

Moral Education and Character Development in Contemporary Schools

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Abstract:

Education should guide the whole person, fostering character, morality, and virtue alongside knowledge and skill. The Greek tradition emphasized imagination, body, soul, and character, alongside intellect. Historically, American schools valued virtue and technical skill to cultivate responsible citizens. The legal rationale for character education favors curriculum integration, addressing youth concerns and aligning with statutory and judicial mandates. Schools must teach character, writes former Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders, as they remain the last institution that embraces all children. Americans agree on character education's importance, yet pluralism precludes a single framework. The moral domain of character education is particularly contentious: how does one become a good person? American education once reflected religious ideals, with Puritan virtues stressing discipline and fear of sin. Over time, political, economic, and social changes fostered moral relativism, influenced by Enlightenment thought and child-centered European educators, and increasing ethnic and religious diversity. Broadening perspectives aimed to assimilate the diverse population, yet many groups preferred separate schooling to preserve unique moral and religious identities.

Keywords: Moral Education, Character Development, Contemporary Schools, Technical skill.

1. Introduction

Contemporary schools balance varying subject demands—physical education, music, mathematics, arts, technology, languages, science—they often note limited time or resources. To produce socially responsible citizens, teachers or policy makers can dedicate human and material resources to moral education; however, moral education through character development enables the incorporation of

teaching character directly into the fabric of the prescribed curriculum (Elizabeth Curfman, 1991). Character development offers schools the opportunity to deliver a systematic effort to design, deliver, assess and refine programs that teach universal knowledge in core subjects while attending to the ethical dimension of students, a combination generally recognised as needed and many still advocate.

The question of the relationship between moral education and the public school—a perplexing matter. Needed moral education, great value, much consensus. Questions arose regarding the nature of moral education resulting in a wide diversity of available answers. Distinct, though interrelated, views circulate regarding the concept to deliver. Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle emphasized the development of personal and civic virtue, whereas Christian-influenced thinkers such as St. Thomas Aquinas linked belief with ethics. Through the centuries and into the contemporary period, approaches to moral education have focused on moral reasoning, moral emotion, and moral character. Kant focused on rationality and moral duty. The student of the moral educator strives to ensure his assistance toward the maturation of the orchestration of moral knowledge. Educational theorists such as Piaget and Kohlberg undertook extensive studies into the development of moral cognition beginning with universal natural inclinations or tendencies. Early, they noted, both Plato and Aristotle assigned broader significance to innate tendencies when addressing the idea of character.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Moral Education

Moral education is an old discipline in the history of education, specifically addressing values, virtues, and character development (Elizabeth Curfman, 1991). The concern of morality, however, is not confined within this discipline or even the entire history of education. The central aim of the ancient Greek philosophers was to train human beings to be moral or ethical agents and conduct virtuous lives. Thus, moral philosophy and moral education have long been strongly tied together, and moral education has been popularly considered as a part of ethics.

Understanding moral education can be achieved by examining moral philosophy. The term “moral” usually relates to the notion of right or wrong. Philosophers and educators have tended to utilize this concept in reference to issues or themes surrounding human relationships. The word “education” can generally be defined as the process resulting in a behavior or set of behaviors. Morality, therefore, is closely associated with socially acceptable behaviors and behaviors that a culture or society has determined to be conducive to harmonious inter-human relationships. Freely behaving in a socially unacceptable manner is generally called “immorality.” There are multiple other terms that reflect the same degree of acceptance, such as “ethics,” “character development,” or “virtue”.

3. Conceptualizing Character Development in School Contexts

Character development refers to the ways in which school environments promote students’ social, emotional, and moral growth. Efforts to foster moral and character growth span multiple domains of learning—intellectual, spiritual, civic, and vocational—and frequently extend across curricular

boundaries. Character may thus be viewed as the integrating theme for a moral education philosophy associated with a broad-based effort to support students in becoming more competent, caring, and contributing citizens and leaders. Such a philosophy encompasses a vision of an ethical culture in which the commitment to foster specific moral virtues becomes an important goal of the school in its entirety. To fulfill that vision, moral and character development must be intentionally and systematically addressed in a variety of ways, including the selection of curriculum content and resources, teacher-practice frameworks, school conditions and structures, and the role of families and community partners.

Character-development frameworks in contemporary school contexts encompass five interdependent dimensions: integrative leadership, climate building, explicit instruction, home-school-community partnership, and assessment. Leadership encompasses the philosophy, policies, and practices that emerge from the head of school and affect the entire school environment. The ethical climate of a school is the set of norms, rules, and values that shape the behavior of all members of the community. The explicit-instruction dimension points to the need not only to model moral behavior but also to teach students about moral reasoning and moral behavior—not just through literature or history, but directly and overtly. The fourth dimension recognizes that families and communities play critical roles in character development, supporting the moral growth of students. Finally, the assessment dimension acknowledges the need to gather and interpret data relating to character and virtue, to inform strategy and programming in character education and development.

4. Curricular and Pedagogical Approaches

Contemporary school curricula gradually reflect the importance of values. Many curricula feature a dedicated component to character development, character education, or moral education; others integrate moral education into specific subjects (A. Potter, 2007). When autonomy, creativity, and self-expression become the prime objectives of an entire curriculum, moral education becomes problematic (Singh, 1997). Education and teaching therefore require character for moral and ethical pedagogy, moral development, and character building.

Character, virtue, and moral education become relevant not only for religions (Christian or Muslim) but for all students in secular institutions. Learning about virtues forms part of every child's education, for only the knowledge of badness, of wrongdoing, or evil is entirely without any interest in mainstream, non-religious education and character building (Kristjánsson, 2013). Educational boundaries have shifted gradually over time: starting with the individualities, moving to societies, moving currently to nature, and perhaps still further. Secular society addressed these shifting boundaries systematically and principled; the revitalisation of secondary education always occurred at the same time as the foundation of an elementary, integrated educational structure.

4.1. Curriculum Design and Integration

Contemporary educators define character or virtue as “knowing how to act well (ethically) in the world—understanding, feeling, and doing what is good—and thinking critically about ethical

matters” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005, p. 1). This definition underscores the importance of knowledge, cognitive engagement, and practice; it is therefore appropriate to consider curricular- and pedagogical approaches for all these elements. Contemporary curriculum generally does not emphasize ethics nor character or virtue (Tibbetts et al., 2007); this omission frequently requires dedicated curricular time for character and virtue development within moral education programs. Curriculum design encompasses degree of integration with the core curriculum and ways to deepen relationships between the curriculum and character, moral, or virtue education. Integration can operate at four levels—concept, theme, topic, or activity—allowing simultaneously for character concept development, core curriculum delivery, and student engagement (Marshall, 2006). Curricular decisions reflect educators’ choices from guidance, recommendations, and standards generated by the moral education literature. Many documents present major moral or character concepts for elementary through secondary levels along with implementation strategies (Aram & Cherniss, 1990; Carr, 2003; Gunter & Gunter, 2007; Noddings, 2003; Ritchie, 2008; Tett, 2003). Resources identify age-appropriate stories containing moral themes for elementary, middle, or secondary education (Berkowitz et al., 2005; Hanley, 2006; Higgins, 2003). In addition, encyclopedic sources provide descriptions of specific virtues, their significance for students, relevant literature selections, and pedagogical suggestions from pre-school through secondary (Flynn, 1992; Lickona, 1991; 1999; 2004). Teaching student-selected ethical dilemmas—either historical or personally experienced—stimulates interest, engages the imagination, and, for many, deepens moral engagement.

4.2. Pedagogical Strategies for Moral Reasoning

Moral education has come to be viewed as a critical aspect of schooling. A growing body of research suggests that effective character development programming is defined broadly to include the cultivation of moral character, performance character, and civic character (A. Potter, 2007). Also, character development programming is inextricably linked to the quality of school climate and the ethical culture in which children live and learn (O’Brien, 1998). By working in concert to create a comprehensive framework of curricular, pedagogical, and school climate approaches, educators at all levels can make significant strides toward fulfilling the moral education mandate and modeling the character skills they aim to instill in their students.

Character education can take place through diverse strategies, which it is possible to represent under some rubrics to provide coherence to the wide variety of materials and efforts. Particularly fruitful proposals around the world centre on throughlines that may be depicted graphically as quadrants or triangles. Three such throughlines, termed directions, pathways, or corners, have gained considerable currency in multiple contexts, as outlined. Clarification of the nature and interrelationships of these essential concepts is central to a recommendations because they shape choices of materials and strategies. Also, moral education remains an important but contested topic

in many educational settings, and disturbance of a common view of the nature of moral education has undermined character development initiatives in certain national and global contexts.

A major reason for character education is because of the perceived decline in the ethical behaviours of youth. Moral and civic education have increasingly been relegated to secondary consideration in educational priorities. The term "character education" is not used uniformly and definitions vary. The most general definition character education is a multi-faceted approach, based upon a wide framework of objectives, supported by flexible programmes of different pedagogical methods and materials grounded in the framework. Detailed discussions of different purposes and approaches are widely available. Character education constitutes a response to the lack of perceived concern for morals in society. Education systems like to address the ethical dimension of education while others concentrate solely on the behavioural aspects, for example, by teaching respect, co-operation, social responsibility, honesty and tolerance.

The purpose of character education is to encourage the development of positive ethical dispositions. It is hoped that the resulting consequential behaviour shapes and prepares students for life. Character education is advocated on the basis of sound instructional practices and experiences, emphasising the need for teachers to conduct lessons relevant to the daily lives of students to improve motivation and interest. A belief exists that school systems should have character education embedded, hence it is important in some systems to articulate a consideration of moral issues in whatever approach is taken.

4.3. Assessment of Character and Virtue

One of the more pressing disciplinary issues faced by teachers is that of assessing students' character development and associated virtues. The critical need for assessment is rooted in the obvious implication that what matters most in character education is how it can best serve students in their moral development. (Hickman, 2019) notes that understanding what counts as effective character education practice—what constitutes both good planning for character development and good assessment of that development—has fundamental consequences for the educational community. (Kristjánsson, 2013) confirms that formal character education exists in some form across diverse educational contexts, meaning that teachers cannot dissociate themselves from students' moral development.

Character-education planning in any school must be accompanied by planning for appropriate assessment. Assessing character development thus requires clarity about what happened to students' character after the direct or indirect provision of character education. Assessments concerning character education across various contexts not only seek to measure "the state" of character but also attempt to monitor how those two parameters of character change. Such assessments necessarily incorporate broad conceptualization of what constitutes a student's character and indicate pedagogical approaches devised to promote character development.

5. School Climate and Ethical Culture

School climate embodies the overall atmosphere of a school, encompassing the conditions in which students are educated. It refers to the school's sharing of practices, objectives, priorities, and values among students and staff, the quality of interactions between them, and the extent to which common objectives are widely pursued. School climate fundamentally shapes cognitive, social, and emotional development, acting as a behavioral motivator that can encourage positive and constructive student behavior (Anne Keiser & E. Schulte, 2007). Research suggests that a positive environment and ethical climate contribute to the prevention of immoral behavior and promote character development. School climate reflects the underlying ethical culture of a school (Nolan & of Lethbridge. Faculty of Education, 2004). The ethical culture embodies shared values regarding what constitutes good and bad conduct and guides the moral behavior of students and educational staff. A positive ethical culture encourages students to take moral action and behave ethically.

5.1. Leadership and Policy Implications

Two dimensions of educational leadership have implications for the promotion of character learning and the establishment of an ethical educational climate. The first dimension focuses on the cultivation of a school culture underpinned by shared values, ethical norms, and commitment to excellence; the second dimension pertains to the articulation of school policies and the delineation of institutional priorities, with explicit regard to individual development and the formation of moral agents. The educational challenge thus consists in fostering the growth not only of academically prepared individuals but also of responsible citizens committed to the common good (Elizabeth Curfman, 1991).

5.2. Role of Teachers, Students, and Families

Moral education and character development can be fostered through the activities of teachers, students, and families. Curfman (Elizabeth Curfman, 1991) emphasizes the need for students to engage with universally agreeable ethical principles, such as integrity, respect, responsibility, and fairness. Such principles are acknowledged across varied cultural contexts and contribute to human flourishing. Classroom discussion of hypothetical situations, such as being lied to about the condition of a broken tape player, can prompt exploration of ethical concerns, like the importance of honesty. Teachers should communicate subject matter with clarity and competence (Singh, 1997). When educators model behaviours that contradict their espoused values, students are likely to perceive moral instruction as irrelevant. The ultimate goal of character development is to nurture capable citizens who reach beyond mere adherence to regulations or avoidance of punishment in order to engage thoughtfully in moral deliberation. The broader school culture must uphold ethical behavioural norms if character development is to have a lasting impact beyond school hours.

6. Contemporary Challenges and Controversies

Moral education in contemporary schools must also address external factors contributing to the erosion of character development. Several factors impede the moral growth of young people today.

Character training may conflict with the development of independent thinking. Today's youth face increasing distractions, temptations, and conflicts that differ from earlier generations; the continued association of school with safety, security, caring, learning, knowledge, and future preparation appears to be breaking down. The expansion of the media since previous efforts to improve character development has increased exposure to violence and anti-social behavior while reinforcing drug, alcohol, and tobacco use. Educational reform is viewed by many as so utterly aberrant and harmful that it undermines all other proposals to create a more ethical society. Children are increasingly perceived as not being reborn innocent and malleable but rather as being born naughty and anti-social; schools have shifted from character education to remediation and rehabilitation (Singh, 1997) (Elizabeth Curfman, 1991).

7. Evidence and Outcomes

Research on character education often focuses on its effectiveness as a vehicle for character and moral development, especially regarding whether specific programs produce demonstrable changes in students' character or behavior. Various empirical studies offer insights into this general question, although their findings vary. For example, a survey of character education in K-12 settings showed that 85 percent of administrators believed they had implemented some form of character education, but 42 percent identified a lack of programs. Even when character education was in place, only 18 percent would have characterized their programs as effective (Nolan & of Lethbridge. Faculty of Education, 2004). A review of character education programs stressed that success hinges on comprehensive approaches involving faculty, administrators, governing boards, and students (M. Nowatzki, 2006). The Youth Voice Project, a study of student perceptions regarding what constitutes appropriate educational experiences, cited a curriculum focused on character development as only the fifth most important factor, well behind a sense of belonging and engagement in learning.

Research has also investigated connections between students' perceptions of school characteristics and various behavioral and cognitive outcomes in the domain of character. High school students who perceive their school as having a "strong character climate" report lower levels of misconduct and higher levels of civic engagement, school dedication, altruistic behavior, and situational empathy than peers in schools that lack a similar character framework. These findings underscore the role of character climate as a mediating factor contributing to moral development, as broadly recognized in related literature. Other studies confirm well-defined connections among school climate, academic outcomes, and the overall character of educational establishments, with tighter, more integrated school environments promoting greater engagement, wider participation, and increased achievement.

8. Implications for Practice and Policy

Building on the foundational understanding of contemporary challenges related to moral and character education in schools, this section examines the implications of the emerging frameworks proposed in the preceding sections for educational practice and policy. The curriculum, pedagogical

approaches, school climate, and related leadership and policy issues are examined through the lens of requirements that emerge from these frameworks and the interconnectedness of these aspects is emphasized. The analysis of these issues demonstrates ways educational authorities and individual schools can support the development of moral capacities and character in students, thereby counteracting the societal and educational challenges related to these topics.

A wealth of empirical evidence documenting the effects of particular approaches to moral education (Elizabeth Curfman, 1991) is complemented by access to curated databases cataloguing specific curricular, pedagogical, and policy recommendations already implemented worldwide (Centre for Spirituality, Leadership, and Ethics, 2020; Miller, 2020). The characterisation of current problems and the articulation of frameworks for understanding educational responsibility in addressing them is a further means of elucidating potential responses to contemporary challenges.

9. Conclusion

Character development is an important aspect of preparation for active citizenship and democratic participation (Elizabeth Curfman, 1991). It is commonly conceptualized as the internalization of social norms, values and expectations. Adolescents engage in active discussions about who they are and how they ought to behave, often experimenting with behaviours that either conform to or contradict established norms and expectations. Without guidance, this process is often fraught with contradictions and conflicts, leading some students to become disillusioned and disengaged. Schools have long been places within society that provide moral instruction. Teaching all adolescents to think, feel and act in line with established community norms has traditionally been regarded as an important social function of secondary schooling. Character education must proceed from an understanding of the adolescent and the challenges involved in guiding moral behaviour.

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