

## Bring Character Education into Classroom

Alex Agboola<sup>1</sup>, Kaun Chen Tsai<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *University of the Incarnate Word*

<sup>2</sup> *University of the Incarnate Word, 6900 N Vandiver Rd J205, San Antonio, TX, 78209, USA*  
*E-mail: ktsai@student.uiwtx.edu*

Character education is a growing discipline with the deliberate attempt to optimize students' ethical behavior. The outcome of character education has always been encouraging, solidly, and continually preparing the leaders of tomorrow. The promotion of character education should not just a leap service but has an action plan for practice. In order words, education policy should take the lead to actualize moral education. Taken together, parents, teachers, and administrators as stakeholders, should join this camp to encourage students to manifest those good values in their lives. The outline of this paper is that first the definition of character education is provided. Then, the historical perspective of character education is reviewed. Third, the issue of context in character education is disclosed. The challenge and controversy of implementation of character education is also presented. Finally, the implication and further research are discussed.

Key words: Character education, characters, virtues, moral education

### Introduction

Character has from the time immemorial been perceived as a word that is acclaimed with special connotations. In other words, when someone is attributed as having a good character as it is commonly used, that person also possesses some other qualities such as trustworthiness, integrity, passionate, reliable, and dependable (Pike, 2010). According to developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind (as cited in Berkowitz & Fekula, 2006), character as the measurement of our perceived manners; namely, it is an overall evaluation of our inward and outward behaviors.

Character education is a growing discipline with the deliberate attempt to optimize students' ethical behavior (Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009; Katilmis, Eksi, & Öztürk, 2011). Character education is not a new idea. The idea of schooling as implanting virtues is as old as schooling itself (O'Sullivan, 2004). Initially character education was an imperative mission in the public educational system; nevertheless, because of fear of conceptual interconnection between morality and religion, it was phased out (Cooley, 2008; Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). The main principle of good character is respect, truth, fair, and responsibility (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006).

Education, in its own domain, has been the part and parcel of our individual lives even from the inception of our respective lives. No wonder it is being described as "field of action in its own right" (Hogan, 2006, p. 253). This is the practical aspect of education as those actions have in retrospect been accorded to us when we were growing up. John Wilson said that education should be seen as a tool of various authorities like a huge corporation, institutional settings – research institutes/universities, or better yet, that of a country (as cited in Hogan, 2006). Attention on the character education has growing in a public school system because of the increasing tendency of negative behaviors among youth (Williams, Yanchar, Jensen, & Lewis, 2003). "Character education can become an everyday opportunities" (Milliren & Messer, 2009, p. 20). Further, Cooley (2008) prized character education as "engines of social change" (p.203).

For the purpose of this literature review, first the definition of character education is provided. Then, the historical perspective of character education is reviewed. Third, the issue of context in character education is disclosed. The challenge and controversy of implementation of character education is also presented. Finally, the implication and further research are discussed.

### **Character Education Defined**

Right from a very long time, the educational systems of world spectrum had in many forms initiated some systems of educating pupils of different ages, and creed about the values of character. It is believed that whatever the children become in the future has to do with the level of character imbedded in him, or her, through education. The belief systems in different parts of the worlds and the inability to maintain a standard accepted ways of instilling this concept of education (e.g., the disagreement between parents and schools) have made the program of character education even subtle. However, as “ethical thinking” is progressively being incorporated into various levels of education or training, the world is gradually embracing the values that come with character education (Tirri, 2009, p. 118).

The word *character* in ancient Greek means “to engrave,” which emphasizes the engraved traits will affect us to behave in certain manners (O’Sullivan, 2004). “Good character is a concept which contains knowing good, embracing good and doing well” (Katilmis et al., 2011, p. 854). The common belief of character education is from psychological and philosophical perspective that virtues can be taught and learned through the proper pedagogy (Cooley, 2008).

Hoge (2002) defined character education as a way of adjusting the behaviors of the students, in order to become good citizens of the future. According to Pike (2010), these students were being instructed, guided, and toward having some sets of prescribed behaviors. Marshall, Caldwell, and Foster (2011) claimed that character education is perpetually believed, to some kind of ways through which the students are being nurtured in the direction of seeing things in different perspectives; in other words, training them is always to exert maturity while in the mist of challenging situations.

U.S. Department of Education (2005) clearly defined the character education as “an explicit learning process from which students in a school community understand, accept, and act on ethical values such as respect for others, justice, civic virtue and citizenship, and responsibility for self and others.” A simpler definition offered by Berkowitz and Hoppe (2009) is “deliberate attempts to promote the development of student character in schools” (p. 132). The purpose of focusing on those values is to decrease problem behaviors and increase academic engagements in schools (Katilmis et al., 2011; Parker, Nelson, & Burns, 2010).

### **Historical Perspective**

The education of character might sound like some scientific inventions that are just proving the extents of its validities. It might make some people wonder if it has to do with some educational training that will forever alter the cultural beliefs of some people. However, as much as it could sound like a new thing, Althof, and Berkowitz (2006) have acclaimed “that this field has existed as long as humans have thought about how to rise each subsequent generation” (p. 496). They also mentioned that “Classic thinkers” like Aristotle, and Confucius have in the past devoted a great deal of time and worked tirelessly, in finding solutions to the issues concerning behavioral expectations of our students. Those ancient sages also endeavored to find the ways to make these behaviors permanent on the students.

John Dewey has “defined character as the interpenetration of habits” (as cited in Althof, & Berkowitz, 1999, p. 497). The period between 1917 and 1930 brought a lot of unwarranted behavioral

problems on the country, and the impacts were felt in and around different communities of the country. These problems range from the students showing defiance to the necessary authorities, stubbornly refusing, or rejecting the prescribed behavioral lessons of that period. Also, the religious sects and “families” also witnessed tremendous shifts in their efforts while they were trying to foster behavioral training for the students (Setran, 2003). These behaviors were contrary to how the people with good characters were perceived. Setran (2003) said the elders, or the organizational leaders of this particular period would judge characters based on: (1) how an individual functions in the means of community initiatives; (2) they also would character on how they collectively joined together to pursue an outstanding project; and (3) judge on how convincingly and independently that individual proved himself/herself that assigned projects were completed as expected.

The behavioral declining mode of this period was due to World War I, which was fought between the years 1914-1919. The aftermath of the war has brought with it a disparaging behavioral dilemma which called for gradual, but effective attitude, or behavioral adjustments (Setran, 2003). Their efforts amongst other things, would bring about the renewed, or the rebirth of character education, and convert the “topic into emerging educational mainstream” (Setran, 2003, p. 437).

### **Current Issues of Students’ Behaviors**

Anderson (2000) stated that these efforts of renewing, revamping, or re-introduction of character education will not be a project that could be accomplished with urgency. It surely has to be gradual progressions with the notion to embed the program into the educational institutions’ curriculum. Further, he emphasized that the teachers should also bear the burdens of impacting, or teaching the students in these institutions. In other words, “the teacher is central to character education” (Anderson, 2000, p.139). Education of character should not be taken lightly, because of the key facts that it would have foundational and everlasting effects on the children, or the students of the future in displaying their character. Further, the program should be well spread through elementary, middle and high school year, and even unto college, while it is distinguishingly embracing a wide range of well-built character classes (Berkowitz & Fukula, 1999). Marshall, Caldwell, and Foster (2011) stated that “rather than being a ‘bag of virtues designed to control student behavior, integrated character education is a school and community process for educating the whole child in a healthy, caring environment” (p. 53). It must be accepted, according to Edgington (2002), and seen as being done through collective efforts, whereby character added values are constantly being planted in the students, for the benefit of our country, and particularly, that of our communities.

Stiff-Williams (2002) argued the students of the past, and that of the present generations, without any hesitation whatsoever, would dive into some detrimental acts of drinking, indiscriminate kind of behaviors, substance abuse, stealing, and felony crimes. These behavioral irregularities in the past quickly brought about some concerns for the educators, teachers, parents, organizations like religious concerns, government entities, and all others like an ex-president of our country. President Clinton in supporting character education, would through his “February 4, 1997 State of the Union address,” said “I challenge all our schools to teach character education, to teach good values and good citizenship” (as cited in Cunningham, 1977, p. 1). Further, Stiff Williams (2002) also mentioned that the majority if not all the states of the country, have compulsorily accepted character based education to be taught in their public schools just as they have accepted their permanent educational syllabi. The impressive unity of these states in pursuing character education also instigated the Federal Government to approve and give free money to some of these states in order to support their relentless efforts in challenging the character maladies, that were presumed to be taken over our children/the students of this country.

The country at large knows that our students should be well tuned, matured, and self-prepared through the assist of character based education, for them to be the leaders of tomorrow. The leadership

mantles will automatically fall into their hands. With that notion in mind, character educators are always of the higher heights, when they see outstanding students who have unconditionally demonstrated an all-out character maturities that are progressively moving his/her community forward (Setran, 2003). It has also been noted, that a beneficiary of character education will in reverse advocate, or do whatever it takes to impact the same knowledge base, on the next generation, subsequently doing better as they strive to broaden their other secular knowledge, and more accommodative of other people regardless of their background. They also have the spirit of caring, and are liberal in perceiving things (Pamental, 2010).

### **The Benefits of Implementation of Character Education**

The initial goal of character education is to exemplify good character characteristics for students (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). A number of researches found the positive results of applying character education programs in the schools, including higher academic achievements, fewer suspensions as well as dropout, and fewer risk behaviors of students (Bergmark, 2008; Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009; Katilmis et al., 2011; Parker et al., 2010; Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). The overall promising student development indicates character education programs should be one of important components embedded in the current curricula. Williams et al (2003) found, through interviews and questionnaire responses, the participants of character education program claimed that the beneficial learning experience they obtained not only in developing ethical, experiential, and intellectual foundation of character, but also those experiences continue extending throughout their lives.

The character education is more effective under the condition of encouraging students with good character traits which also are “legitimized, modeled, and reinforced by school and teachers” (Romanowski, 2005, p. 17). O'Sullivan (2004) suggested that the easiest way to promote character education is using literature study, since the stories serve as role models that connect experiences and morals (Sanchez & Stewart, 2006). Further, Revell and Arthur (2007) argued that the attitudes of student teachers toward moral education also play an imperative role in the process of implementation of moral education. That is, it should be part of the curriculum of teacher education. Most important, they found the positive effect on later exercise because of opportunities of self-evaluation and of checking their assumption of character education.

Romanowski (2005) provided some beneficial suggestions for the implementation of character education: (1) the involvement of the teachers in program planning will increase faculty support and commitment, which in turn improve the effectiveness of the program; (2) with regard to the curriculum, it should be relevant to students' life and also challenge them intellectually, emotionally, and socially; (3) administration should support and give enough space for teachers to exercise flexible pedagogy in specific character traits; (4) conducting class discussions could effectively engage students in the program. Further, through the reflection, it will lead to the opportunities of in-depth discussion; (5) finally; the responsibility of the school is to develop an environment in which reinforces bright sides of students learning and behavior, thereby students also practicing those good values they learned from the character education program. The promising ground of bring the framework of character education is to “make critical links between the lessons of greater social sympathy in the classroom and benevolent action in life” (Cooley, 2008, p. 203).

### **Constraints and Controversies with Implementation of Character Education**

We live in a free democratic world where individual families can choose to raise their children in the ways they feel appropriate for them, or their life style. In this case, some people, who are not the advocates of character education, are of the belief that children among other things should be

completely independent “to make up their own minds.” The mindset of these segments of people is that “character education is even regarded as indoctrinatory and an infringement of children’s rights” (Pike, 2010, p.311). Another challenge will be the confusions that could take place when the students of different religious backgrounds are studying under one roof, how then will you decipher the situation. A tested solution is to work around the perimeters of some “shared value” (Pike, 2010). However, this could also lead to some disagreement between all the concerned people as they would have different meaning, or interpretation to what is being perceived as shared value.

The politics of schooling, on the other hand, plays an important role to influence the implementation of character education. Sometimes the hidden agenda among the faculty member or parents will block the program development. In order to solve this conflict, the support of administration is the key, which in turn will wipe out the concerns of teachers (Romanowski, 2005). On the behavior of process of character education, Bergmark (2008) identified student voice also services as the cornerstone of character education. By doing so, it allows students to actively participate in the development of character strength. With regards to egalitarian frame for character education, Cooley (2008) pointed out the discourse of character should be located in democratic agreement instead of proclaiming universal values that are in the textbook. For example, Gallien and Jackson (2006) asserted that character curricular should take context into consideration with culturally responsive manner. Different group has specific value and needs. They suggested in order promoting character education in black urban areas, it is necessary to construct the framework through the conception of African-American counternarratives (e.g., history, literature, cultural, and religious values), thereby effectively transmitting good character values to their youth.

Issues of moral education touch an individual’s basic beliefs (Eberly, 1995; Pritchard, 1998). Morris and Scott (2003) identified the importance of educational reform and policy implementation in terms of actualization of moral education in classrooms. In other words, character education will be achieved in accordance with the support of national education system, in which the government should have a commitment and responsibility to this task (Fathurahman, 2012). With the determinative and supportive policy, this atmosphere will be conducive to the operational level, agencies such as teachers, students, and facilities. At the implementation level, the departmental structures and curriculum are also the reason that schools are hesitant to embrace character education (Chazan, 1985; Nucci, 1989; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999). As a result, it is necessary to redesign the curriculum for the sake of facilitating character education. Finally, the concept of moral education should be involved in the education of teachers, especially, in the introduction course of philosophy and history of education (Berkowitz & Oser, 1985; Lickona, 1991). The rationale behind this is that those young teachers will involve in elementary and secondary schools, in which the concept of moral and character is easy to introduce to children. Through being equipped with enough knowledge of character education, teachers would tend to be more engaging in character education development.

In sum, there are tendencies where the “standard based education” and all other none standard curriculum, like that of character education would conflict each other, and as these institutions would strive to follow the directive of the authority involve, the auxiliary program, might just be thrown out (Stiff-Williams, 2010). Education has been perceived as authority of its own that serves as catalyst through which knowledge, training, empowerment are also embedded on someone. These two words bring the added value of character education, which simply are calculated attempts used in controlling, or inciting the behaviors of some people. This is an educational phenomenon that has been in existence for a very long time; however, the importance of it in our current world could not be over emphasized as it is just an added packed values that tend to benefit the young, old, organizational settings, the community, and the country as whole.

## Conclusion

Character in many forms has been described as the way we express our inner and outward being; that imbedded value that is within us, and will make some of us to go out of our ways to express compassion, caring, integrity, respect, and all other values that go with virtue. Although the focus of character education has changed throughout history, “character education is an enduring idea” (O’Sullivan, 2004, p. 640). Character education does not function as a quick fix of deviated behaviors of students, because other factors also impact their behaviors such as family, social, and cultural issues. That is, the character of a student is shaped by social environment that is beyond the scope of educational settings (Romanowski, 2005). Centrally, “character development is the dynamic interplay between internal determinants and external influences in order for positive growth to occur” (Gallien & Jackson, 2006, p. 133). Although other factors (e.g., media or peers) could impact the development outcomes and lead to opposite direction, the school still needs to employ character education equipping students with proper characteristics that help them become good citizens. In sum, participation and commitment is the key to attain this goal (Bergmark, 2008).

There are some downsides to the program ranging from conflict with the standard school curriculum, defiance of some parents about the education of character, or where some students of an institution will have variable, or unidentical beliefs in regard to character. Additionally, some issues of character education are lack of reliable and valid evaluation to justify its effect; therefore, it will be beneficial for future research that puts more weights on the assessment (Romanowski, 2005). Further, an inter-disciplinary approach from different perspectives could facilitate a better understanding of character education, especially on specific cultural groups (Gallien & Jackson, 2006).

The outcome of character education has always been encouraging, solidly, and continually preparing the leaders of tomorrow. This subject matter will require more studies particularly in the areas of similarities/differences in character education, and that of moral education. Finally, Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006) suggested the importance of the process of implementation of character education in different districts in order to fit the needs and goals of each community, thereby effectively influencing students’ behaviors.

In closing, character education is not a slogan or a course but a mission that is embedded in the everyday school life. Schools function as an arena where students could practice good virtues and go beyond their school life (Milliren & Messer, 2009). Most important, the promotion of character education should not just a leap service but has an action plan for practice (Cooley, 2008). In other words, education policy should take the lead to actualize moral education in the school system. Taken together, parents, teachers, and administrators as stakeholders, should join this camp to encourage students to manifest those good values in their lives.

## References

- Anderson, D. R. (2000). Character education: Who is responsible? *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 27(3), 139.
- Althof, W., & Berkowitz, M. W. (2006). Moral education and character education: Their relationship and roles in citizenship education. *Journal of Moral Education*, 35(4), 495-518. doi:10.1080/0305724060101220
- Bergmark, U. (2008). 'I want people to believe in me, listen when I say something and remember me' - how students wish to be treated. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 26(4), 267-279. doi:10.1080/02643940802472205
- Berkowitz, M., & Oser, F. (eds.) (1985). *Moral education: Theory and application*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Berkowitz, M. W., & Hoppe, M. (2009). Character education and gifted children. *High Ability Studies*, 20(2), 131-142. doi:10.1080/13598130903358493
- Berkowitz, M. W., & Fekula, M. J. (1999). Educating for character. *About Campus*, 4(5), 17-22.
- Chazan, B. (1985). *Contemporary approaches to moral education: Analyzing alternative theories*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cooley, A. (2008). Legislating character: moral education in North Carolina's public schools. *Educational Studies*, 43(3), 188-205. doi:10.1080/00131940802117563
- Eberly, D. (ed.) (1995). *America's character: Recovering civic virtue*. Lanham, MD: Madison.
- Edgington, W. D., (2002). To promote character education, use literature for children and adolescents. *Journal of social studies*, 93(3), 113-116.
- Fathurahman, P. (2012). Model of the character education in developing countries. *Journal of Applied Sciences Research*, 8(3), 1813-1816.
- Gallien, L. B., & Jackson, L. (2006). Character development from African-American perspectives: toward a counternarrative approach. *Journal of Education & Christian Belief*, 10(2), 129-142.
- Hogan, P. (2006). Education as a discipline of thought and action: A memorial to John Wilson. *Oxford Review of Education*, 32(2), 253-264. doi:10.1080/03054980600645420
- Hoge, J. (2002). Character education, citizenship education, and the social studies. *Social Studies*, 93(3), 103-109.
- Katilmis, A., Eksi, H., & Öztürk, C. (2011). Efficiency of social studies integrated character education program. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, 11(2), 854-859.
- Lickona, T. (1991). *Educating for character: How our schools can teach respect and responsibility*. New York: Bantam.
- Marshall, J. C., Caldwell, S. D., & Foster, J. (2011). Moral education the character plus way. *Journal of Moral Education*, 40(1), 51-72. doi:10.1080/03057240.2011.541770
- Milliren, A., & Messer, M. H. (2009). Invitations to character. *Journal of Invitational Theory & Practice*, 15, 19-31.
- Morris, P., & Scott, I. (2003). Educational reform and policy implementation in Hong Kong. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(1), 1-15.
- Nucci, L. (ed.) (1989). *Moral development and character education: A dialogue*. Berkeley, CA: McCutchan.
- O'Sullivan, S. (2004). Books to live by: Using children's literature for character education. *Reading Teacher*, 57(7), 640-645.
- Pamental, M. P. (2010). Dewey, situationism, and moral education. *Educational Theory*, 60(2), 147-166. doi:10.1111/j.1741-5446.2010.00351.
- Parker, D. C., Nelson, J. S., & Burns, M. K. (2010). Comparison of correlates of classroom behavior problems in schools with and without a school-wide character education program. *Psychology in the Schools*, 47(8), 817-827.
- Pike, M. A. (2010). Christianity and character education: faith in core values? *Journal of Beliefs & Values: Studies in Religion & Education*, 31(3), 311-312.
- Pritchard, I. (1998). *Good education: The virtues of learning*. Norwalk, CT: Judd.
- Revell, L., & Arthur, J. (2007). Character education in schools and the education of teachers. *Journal of Moral Education*, 36(1), 79-92. doi:10.1080/03057240701194738
- Romanowski, M. H. (2005). Through the eyes of teachers: High school teachers' experiences with character education. *American Secondary Education*, 34(1), 6-23.
- Ryan, K., & Bohlin, K. (1999). *Building character in schools: Practical ways to bring moral instruction to life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Sanchez, T. R., & Stewart, V. (2006). The remarkable Abigail: story-telling for character education. *High School Journal*, 89(4), 14-21.
- Setran, D. P. (2003). From morality to character: conservative progressivism and the search for civic virtue, 1910-1930. *Paedagogica Historica*, 39(4), 435-456.
- Skaggs, G., & Bodenhorn, N. (2006). Relationships between implementing character education, student behavior, and student achievement. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 18(1), 82-114.
- Stiff-Williams, H. R. (2010). Widening the lens to teach character education alongside standards curriculum. *Clearing House*, 83(4), 115-120. doi:10.1080/00098651003653030
- Tirri, K. (2009). Character education and giftedness. *High Ability Studies*, 20(2), 117-119. doi:10.1080/13598130903358469
- U.S. Department of Education (2005). Character education . . . our shared responsibility [Brochure]. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/character/brochure.pdf>
- Williams, D. D., Yanchar, S. C., Jensen, L. C., & Lewis, C. (2003). Character education in a public high school: A multi-year inquiry into Unified Studies. *Journal of Moral Education*, 32(1), 3-33.