

Character Education in the 21st Century Multicultural Classroom

Stephanie Bain De Los Santos, EdD
Advancement Via Individual Determination Liaison
Center for Student Success
Texas A&M University-Kingsville
Kingsville, TX

Nicole D. Morris, M.A.
Journalism Lecturer - Adviser, The South Texan
Art, Communication and Theatre Department
Texas A&M University-Kingsville
Kingsville, TX

Abstract

Character Education is being adopted by many school districts throughout the country. There is a revival of Character Education based curriculum due to more and more school districts emphasizing the importance of a well-rounded education. This encompasses the person holistically, not just their performance on a standardized test. Contributors for the need of Character Education are: the need for teacher education in classroom management, minority representation in school discipline, and the effects of school discipline on post K-12 students.

Keywords: character education, behavioral management, multicultural, discipline, minorities

Character Education

A person's moral beliefs helps shape their moral identity (Rizzo & Bajovic, 2016). *Character* is how someone acts when no one is looking (Djiwandono, 2016). It consists of self-awareness, self-control, empathy and fairness and constantly evolves throughout a person's life (Kose, 2015). Many times, the only role models' students have been at school. They look to their teachers and administrators to lead by example. They are the moral compass for these students. By helping students develop and nurture their own character and morals, this sets the tone for a morally sound future (Djiwandono, 2016).

Character education can be described as the sum of our habits and tendencies (Hill, 2017) and is the foundation of building a democratic society (Kose, 2015). It is a natural part of being human and should be nurtured by the people who are responsible for the new generation (Kose, 2015). Honesty is one of the foundational building blocks for character education. Ways in which honesty can be implemented in school are asking students to give reasons for tardiness, hold them accountable when writing scholarly level papers, and peer-assessment (Djiwandono, 2016). Character education encompasses what we are by nature, what we become through

environmental influences, and what we determine to do with ourselves (Hill, 2017).

Character education begins with the teacher. It is important for teachers to put biases aside in order to create an effective learning environment (Rizzo & Bajovic, 2016). Biases are embedded within cultures, are rarely brought to the surface. They impact our daily life and decision making; they can even affect us on a moment by moment basis (George, 2015).

Cultures encompass everything from ethnic or racial groups, to socioeconomic class. They vary depending on education, home situations, geographical locations, and first-generation students and those that are not (Blas, 2014). When an educator understands the cultural background of their students, they can establish a foundation that forges a relationship with the student which enables the instructor to teach them in the most effective way. By recognizing and combating these biases, educators will be able to make a greater impact on their students; ignoring this only hurts the educational system (George, 2015).

Implementation and Curriculum

Students are diversified. In order to effectively teach students from all cultures including educators must adapt their teaching methods (Blas, 2014). Scientists and researchers agree that there is a need for new curriculum in schools and more teachers who promote character education (Hill, 2017). By providing activities in the classroom which promote character education, students will gain experience in behaving ethically (Kose, 2015). To be most successful, character education curriculum should be crafted within the cultural diversity of students in mind.

To help guide students throughout their school years and in order to prepare them for their adult lives, more and more schools are implementing character education (Djiwandono, 2016). Schools are implementing character education starting in preschool (Hill, 2017). And yet, character education is not the foundation of the present-day education system. Most often, students are taught without ever receiving a character education. Without this foundation, a lot of times, students lack the exposure to react and behave properly to difficult situations within and outside of school (Rizzo & Bajovic, 2016). Some institutions have begun to implement character education into their institutional practices. This has proven to be a difficult task as a result of the lack of teacher knowledge on character education and time needed to spend with the students (Djiwandono, 2016). However, there are some countries that have implemented character education through their legal system. In 2003, Indonesia passed a law to, develop student abilities and shape them to have strong faith in God (Djiwandono, 2016).

In the same way, Colombia has a long history of political violence, and to help move past this the Colombian Ministry of Education in 2003 created the National Program of Citizenship Competencies to help build a peaceful society, starting with the country's students (Berkowitz & Bustamante, 2013). Although this may have proved successful for Indonesia and Columbia, it has not proven easy for other formal institutions. In the United States, the priorities of education lie more with the states than the federal government. There have been instances when the U.S. has made character education a priority. President Bill Clinton established the Partnerships in Character Education program, thus making it a national priority. The program received further priority when the Bush Administration tripled funding for it (Berkowitz & Bustamante, 2013).

Since 1993, more than 20 states have passed either new legislation or modified existing legislation to bolster character education in its school systems (Glanzer & Milson, 2006). In their

study of legislation, Glanzer & Milson (2006) found that 26 states have some form of legislation regarding character education; all of which was passed or modified in the last 12 years. However, a lot of the legislation allows for local control, resulting in varying degrees of implementation and success. The willingness of politicians to address character education at the state level points to the importance legislators place on character education. Getting from the capitols of our states to the classrooms remains the challenge. Local school districts and individual schools often lack direction and uniformity.

Up until the 1960s, character education was at the forefront of curriculum. While some may criticize a lack of more federal guidelines for character education, there isn't a one-size-fits-all model. It is impractical given the vast cultural diversity in schools, particularly in urban areas. Time has changed the perceptions of character education and cannot be ignored (Rizzo & Bajovic, 2016).

One of the ways teachers are implementing character education is through activities like the "Good Behavior Game." Oliver, Wehby, & Nelson (2015) examined the benefits of using a self-monitoring checklist to help teachers' classroom management practices. The checklist, "Good Behavior Game," was a tool to help teacher reaction to behavioral problems. Results of their study indicated that teachers' use of the self-monitoring checklist helped them maintain classroom management practices. Effective classrooms have proven classroom practices. Consistency, however, does not always occur, thus affecting student learner outcomes. Lower accuracy and consistency can occur because the teacher is only using a portion of the effective classroom management practice. In the same way, the disciplinary practice is affected schoolwide if there is a high number of teachers using this practice consistently (Oliver et. al., 2015).

Research has shown that by giving teachers a checklist for classroom management practices, this increases their accuracy in this implementation of new classroom practices (Oliver et. al., 2015). Self-monitoring checklists have been used across many disciplines including medicine. They further state that teachers' self-monitoring can improve student and teacher behavior.

Pas, Cash, & O'Brennan (2015) used data from 1262 classrooms in 52 high schools to observe teacher classroom management strategies and ratings of student compliance, engagement, and social disruption. Their results showed that there was a direct connection between student behavior and the teachers' classroom management style. Classrooms that met expectation were provided more opportunities to respond and the teacher was not as reactive in their behavioral management. Classrooms that were considered noncompliant had teachers who were reactive to behavioral management. These findings connect student patterns of behavior with teacher classroom management (Pas et al., 2015).

Classroom management is not the only assurance of strong character education. Anderson (2000) notes that if educators want to cultivate well-rounded students of strong character, the education of such should be entwined in all curriculums and aspects of the school. He also believed that educators must exhibit generosity of time and spirit of commitment, respect for others, a willingness to work with others, and most importantly, an opportunity for service to model such behaviors.

Teacher Preparation

Teacher management and student behavior are intertwined. School administrators should

take a greater role in managing student behavior in classrooms instead of individually. Teacher reaction and management skills in the classroom affect the behaviors of the entire class. Students who may not misbehave in one class might misbehave in another because of the teacher's classroom management style (Pas et al., 2015). Students can only grow in character if educators provide innovative teaching and learning environments that incorporate such traits as respect, responsibility and fairness in a continuous manner and within all classes in a school (Anderson, 2000). These learning environments must also be culturally sensitive.

Nucci, Drill, Larson, Browne (2005) emphasize that teachers early-on must be given the tools they need regarding character education, but more importantly, learn to challenge assumptions about their craft and make them more sensitive to race and social classes which impact the lives of their students. By doing so, this moves character education from merely a method or teaching technique to one of successful engagement. This in return, leads to advancement of morals, ethics and virtue. By providing the administrative support and classroom management techniques, student behavioral issues will decrease contingent on teacher buy-in and implementation (Pas, Larson, Reinke, Herman, & Bradshaw, 2016).

Uriegas, Kupczynski, & Mundy (2013) state that teachers are entering the classroom with varying levels of training in the areas of curriculum, assessment, theory, pedagogy, and classroom management. Teacher education, experience, age, race, and gender are also factors that constitute to the number of discipline referrals written by teachers. As there are several teacher certification programs and more and more teachers are entering the classroom, the question is whether these programs are enough in preparing teachers for the classroom. Those who oppose certification programs argue that the lack of experience hinders the ability to manage a classroom. Supporters of student teaching argue that it provides prospective teachers with life experience in the world of education as well as preparing them to be a teacher (Uriegas et al.).

The results of this study concluded that student teaching had no effect on classroom management as measured by discipline referrals. However, age and years of experience effect classroom management (Uriegas et. al., 2013). Lickona (1999) notes that to move character education forward, future teachers must have character education included in teacher preparation with such programs as college courses dedicated specifically to character education, modeling integration of character education in a classroom setting, etc. Exposure to cultural sensitivity and equality is important is important to future teachers in order to better meet the individualistic needs of their students when presenting character education.

McAllister and Irvine (2000) note that student teachers should first examine their own beliefs and cultural experiences as part of their own studies. It is too often that teachers in multicultural classrooms face more challenges in providing an appropriate classroom environment, particularly for students of color. The best way to ensure self-awareness regarding possible cultural bias is provide opportunities for student teachers to interact with those from differing ethnic backgrounds prior to said teachers entering the classroom on their own for the first time (McAllister & Irvine, 2000). Once this happens, student teachers will understand cultural sensitivity and can apply it to multicultural character education.

Administration

Effective educational leadership is not given but earned and should come from those

responsible for educating and developing our future leader. In addition, they put themselves in the shoes of the teacher. If administrators were to examine what they wanted their faculty and staff to understand from the beginning they would become more effective. Teaching is engaging students and engineering an environment in which they learn. Faculty and staff members are students themselves because they are required to learn and adjust daily just as students are (Bain, 2004). Professional developments are important when implementing a campus wide initiative for classroom management and character education. However, if the implementation is not reinforced by administration then the accuracy and consistency of this new initiative decreases (Oliver et. al., 2015).

The administrator, superintendent or the organizational leader of a school or school district must take primary responsibility for setting priorities, and those priorities should include building character (Berkowitz & Bustamante, 2013). Moreover, character education cannot exist in name only. It must be a functioning part of any curriculum, supported from the top down. Individuals with clear levels of authority are best suited to implement character education because they have the ability to set priorities on a broader level, thus influencing individual teachers by moving character education into a school-wide practice (Berkowitz & Bustamante, 2013).

Administrators are equally responsible to be familiar with character education and should lead by example (Hill, 2017). Educators are influential in the development of a child's education. Without their knowledge and training, the implementation of this type of education will not be effective. Both the students and the faculty members must be in an effective learning environment (Rizzo & Bajovic, 2016).

Minority Representation in School Discipline

Demographics like race, gender, and the context of school discipline effect school discipline. Research shows that there are more racial, ethnic minority, and special education students receiving discipline actions such as office referrals and suspensions than White students (Pas et. al., 2016). They assert that professional development and coaching are key in reducing the amount of student referrals. Research suggests that professional developments are not enough to improve general teaching practices. In professional developments, it is even harder to address culture and race (Pas et al., 2016).

There is a correlation between school discipline and the amount of minority students receiving this discipline (Smolkowski, Girvan, McIntosh, & Horner, 2016). Theories on implicit bias identify effective interventions. Results showed that race, gender, and the times of day effect the number of referrals. These are disproportionate compared to the number of White student referrals. In a national study, 8% of African-American elementary students and 23% of African-American secondary students, compared to 2% of White elementary students and 7% of White secondary students were given referrals by administrators while there is no evidence to support that the referrals aligned with student behavior by race (Smolkowski et. al., 2016, p. 185).

Although African- Americans in general have been impacted by discipline practices, African American girls are impacted more because of both gender and racial bias (George, 2015). This again raises the importance of cultural sensitivity in the classroom in order to help remove racial conflict or bias. By removing students from school for minor offenses, this can push students towards a life on the streets and/or in the judicial system. Keeping students in school as much as possible can contribute to higher success rates for minority students. Research

has shown that by removing students from class and school, this leads to unemployment in the future and reduced lifetime earnings (George, 2015). By utilizing culturally responsive classroom management strategies, the number of disciplinary referrals for special needs and minority students may reduce (Pas et al., 2016).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Educators must evolve. As we move forward as an educational system, more consideration is needed when it comes to character education and cultural diversity. The twenty-first century educator will not effectively impact their students and staff if they do not reflect on their own actions and change accordingly. Teachers must set the bar high for their students and themselves (Bain, 2004).

Educators should promote student thinking and self-motivation. To get respect, one must give respect. This especially goes hand in hand with education and student learning (Bain 2004). He says that there are endless ways to teach students and there are endless ways of administrators to help their faculty and staff. Teachers and administrators must adapt. Education is a personalized way of learning. No two people are alike, and therefore should be recognized as such (Bain, 2004).

References

- Anderson, D. (2000). Character education: Who is responsible. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 27(3), 139-142.
- Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Berkowitz, M., & Bustamante, A. (2013). Using research to set priorities for character education in schools: A global perspective. *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy*, 10(3), 7-20.
- Blas, E. A. (2014). Information literacy in the 21st century multicultural classroom: Using sociocultural literacy. *Education Libraries*, 37(2), 33-40.
- Djiwandono, P. I. (2016). Character education in content courses: Self scoring as a means for developing honesty in students. *Teflin Journal: A Publication on the Teaching and Learning of English*, 27(2), 153-165.
- George, J. A. (2015). Stereotype and school pushout: Race, gender, and discipline disparities. *Arkansas Law Review (1968-Present)*, 68(1), 101-129.
- Glazner, P., & Milson, A. (2006). Legislating the good: A survey and evaluation of character education laws in the United States. *Educational Policy*, 20(3), 525-550.
- Hill, P. S. (2017). First steps in character education. *Childhood Education*, 93(3), 219.
- Köse, T. C. (2015). Character education of adolescents: A case study of a research center. *Education & Science / Egitim Ve Bilim*, 40(179), 295-306.
- Lickona, L. (1999). Character education: Seven crucial issues. *Action in Teacher Education*, 20(4), 77-84.
- McAllister, G., & Irvine, J. (2000). Cross cultural competency and multicultural teacher education. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(1), 3-24.
- Nucci, L., Drill, K., Larson, C., & Browne, C. (2005) Preparing preservice teachers for character education in urban elementary schools; the UIC Initiative. *Journal of Research in Character Education*, 3(2), 81-96.

-
- Oliver, R. M., Wehby, J. H., & Nelson, J. R. (2015). Helping teachers maintain classroom management practices using a self-monitoring checklist. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 51*, 113-120.
- Pas, E. T., Cash, A. H., O'Brennan, L., Debnam, K. J., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2015). Profiles of classroom behavior in high schools: Associations with teacher behavior management strategies and classroom composition. *Journal of School Psychology, 53*(2), 137-148.
- Pas, E. T., Larson, K. E., Reinke, W. M., Herman, K. C., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2016). Implementation and acceptability of an adapted classroom check-up coaching model to promote culturally responsive classroom management. *Education and Treatment of Children, 39*(4), 467-491.
- Rizzo, K., & Bajovic, M. (2016). Moral literacy through two lenses: Pre-service teachers' preparation for character education. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 28*(1), 131-138.
- Smolkowski, K., Girvan, E. J., McIntosh, K., Nese, R. N., & Horner, R. H. (2016). Vulnerable decision points for disproportionate office discipline referrals: comparisons of discipline for African American and white elementary school students. *Behavioral Disorders, 41*(4), 178-195.
- Uriegas, B., Kupczynski, L., & Mundy, M. (2013, September). The impact of student teaching on discipline referrals in an urban Texas school district. *Journal of Instructional Pedagogies, 12*, 1-6.