

FOSTERING CHARACTER BUILDING; A GUIDE FOR SECONDARY LEVEL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Character building is an essential component of education, particularly in secondary schools, where adolescents are undergoing significant developmental changes. This research article delves into the critical importance of character building at the secondary level and offers practical guidance for educators to facilitate character development among students. By synthesizing theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, this article provides valuable insights into the pivotal roles of educators, curriculum design, and school culture in nurturing moral and ethical growth. Educators play a central role in shaping the character of secondary level learners through their influence as role models, mentors, and facilitators of moral development. A well-designed curriculum that integrates character education across various subjects and activities can provide students with opportunities to reflect on their values, beliefs, and actions. Additionally, fostering a positive school culture characterized by respect, empathy, and a shared commitment to ethical behavior is essential for creating an environment conducive to character growth. Through a comprehensive review of literature and case studies, this article explores effective strategies for instilling values, promoting empathy, and cultivating responsible citizenship among secondary level learners. By examining successful approaches implemented in diverse educational settings, educators can gain valuable insights into best practices for fostering character development in their own schools.

Keywords: Character building, Secondary schools, Educators' role, Curriculum design, School culture, Moral development, Ethical growth

INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly changing world, the role of education extends beyond the mere transmission of knowledge and academic skills. With the advent of globalization, technological advancements, and shifting societal norms, the need for holistic development, particularly at the secondary level, has become increasingly evident. While academic excellence remains a cornerstone of educational endeavors, educators and stakeholders alike recognize the imperative of nurturing well-rounded individuals equipped with strong character traits. Character education, therefore, emerges as a pivotal component of secondary schooling, offering a

framework for cultivating essential qualities such as integrity, empathy, and resilience. These traits not only contribute to individual well-being but also play a significant role in shaping the fabric of society. In an era marked by complex ethical dilemmas and socio-cultural diversity, the ability to make principled decisions and empathize with others assumes paramount importance. Moreover, research underscores the correlation between character development and various positive outcomes, including academic success, mental health, and pro-social behavior. Students who possess a strong moral compass and emotional intelligence are better

equipped to navigate the challenges of adolescence and adulthood, fostering a sense of agency and purpose in their lives. Promoting Positive Youth Development: The Role of Secondary Schools in Fostering Character and Resilience (Lerner, Lerner & Almerigi, 2023).

Recognizing the multifaceted nature of character development, this article endeavors to delve into the intricacies of character education in secondary schools. By exploring the interplay between individual traits, interpersonal dynamics, and institutional practices, educators can gain a deeper understanding of how to foster moral and ethical growth among learners. Positive psychology and school-based interventions: An introduction to a special issue (Goldstein, Young & Boyd, 2018). Through an examination of theoretical frameworks, empirical research, and practical strategies, this article seeks to equip educators with the tools and insights necessary to create nurturing learning environments conducive to character building. Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification (Vol. 2). Oxford University Press (Peterson & Seligman, 2018). By embracing the holistic development of students and prioritizing the cultivation of character alongside academic pursuits, secondary schools can fulfill their mandate of preparing individuals who are not only intellectually competent but also morally upright and socially responsible.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Character education draws upon diverse theoretical frameworks, encompassing moral psychology, social learning theory, and virtue ethics, among others. These frameworks collectively posit that character is not innate but rather a product of environmental influences and intentional cultivation. Central to these theories is the belief that character development is a dynamic process that unfolds over time, shaped by individual experiences, social interactions, and cultural norms. Moral psychology explores the cognitive and emotional processes underlying moral reasoning and decision-making. Researchers such as Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan have proposed stage theories of moral development, highlighting the progression from basic moral understanding to more sophisticated ethical reasoning. By examining the interplay

between cognitive development, moral emotions, and social context, moral psychology offers insights into the mechanisms through which character is formed. Building ethical communities: A lifespan developmental systems perspective (Narvaez & Bock, 2018)

Social learning theory, as articulated by Albert Bandura, emphasizes the role of observation, imitation, and reinforcement in shaping behavior. According to this theory, individuals acquire moral values and behaviors through modeling and vicarious learning, as well as through direct experiences of reward and punishment. By understanding the social influences that shape character, educators can leverage peer interactions, role modeling, and positive reinforcement to promote desirable traits and discourage negative behaviors. Virtue ethics, rooted in the philosophical traditions of Aristotle and Confucius, focuses on the cultivation of virtuous dispositions and habits of mind. Unlike deontological or consequentialist approaches to ethics, virtue ethics emphasizes the importance of character traits such as courage, honesty, and compassion in guiding ethical action. By cultivating virtues through practice, reflection, and habituation, individuals develop the moral integrity and resilience necessary to navigate ethical dilemmas and uphold ethical principles. Fostering character development in schools: The role of teachers and school climate (Jackson, 2017).

By integrating insights from these theoretical perspectives, educators can design interventions that foster character growth among secondary level learners. By addressing cognitive, social, and ethical dimensions of development, educators can create comprehensive programs that promote moral reasoning, prosocial behavior, and the cultivation of virtues. Implementing character education in schools: An analysis of teachers' perspectives (De Luca, Vazirabadi & Marsiglia, 2016). Through intentional efforts to understand the psychological processes involved in moral development and the influence of social and environmental factors, educators can empower students to become morally responsible individuals capable of contributing positively to their communities.

ROLE OF EDUCATORS

Educators are not only imparting knowledge but are also instrumental in shaping the character and values of their students. They serve as role models, mentors, and facilitators of moral growth, influencing students' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors both inside and outside the classroom (Shahid & Ali, 2017). By embodying the values, they wish to instill in their students, educators set a powerful example and create a culture of integrity, empathy, and respect within the school community. Moreover, educators play a crucial role in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment where every student feels valued and respected (Ahmad et al, 2024). By fostering a sense of belonging and promoting positive interpersonal relationships, teachers lay the foundation for a school culture that celebrates diversity and embraces mutual understanding. How schools can support the moral development of students: Some principles and practices (Davidson, 2017).

In addition to their interpersonal influence, educators can integrate character education into their instructional practices, enriching the curriculum with opportunities for moral reflection and ethical inquiry. By incorporating moral dilemmas, ethical

discussions, and service-learning projects into the curriculum, teachers provide students with real-world contexts for applying ethical principles and values. Through these experiential learning opportunities, students not only deepen their understanding of ethical concepts but also develop practical skills for ethical decision-making and responsible citizenship (Rao et al, 2023). Furthermore, educators can leverage their position to collaborate with parents, administrators, and community stakeholders in promoting character development initiatives. By fostering partnerships with families and community organizations, teachers can extend the impact of character education beyond the classroom and create a collective commitment to nurturing the whole child. Religion and child development: Evidence from the early childhood longitudinal study (Bartkowski, & Levin, 2016). Educators play a multifaceted role in character building, embodying values, creating supportive environments, integrating character education into the curriculum, and fostering partnerships with stakeholders. By recognizing and embracing their responsibility as moral agents, educators can empower students to become compassionate, ethical, and socially responsible individuals capable of making positive contributions to society.



CURRICULUM DESIGN FOR EFFECTIVE CHARACTER EDUCATION

In designing a curriculum for character education that truly resonates with students and effectively fosters moral development, several key considerations must be taken into account.

I. Comprehensive and Sequential Structure:

A curriculum should cover a broad spectrum of virtues and ethical principles, progressing in a logical sequence from foundational concepts to more complex moral reasoning. Each grade level builds upon the lessons learned in previous years, allowing

students to deepen their understanding and practice of character traits over time. School climate profiles: Characterizing types of schools with multidimensional configurations of student engagement and adult-student relationships (You, Furlong, Felix & O'Malley, 2015).

II. Age-Appropriate Content:

Recognizing the varying cognitive and socio-emotional development of students at different ages, curriculum designers should tailor content and activities to be developmentally appropriate. This ensures that students are engaged and challenged without being overwhelmed, allowing them to internalize and apply character principles effectively. Social domain theory: Consistencies and variations in children's moral and social judgments. (Smetana, 2017).

III. Explicit Instruction and Implicit Modeling:

A balanced approach to instruction is essential, combining direct teaching of moral values with the modeling of those values by educators and other authority figures. Explicit instruction provides clarity and guidance, while implicit modeling allows students to observe virtues in action and internalize them through emulation. Educating for character: How schools can teach respect and responsibility. HarperCollins (Shriver, 2017).

IV. Reflection and Dialogue:

Providing opportunities for students to reflect on their values, beliefs, and actions is integral to character development. Incorporating regular reflection exercises, journaling prompts, and open discussions about ethical dilemmas encourages critical thinking and self-awareness, fostering a deeper understanding of one's own moral compass. The long and winding road: The role of character development in educational outcomes (Roth, 2019).

V. Integration with Academic Content:

To maximize the impact of character education, it should be seamlessly integrated with academic content across subject areas. By embedding character themes and ethical considerations into lesson plans, educators can demonstrate the real-world relevance of character virtues and reinforce their importance in various contexts. Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press (Peterson & Seligman, 2016).

VI. Alignment with Standards:

Aligning character education with academic standards ensures that it receives the same level of attention and priority as other educational goals. By incorporating character development objectives into curriculum standards and assessments, educators underscore the importance of moral growth alongside academic achievement. Character strengths and positive youth development (Park, 2016).

VII. Interactive and Engaging Activities:

Utilizing a variety of teaching methods, such as role-playing, cooperative learning tasks, and experiential exercises, keeps students actively engaged in the learning process. Hands-on activities and real-life simulations provide opportunities for students to apply character principles in practical scenarios, reinforcing their understanding and retention. Moral chronicity and social information processing: Tests of a social cognitive approach to the moral personality (Narvaez, Lapsley, Hagele & Lasky, 2013).

By adhering to these principles of curriculum design, educators can create a robust framework for character education that empowers students to become ethical, empathetic, and responsible individuals capable of navigating life's challenges with integrity and resilience. Eleven principles of effective character education (Lickona, Schaps & Lewis, 2016).

FOSTERING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURE AND CLIMATE FOR CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

The culture and climate of a school are foundational pillars that underpin the success of character education initiatives. A positive school culture, marked by mutual respect, empathy, and a collective dedication to ethical behavior, serves as fertile soil for the cultivation of character virtues among students, several terms must be taken into account.

1. Mutual Respect and Empathy:

Central to a positive school culture is the cultivation of mutual respect and empathy among all members of the school community. Students, teachers, administrators, and staff alike should feel valued, heard, and supported in their interactions. By fostering an environment where differences are

celebrated and individuals feel accepted for who they are, schools lay the groundwork for meaningful relationships and empathetic understanding. Promoting empathy in schools: The role of social and emotional learning (Jackson, 2018).

2. Shared Commitment to Ethical Behavior:

A cohesive school community is characterized by a shared commitment to upholding ethical standards and principles. By explicitly articulating and promoting a set of core values that guide behavior and decision-making, schools create a moral compass that steers interactions and fosters a sense of collective responsibility for the well-being of others. Social-emotional and character development in elementary school (Elias & Tobias, 2017).

3. Promotion of Social and Emotional Learning:

Schools can promote character development by embedding social and emotional learning (SEL) into the fabric of daily school life. SEL programs provide students with the skills and competencies needed to manage emotions, build positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. By integrating SEL practices into the curriculum and extracurricular activities, schools empower students to navigate interpersonal dynamics and develop empathy and self-awareness. (Davidson, 2018). The moral development of the child: An integrated model (Davidson, 2018).

4. Conflict Resolution and Restorative Justice:

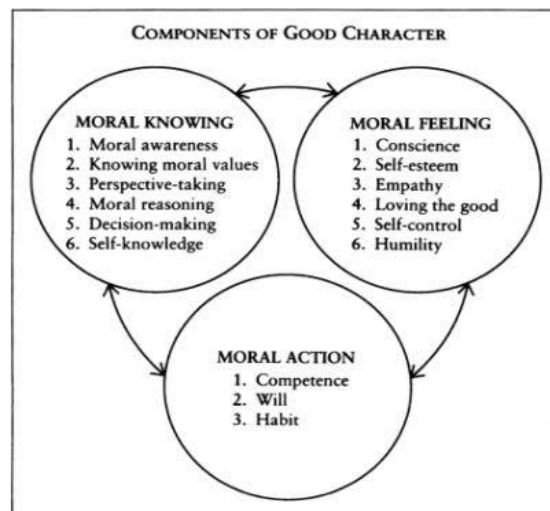
Addressing conflicts and disciplinary issues through restorative practices fosters a culture of

accountability, empathy, and reconciliation. Rather than resorting to punitive measures, restorative justice approaches prioritize dialogue, understanding, and repairing harm. By involving all parties affected by a conflict in a collaborative problem-solving process, schools promote empathy, empathy, and personal growth while reinforcing a sense of community and belonging. Sixteen going on sixty-six: A longitudinal study of personality stability and change across 50 years (Damian, Spengler, Sutu & Roberts, 2019).

5. Teacher Leadership and Professional Development:

Educators play a pivotal role in shaping school culture through their leadership, modeling, and advocacy for character education. Providing teachers with ongoing professional development opportunities in SEL, conflict resolution, and restorative practices equips them with the knowledge and skills needed to create supportive learning environments conducive to character growth. Unselfie: Why empathetic kids succeed in our all-about-me world. Touchstone (Borba,2016).

In essence, fostering a positive school culture and climate requires a collective effort from all stakeholders, including students, educators, administrators, parents, and community members. By prioritizing mutual respect, empathy, and ethical behavior, schools can create nurturing environments that cultivate the character virtues essential for students' personal and academic success. Research-based character education: What we know and what we need to know (Berkowitz & Bier, 2017).



FINDINGS

- I. Character education is essential for holistic development, complementing academic achievement by fostering essential traits such as integrity, empathy, and resilience.
- II. Theoretical frameworks such as moral psychology, social learning theory, and virtue ethics provide valuable insights into the processes of character development and effective intervention strategies.
- III. Educators play a pivotal role in character building, serving as role models, mentors, and facilitators of moral growth within the school community.
- IV. A comprehensive and sequential character education curriculum, aligned with academic content and standards, is essential for promoting character development in secondary level learners.
- V. The culture and climate of a school significantly influence the success of character education initiatives, with a positive school culture characterized by mutual respect and empathy providing a fertile ground for character growth.
- VI. Policies and practices that prioritize social and emotional learning, conflict resolution, and restorative justice contribute to creating a supportive environment conducive to character development.
- VII. Opportunities for students to reflect on their values, beliefs, and actions and engage in meaningful discussions about ethical issues are integral to character education.
- VIII. Effective approaches to instilling values, fostering empathy, and cultivating responsible citizenship include experiential learning, service-learning projects, and collaborative problem-solving.
- IX. Integrating character education into all aspects of school life, including extracurricular activities and school-

wide events, enhances its impact and sustainability.

- X. Collaboration between educators, administrators, parents, and the community is essential for the successful implementation and reinforcement of character education initiatives.
- XI. Ongoing professional development for educators and continuous evaluation of program effectiveness are critical for ensuring the long-term success and impact of character education efforts.

DISCUSSION

In light of the findings presented in this research article, it is evident that character education plays a crucial role in secondary education, shaping the moral and ethical development of students and preparing them to become responsible citizens in an ever-changing world. The role of educators as facilitators of character growth is paramount, necessitating ongoing support and professional development to effectively implement evidence-based practices. Additionally, the design of a comprehensive and sequential character education curriculum, aligned with academic content and standards, is essential for promoting character development in secondary level learners. Furthermore, creating a positive school culture and climate characterized by mutual respect, empathy, and a commitment to ethical behavior provides a fertile ground for character growth, with policies and practices that prioritize social and emotional learning, conflict resolution, and restorative justice playing a pivotal role.

Overall, by embracing the principles of character education and fostering collaboration among stakeholders, schools can empower students to become ethical leaders capable of making positive contributions to their communities and society at large.

CONCLUSIONS

The journey of fostering character building among secondary level learners is a dynamic and multifaceted endeavor that demands a concerted effort from various stakeholders within the educational ecosystem. As demonstrated throughout

this research article, the principles of character education serve as guiding beacons illuminating the path towards equipping students with the moral compass necessary to navigate life's complexities with integrity and resilience. Educators, administrators, parents, and the broader community each play indispensable roles in shaping the character development of young learners. By working collaboratively and synergistically, these stakeholders can create a nurturing environment that fosters the growth of essential virtues and ethical principles in students.

Through the implementation of evidence-based practices grounded in moral psychology, social learning theory, and virtue ethics, schools can serve as incubators for the cultivation of ethical leaders and responsible citizens. By incorporating explicit instruction, implicit modeling, reflective practices, and opportunities for dialogue into the curriculum, educators can empower students to internalize values, deepen their understanding of ethical concepts, and apply them in real-world contexts. Moreover, fostering a positive school culture characterized by mutual respect, empathy, and a shared commitment to ethical behavior provides the fertile ground upon which character growth flourishes. By promoting social and emotional learning, conflict resolution, and restorative justice, schools create inclusive communities where every individual feels valued, heard, and supported in their journey towards moral excellence.

This research article serves not only as a comprehensive guide for educators seeking to cultivate a culture of character in their schools but also as a testament to the transformative power of education in shaping the future leaders of tomorrow. By embracing the principles of character education and championing the holistic development of students, educators can empower them to become compassionate, ethical, and socially responsible individuals capable of making meaningful contributions to their communities and the world at large. In essence, the cultivation of character in secondary education is not merely a pedagogical endeavor but a moral imperative a collective endeavor aimed at nurturing the hearts and minds of young learners and instilling within them the values

and virtues that will guide them towards a future of integrity, empathy, and purpose.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Implement comprehensive character education programs that integrate moral development into all aspects of the school curriculum. Provide ongoing professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their understanding of character education principles and effective instructional strategies. Foster partnerships with parents and community organizations to support and reinforce character education initiatives beyond the classroom. Incorporate student voice and choice in the design and implementation of character education activities to promote ownership and engagement. Evaluate the effectiveness of character education programs through regular assessment and feedback mechanisms, adjusting practices as needed to ensure continuous improvement.

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