NATIONAL FORUM OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION AND SUPERVISION
VOLUME 25, NUMBER 4, 2007

Mississippi Elementary School Counselors' Perceptions of Character Education Programs

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ABSTRACT

A random sample of 200 schools was drawn from a population of 498 elementary schools. The study investigated the perceptions of 143 elementary school counselors throughout school districts in Mississippi. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. **What are the perceptions of elementary school counselors in Mississippi on character education and character traits within the curriculum?**
2. **To what extent are elementary school counselors in Mississippi prepared to provide leadership in character education?**

Data were statistically analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Findings confirmed the literature which suggested a need for teaching character traits in schools and that there are identifiable traits upon which school personnel, parents, and others agree that should be taught. In view of findings related to the source of preparation for character education, it is recommended that school districts institute a continuing education plan that provides for in-service training, seminars, and other resources to encourage counselors' preparation efforts in character education. It is further recommended that institutions of higher education include a character education component in the curriculum for educating counselors.

Introduction

This study explored Mississippi elementary school counselors' perceptions of character education programs. The literature revealed that educational leaders, to include counselors, had a significant role in ensuring that the school's curriculum provided students opportunities for their social, ethical, emotional and academic development. There has been an on-going debate among educators for some time regarding the purposes of schools and how curriculums should be restructured. With the publication of A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence, 1983), more attention was placed on curriculum changes and who should be responsible for initiating them within a school center. The literature supported the notion that school leaders should establish and maintain a learning environment where effective learning will occur. As a part of that role, new emphasis on character education emerged (Walberg, 1999; Carpenter, 2000; Callahan, 2000; Goodlad, 1984; Goodlad et al., 1990; Boyer, 1995).

Review of Literature

Character education is described as guidance provided to persons intended to result in their behaving in concert with core ethical values common to humankind. Huffman (1993) described the concept as the belief that behavior control must come from within the individual. The need for character education to ensure that schools provide environments for learning to occur have existed in American society since the beginning of organized educational practices. Through the use of the Bible as the basic instructional resource, and later the McGuffey Readers, the acquisition of "goodness," moral and religious values were taught. Virtues to include respect and concern for others, honesty, kindness, and thriftiness were stressed with the teacher serving as model. Behaving morally, or in the appropriate manner was the expected norm (Schaps & Williams, 1999; Brooks & Goble, 1997).

An important part of the school's mission during the 1920-1930 period was character education that focused on the teaching of honesty, fairness, loyalty and other virtues. Character education programs were based on the works of psychologists who focused on behavior and Jean Piaget's theories of cognitive development. However, questions regarding the virtues to be taught and their meanings were among reasons for the decline in the use of these programs (Daeg de Mott, 1998b). However, as society changed and newer views emerged on the purposes of schools, emphases and elements of character education also changed.

Morality was an issue then and remains one today. Lawrence Kohlberg in 1958 completed a scientific study of moral development identifying six stages of moral development based on cognitive reasoning (Kohlberg, 1981). His work and works of other behavior and psychoanalytic theorists have suggested that character, in terms of morals, is developed through different avenues. These include learnings gained through the external environment, through internal or instinctive drives prompted by influences

from society, through reasoning, or through a combination of factors that make up one's personality (Daeg de Mott, 1998a).

The traditional emphasis of character education programs changed and in the 1960s and 1970s programs began to focus more on thinking skills associated with decision-making. Approaches referred to as values clarification and values modification replaced character education and were intended to guide students in developing their own value system through self-examination of their motives for specific actions. However, with moral problems increasing in schools and in society in general, character education programs more reflective of those emphasized in the 1920s and 1930s reappeared in the 1990s (Center, 2003c).

In 1995, President Bill Clinton and the US Congress identified a period for emphasizing the teaching of values. "National Character Counts Week," observed October 16-22 encouraged teachers to present students with moral dilemmas for which they would develop a definitive course of action (Gale Encyclopedia of Childhood & Adolescence, 1998). The focus shifted such that character education procedures were being designed to teach values directly, as a matter of practice, rather than to present academic information about values as a classroom exercise (Harman, 1997). The literature and reports of the media suggested that proponents of character education were perhaps more encouraged than direct instruction, especially in the aftermath of such school disasters as Columbine, Pearl High and others.

A number of benefits from employing effective character education programs have been cited in the literature. Harman maintained that it instills positive qualities in students enabling them to respond productively in the workplace, in academia, and as citizens. Abourjilie (2000); Wynne & Ryan (1997); Wiley (1997); and Benninga & Wynne (1998) concurred that quality character education supports academic development, promotes a safe, caring learning environment, and promulgates the demonstration of ethical and citizenship values in both the school and community.

Molnar (1997) and Murphy (1998) pointed out that some school centers elected to highlight compassion, honesty, self-respect, prudence, courage and integrity as important character traits. Lickona (1991) supported the idea that a person can benefit from character education and that it is the combined responsibility of schools, families, religious institutions and others to teach and model character qualities for students.

There is widespread agreement among proponents of character education that effective education requires a comprehensive definition that includes thinking, feelings, and behavior. The works of Glanzer (1998); Bennett (1996); Leming (1993); and Devine, HoSeuk, & Wilson (2000) postulated that if the core goal of education is to internalize the best of what society can produce in all realms, educators must help students develop a sense of ownership about their knowledge, emotions, and behavior. Their comprehensive view also involved parents as members of the educational team. Researchers and authors addressing these topics include Yeager, Buxton, Baltzell & Bzdell (2001); Boyer (1995); Beedy (1997); Molnar (1997); Wiley (1997); and Jacobs & Spencer (2001).

According to Sergiovanni (1996) the success rate of character education initiatives was greater when the school's total curriculum (all activities of the school) had them integrated. This position was expounded by Lickona (1991) who explained that when character education is taught in schools and then reinforced in the community, it was more effective. Lickona cited such experiences as athletics, school counseling,

community service projects, and staff development among those that provide for the development of character. The value of a comprehensive integrated character education program ascribed to by authors cited in this introduction, is perhaps most accurately described by Lickona.

The body of research reviewed in this study consistently supported the notion that administrators and counselors were responsible for determining the best practices for guiding students to become ethical, productive, and responsible citizens (Benninga & Wynne, 1998) and they must plan programs that were intentional, proactive, and comprehensive. Boyer (1995) stressed that character education served as an enthusiastic forum for sharing ideas with other educators. Given that educators, especially at the elementary level, played a vital role in the development of students, based on researchers cited, it was imperative that clarity exists in terms of the relationship of students' development to character education programs provided in the schools.

This study was designed to add to the literature on the perceptions of educators regarding character education programs. The study was based on the premise that school counselors were among the important decision-makers in the state's school districts. The professional literature suggested that the perceptions of educational leaders about character education were determining factors for the successful inclusion of character education as an intervention strategy for school improvement.

Statement of the Problem

Little, if any, statewide assessments have been completed that determine if counselors' perceptions reflected a need for implementing a program in their schools. Therefore, the study was conducted to investigate Mississippi elementary school counselors' perceptions of character education programs.

Purpose of the Study

This purpose of this research was to investigate and examine Mississippi elementary school counselors' perceptions of character education programs as an intervention strategy for school improvement.

Significance of the Study

This study could benefit in generating data that could assist school administrators and other educational leaders in making decisions regarding the implementation of character education programs in school districts.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the perceptions of elementary school counselors in Mississippi on character education and character traits within the curriculum?
2. To what extent are elementary school counselors in Mississippi prepared to provide leadership in character education?

Methodology

This research study was conducted using a descriptive design employing a five-part questionnaire which had been used in two previous perception studies of character education. A random sample of elementary school counselors throughout Mississippi were surveyed to assess their perceptions about character education, traits that should be taught, their preparation for providing leadership, and the level of support provided for character education in their school. Data were analyzed employing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and results were reported in terms of frequencies and percentages. Descriptive statistics were also reported in tabular form to further describe the study's results.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to 200 participants who were randomly selected from a population of 498 elementary schools in the state of Mississippi, and was therefore limited to those counselors' perceptions of character education.

Findings

Data for the research questions was statistically treated using The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to determine percentages, frequencies, and mean scores of participants' responses to Likert type items on a 5-part questionnaire. The return rate on the 200 questionnaires mailed was 71.5% resulting in a final sample of 143 counselors. The attitudes of counselors with regard to character education were identified in specific categories based on items on the survey. Three groupings appropriately describing survey items were (1) about teaching character education; (2) about the need for character education; and (3) about support for character education programs. An analysis of participants' responses revealed that counselors strongly agreed that the teaching of traits specifically identified in items 1 and 2 was possible and desirable in their elementary schools. However, they did not strongly agree that the school could make an important contribution in developing character traits whether or not they were reinforced at home. Support for character education was addressed from the standpoint of beliefs about ethical values and engagement by parents, families, faculty, and communities in identifying traits to be taught directly to students. The strongest element supporting the need for character education was beliefs of counselors that respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, justice, fairness, civic virtues, and citizenship were values upon which a democratic society was formed.

Counselors were asked to rate twenty-one character traits in terms of the degree each should be actively taught in public elementary schools. The ratings were: (1) definitely should not be actively taught; (2) should not be actively taught; (3) neutral; (4) should be actively taught, and (5) definitely should be actively taught. The average mean score for traits was 4.73.

Based on the means and standard deviations, counselors indicated that all twenty-one traits should be included in the curriculum. Respect was most frequently rated as the trait to definitely be actively taught (126 participants), whereas love was the trait less frequently rated (87 participants), and of course furthest from the mean score. An interesting observation was that only two traits had no responses where counselors indicated the trait that definitely should not be actively taught (a rating of one). These were respect for property (ranked 7^{th}), and respect for diversity (ranked 7^{th}).

Counselors were to indicate preparedness in character education by responding to five Likert typed items. The scaled items were represented by 1-none; 2=some; 3=numerous and required counselors to choose if they had used the five sources of preparation. Percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated.

Counselors reported that the most frequently used source of preparation was through direct experiences in elementary school settings. One hundred and one counselors rated this source being used numerous times. This source was followed by personal reading in the area of character education for elementary schools (51.4%) and attending county or state programs or conferences on character education (31%). Their responses revealed that the most infrequent source used was taking graduate courses or engaging in portions of graduate courses devoted to character education.

Summary

There were 143 Mississippi elementary school counselors during the 2002-2003 academic year to determine their perceptions of character education programs. The majority of the participants had 10 or more years of professional experience. Similarly, the number of counselors with a master's degree or higher was 137. However, experience rather than the level of education had a greater influence on counselors with regard to attitudes, especially in light of counselors' responses as to how they were trained in character education. They indicated that their direct experiences in elementary school settings provided them numerous preparation opportunities.

Results

The results from a statistical analysis show that counselors had similar attitudes about character education and agreed that the 21 character traits showed on the questionnaire should be actively taught in elementary schools. Counselors perceived that they had not been frequently trained in character education through graduate study, but that direct experiences and readings accounted for the majority of preparation activities. Finally, the counselors tended to rate the level of administrative support for character education programs as good.

In essence, perceptions of counselors regarding character education and the schools in the state were that: (a) schools should teach positive character traits; (b) schools should foster a common set of traditional values; (c) public schools needed a value-based curriculum; (d) a mandated character education program should be top priority; (e) effective character education was based on ones core ethical values; (f) there are traits families and communities want schools to teach; (g) direct teaching of traits should be a function of schools; (h) faculty and parents supported the direct teaching of traits; (i) an imposed program would effectively address students' lack of discipline, civility, and respect; (j) schools make an important contribution to character development whether or not they are reinforced at home; and (k) teaching character traits is effective when addressing school problems such as violence, vandalism, and poor discipline.

The results of this study confirmed the literature which suggested there was a need for teaching character traits in schools and that there are identifiable traits upon which school personnel, parents, and others agree should be taught. Findings, in terms of traits to be taught, also support those of another study (Orden, 2001). This study and Orden's study found that traits that centered on respect were those believed that should definitely be actively taught, whereas, love was ranked lowest among traits to be actively taught.

Recommendations

Since factors such as the age and grade levels of students, types of schools, and school curriculums may impact perception, it is recommended that similar studies be conducted at the middle and high school levels. These studies could ascertain counselors' perceptions as well as how they compare with those of counselors in various school settings. It is recommended that the perceptions resulting from the study be used as part of an assessment process to determine the viability of current programs. In creating new programs, since counselors generally agreed that there are identifiable traits parents and the community would want directly taught to students, it is recommended that opportunities be afforded these constituencies to identify such traits. In view of findings related to the source of preparation for character education, it is recommended that school districts institute a continuing education plan that provides for in-service training, seminars, and other resources to encourage counselors' preparation efforts in character education. It is further recommended that institutions of higher education include a character education component in the curriculum for educating counselors. This recommendation is also based on reports in the literature on the implications for infusing character education in teacher education programs nationwide.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, based on the limited number of counselors in the study who participated in starting their character education programs, it is recommended that elementary school counselors assume a leadership role in designing and implementing character education programs. Furthermore, as counselors indicated a need for character education in elementary schools, it is recommended that studies be conducted to ascertain existing factors that are prohibiting the establishment of character education programs in all of the state's elementary schools.

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Formatted by Dr. Mary Alice Kritsonis, National Manuscript and Preparation Editor, National FORUM Journals, Houston, Texas. www.nationalforum.com