership; integrating character and academic education; integrating character education and prevention education; ample and appropriate staff development; direct teaching of relevant personal and social skills; parent involvement; and student reflection and grappling with moral issues; adults' modeling good character.

Clearly, more research is needed to understand better how and when character education is most effective. Nonetheless, enough is already known to help educators design effective initiatives that will foster the development of character in students.

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# What Works in School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs for Positive Youth Development

*By*
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Two challenges for researchers of school-based action are to identify effective approaches to prevent problem behaviors and promote positive youth development and to support the widespread implementation and sustainability of evidence-based preschool through high school practice. In this article, the authors describe integrated social, emotional, and academic education as a useful framework for conceptualizing school-based positive youth development programming. We then review findings from selected exemplary studies and research syntheses to support this perspective. We conclude with guidelines for implementing integrated social, emotional, and academic learning programs.

*Keywords:* social and emotional learning; school; children; prevention

Educators and parents want children to attend safe, supportive schools that use sound methods to enhance students' academic, social, emotional, and ethical growth (Learning First Alliance 2001). In addition to producing students who are intellectually reflective and committed to lifelong learning, they want quality education that results in students who relate in socially skilled, respectful, and constructive ways with other young people and adults; engage in positive and safe health practices; contribute ethically and responsibly to their peer

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