

Recognition and Applying Character Education Approaches in Schools

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to recognize the approaches of “character education” and trying to find useful and applicable method for each approach. Making use of a qualitative approach and a descriptive-analytic method, at first, this study attempted to explain the concept of character education by mentioning a brief history it. Then, it is focused on character education approaches and methods derived from them for applying at schools. The findings of this study imply that three major approaches of character education are traditional, developmental-cognitive and care approaches; but in schools, character education programs should be a combination of two or even all three approaches because each approach has some limitations and defects. It seems that the “holistic approach” can increase the chances of success of character education programs.

Keywords: moral education, character education, character education approach

1. Introduction

Morality is one of the most important factors of stability and excellence of human societies and thus most of the prophets, social reformers, cultural policy makers and educators have emphasized on its necessity and offered some solutions to promote morality in human societies. Today, “strengthening personal and social morality” is one of the fundamental aims of life, and “moral education” is one of the important aspects of education. Therefore, almost all of educational documents or programs around the World contain moral goals.

Among the various ways that have been used to promote morals by educators, “character education” is one of oldest methods in the history of education. Great educators such as Plato, Aristotle, Locke and Herbart pointed to character education as an effective method to develop moral virtues in children and youth (Naghibzadeh, 2012). While character education has a long precedent in history of education, it is revived in the United States and some European countries since the 1980s.

Davis (2003) expressed the reasons for renewed focus on character education especially in schools. Issues such as failure of many families in moral education due to multiple involvements, failed and dysfunctional families, illegal sexual relations, increased violence, materialism portrayed in the mass media, peer pressure, increased mistrust and prevalence of ethical vices such as lying, cheating, theft and robbery, increased disrespect for adults, the prevalence of superstitions in schools and other sectors of society, early sexual maturation, loss of civil liability (Davis, 2003).

Moral goals, like other educational goals, can be implemented in family, school and other institutions in human societies. But the “school” has a special position. In school as a small community, it is possible for school authorities to teach morality in theoretical and practical way simultaneously. There is also the possibility of analyzing the results.

It should be noted that operational methods of character education, derived from more overall philosophical-educational approaches. In this paper, these approaches are summarized under three headings: Traditional Approach, Cognitive-developmental Approach and Caring Approach. This study is focused mainly on the mentioned approaches and operational methods derived from them.

But for the success of any educational action, it is necessary to know the theoretical foundations. It seems that many managers and teachers in schools are aware of the importance and necessity of moral education. But the problem is that most of school managers and teachers do not have a clear idea of character education approaches and methods. So, the main purpose of this paper is to recognize and introduce these approaches and methods in a regular and clear way.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 *The Definition of "Character Education"*

To better understanding of character education, the meaning of the word "character" must be examined. Etymologically, the term "character" comes from the ancient Greek which initially referred to the mark impressed upon a coin. The term character (Note 1) later came to refer more generally to any distinctive feature by which one thing is distinguished from others. Along this general line, in contemporary usage character often refers to a set of qualities that can be used to differentiate between persons. In philosophy, however, the term character is typically used to refer to the particularly moral dimension of a person. For example, Aristotle most often used the term *ēthē* for character, which is etymologically linked to "ethics" and "morality" (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2015).

Some experts believe that the use of the term character should be used only for the virtues and positive habits (Sojourner, 2012). In this sense, character, refers to basic moral values such as caring, honesty, justice, responsibility and respect for themselves and others (Character Education Partnership (CEP), 2003).

Another group of theorists of moral education believe that character is a kind of behavioral approach. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, Charles German, defined character as a personalized and appropriate response to living conditions. In line with this definition, new psychologists acknowledge that the character can be used as a "regulatory system" to prevent many unethical acts and help to the person to maintain stability and identity as an independent person (Shipiro, 2000, p. 9).

But when character is combined to "education", it finds a more specialized meaning. Today, character education means a systematic, comprehensive and planned approach to teach moral values (Wood & Rvach, 1999). Lickona (1996) defined Character Education as a "deliberate effort to help people understand, care about, and act upon core ethical values". Edington believes that character education means "help students to internalize the moral values through modeling, so that without the presence of parents and teachers are able and willing to carry out wise choices and act upon them" (Edington, 2002).

But the experts, who obviously follow character education in the school space, present a more operational definition of the term: "Character education is an intentional effort by schools in which school staff help children and young people to behave with parents and community members reasonably and responsibly" (Character Education Partnership (CEP), 2003, p. 2).

A group of character education scholars purpose some moral purposes in their definition of character education. For example, Clouse (2001) believes that character education is based on some pillars such as trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship that humanitarian principles accepted by all cultures and societies (Clouse, 2001).

2.2 *The History of Character Education*

The term "character education" as well as the word character, rooted in the ideas of ancient Greek philosophers. From Socrates' view, educated person is a person who can manage his daily life and enjoys the virtues such as good judgment, generosity, magnanimity, order, moderation in pleasure, courage in adverse conditions, humility in success and slowness in doing errors. Socrates believed that the realizing and implementing of these virtues is possible only by education (Carus, 2004).

Plato accepted that moral ideals can be created in human by proper education. He insisted that human abilities should be developed harmoniously by education and moral life is one of the most important aspects of human nature. Aristotle also, recounted three stages for education: the first stage is associated with the body training; the second is character education and third is the growth of wisdom. By creating good habits in second stage, children moves toward logical and rational understanding of morals (Ryan, 1986).

From the perspective of medieval Christian educators, many aspects of human nature were not only worthy of breeding, but they are barriers for true education. Aquinas (1225-1274), put morality in theology ground and believes that if religious virtues such as faith, hope and love nurtured in a satisfactory way, human beings can follow the natural laws and adapt themselves with them (Power, 1989).

In the Renaissance, the wave of sensuality and experimental methods embraced the realm of ethics and moral values. Since the moral values are known abstract and not empirically verifiable phenomena, and were deemed unrealistic and biased and arbitrary.

But, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the pioneers of education concluded that the educational system, should teach civic virtues or habits which are required to democratic citizenship (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999, p. 67); virtues such as patriotism, diligence, honesty, altruism and courage. In the mid of twentieth century, the United States was the world's harbinger of character education. When John Dewey wrote that it is a commonplace matter in the educational theory that character education is a comprehensive goal of education in schools, character education gradually became one of the missions of America's schools (Heslep, 1995, p. 168).

In the late 1950s, Lawrence Kohlberg introduced a new theory of moral development including logical thinking and independent judgment as a source of moral behavior (Smith, 1989). He believed that teaching good habits and moral truths to students is not possible only by preaching. Instead, child-centered approaches and strategies should be used to teach good manners. In particular, Kohlberg argued in 1976 that the aim of moral education should be in suit with natural stages of moral reasoning in students (Power, 1989).

While in the 1960s, promoting beliefs like individualism, pluralism and secularism in America, undermined the efforts of character education in schools, but in the 1970s moral education was revived. From 1980s to present time, due to parents' concerns and educational policy makers of growing trend of declining moral values, character education has always been considered as a key element of moral education (Lickona, 1996).

3. The Main Approaches of Character Education

Over viewing the history of character education shows its fluctuation over the times. But today, we can place the educational experiences related to character education under three categories: traditional, cognitive-developmental and caring approaches.

3.1 Traditional Approach

This approach basically focuses on the "habitual moral acts" and mainly originated from Aristotle. Although great educators like Herbart, Kerschensteiner and Dewey have insisted on this approach after Aristotle.

Unlike Socrates and Plato that believed "Unity of Knowledge and Virtue" (if a person knows well, he will do it), Aristotle believed that we become moral persons through practicing good deeds. In other words, if Idealist philosophers like Plato recommended "improving mental abilities for developing virtues in society", Aristotle accentuated that correct behavior would be obtained through practicing good actions (James, 2006, pp. 30-31).

Therefore, traditional approach means creating good habits by repetition and drill through "formal and direct training". In this regard, the responsibility of the school is determining the moral aims, appropriate models, and encouraging these features and values. These actions would increase the chances of doing the right conducts and good behavior among students. We can consider some methods under this approach:

3.1.1 Service Learning

One of the ways that in some parts of the world, including the US, is used to develop character education in the students is "service learning" or learning of moral virtues through doing moral service.

This method that is included in the school curriculum and auxiliary programs provides opportunities for application of moral knowledge and acquired skills in real life situations. Service learning is not limited to the participation of students in ethical services but also prepare them with the opportunities for reflection, dialogue and writing about these activities.

Implementation of Service-learning projects in schools makes opportunities for students to practice moral and spiritual activities. The ultimate goal of service learning is to motivate students to become committed humans. The growth of virtues such as expression of respect, responsibility, compassion, cooperation, citizenship and stability is an important objective of service learning (Miller, 2005). Service-learning involves participants in reading, reflection and analysis; provides students an opportunity to develop a personal connection to what they are learning; and creates a context for the application of concepts introduced in the classroom. Programs like voluntarily caring for elderly and children, helping "at risk children, participation in benevolent public projects are examples of Service-Learning" (Elkind & Suites, 2004).

3.1.2 Civic Education

Experts of character education believe that accurate and continuous civic education can be effective in formation of moral character of students, especially social ethics (Bischoff, 2016). Civic Education consists of both a core curriculum and teaching strategies that give students the knowledge, skills, virtues, and confidence to actively participate in democratic life.

It teaches how government, businesses, community groups, and nonprofits work together to create strong communities. It emphasizes that both individual and group participation is important to sustain our democratic way of life. It teaches civility and respect for others when deliberating, negotiating, organizing, and advocating for one's own positions on public issues (Hoge, 2002).

3.1.3 Presenting "Value Statement"

A very common way for creating a positive impact on student behavior is acquainting them with value statements. Value statements include a list of moral virtues or desirable goals that are accepted in each society. Value Statement includes expectations for student behavior not only at school but outside of school.

Value statements can be used as a part of other educational programs such as citizenship education, social skills training and services learning. The value statements may change the non-moral attitudes and abnormal social behavior of students. For this purpose, the school staff can publish a variety of values on posters, banners and so forth and install them in suitable places.

3.2 Cognitive-Developmental Approach

Unlike the traditional approach, which is "subject-oriented", the cognitive-developmental approach is "process-oriented". In this approach, rather than direct and manifest emphasis on moral matters, the school focuses on critical thinking, problem-solving and other cognitive methods in dealing with social issues.

The origins of this approach return to the theory of Piaget and Kohlberg. Jean Piaget (1896-1980) research showed that the children are able to do rational argument from fourth (Note 2) stage of cognitive development. He described two types of morality: First "Heteronomous morality", when the person follows laws because of external threats and pressure without any objections and questions. The second type of ethics is "Autonomous morality" and it is when person follows moral rules because they seem reasonable and legitimate. In other words, he achieved a "self-regulation" in Ethics (Dervries, 1998).

According to Piaget, the aim of character education is strengthening the understanding and creativity of student in solving life's problems, including ethical issues (Kardan, 2009, pp. 253-254). Lawrence Kohlberg is likely the most well known moral theorist; his name is synonymous with moral development. Kohlberg expanded the work of Jean Piaget, who viewed the development of logical reasoning as a progression through a series of stages in which individuals incorporate a greater number of interacting variables in each stage. From Kohlberg's perspective, moral development is the increasing ability to differentiate and integrate the perspectives of self and others in making moral decisions. This is the product of an interaction between the child's cognitive structures and the structural features of the social environment. The capability for complex perspective and understanding abstract concepts is associated with advances in moral reasoning. Kohlberg believes that moral development is promoted by social experiences that produce cognitive conflict. Social experiences provide the child some opportunities to analyze the perspectives of others. Kohlberg's stories that put teenagers in moral dilemmas are interesting examples of development of moral judgment (Elkind & Sweet, 2004).

In addition to Piaget and Kohlberg, people like Vygotsky, James Rest (1983), Selman (1980) argued that teaching good habits to students is not possible only by simple preaching. They believed child-centered approaches and strategies for teaching character must be replaced. They believe that school textbooks should contain delightful stories with clear moral values and lessons of self-esteem (Lickona, 1996). They argue that the purpose of ethics education should cultivate students through the natural stages of moral reasoning (Power, 1989).

Under the cognitive-developmental approach, we can consider a variety of teaching methods that promote critical thinking and problem solving ability of students if these teaching methods performed with a focus on values and moral virtues. One of the most famous methods of this kind is the Socratic Method.

3.2.1 Socratic Method

Socratic Method (Note 3) is one of the oldest teaching methods to strengthen reasoning ability and intellectual mastery that can be used in character education, too. Nowadays, teachers can begin Socratic Method more attractive than oral questions, because in recent years, by the use of audio-visual equipments, books and other media, they can prepare the mind of students for moral Socratic questions and answers.

Providing moral and instructive stories from history and biographies of heroes and stories with moral dilemmas in formats such as illustrated books, cartoon, documentaries and drama can be a starting point for discussion in class and class assignments.

3.3 Caring Approach

Caring approach is one of the new movements in ethics that generally associated with the work of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings. Carol Gilligan (1982), states that there are two types of morality:

One which emphasizes rules, rights and justice, and another that emphasizes relationships and personal responsibility. She believed ethics should be originated towards the particular rather than universal. Basically, the ethics of care is in many ways a response to ethical systems based upon justice especially related to Lawrence Kohlberg, Immanuel Kant and other systems that emphasize rights and duties. By contrast, ethics of care is based on relational values such as nurturing, kindness and compassion. The Ethics of care emphasizes that determining practice the decisive factor should be our concern for the other (Page, 2008, pp. 159-160).

Noddings by writing "Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education" has taken an important step in application of this type of ethics in education. She states that caring should be "a way of being in relation" to others (Noddings, 1984, p. 17). Noddings separated ethical caring from natural caring. Ethical caring is where one recognizes and evaluates caring as a specific means of relating to others, although ethical caring arises from natural caring (Noddings, 2005, p. 83).

She critiques curricula that are directed towards "a drive for academic adequacy" and not directed towards "producing caring people" (Noddings, 2005, p. 366). She contends that our children should believe that they themselves are cared for and learn to care for others (Noddings, 2005, p. 676). One of the most famous methods that today can be implemented in character education is Social-Emotional Learning.

3.3.1 Social-Emotional Learning

This movement emerged in the late 90s and found continued growth in the 2000s. Social-emotional learning can be described as a process of achieving skills to understand and manage emotions, the growth of care and concern for others, establish positive relationships and accountability in decision-making.

Social-emotional learning programs have a significant impact in all aspects of children's growth such as health, moral development, citizenship, academic learning, as well as motivation for success. Social-emotional learning is defined as "the process through which students learn to recognize and manage their emotions. Social-emotional learning forms a systematic framework for addressing the social and emotional needs of students" (Davis, 2003).

Social-emotional education is based on the assumption that learning is a social process and related to students emotions which is done by teachers, parents, peers and other adults. Social-emotional learning includes the efforts of educators to combine science, emotional and social education.

If social-emotional learning programs are done in a high and efficient quality, educational progress and reduction of behavioral problems will be tangible.

The main objectives of social-emotional learning students include: 1) self-awareness, 2) accountability for decision-making, 3) communication skills, 4) self-management, and 5) social awareness.

If the goals of character education are achieved through social-emotional learning in school, the result will be a "care community" at school. In such a situation, school tries to be an example of a small careful and civic community. To this end, the school performs in a way to create respectful relationships among all students, teachers and staff. This situation will improve the sense of caring and responsibility in school environment.

If the students, staff and parents can experience the mutual respect, fairness and cooperation, will be successful in promoting these values in society most likely. In a caring school, daily life in the classroom and all other school departments (laboratories, workshops, corridors, sports grounds, bus, etc.) will be filled with love and mutual respect.

4. Character Education Approaches: Integration or Segregation?

Although in this paper, traditional, cognitive-developmental and caring approaches were recognized as the three main approaches of character education, but it is not required to use only one approach in schools. Even better is that a combination of two or three approaches be used in programs of character education. In this regard, some experts believe that character education should nurture think, feel and act together (Douglas, 2002). Character education should be understood in general and comprehensive way. It should encompass all cognitive, emotional

and behavioral aspects of morality. Schools must help children understand the main values, commit to them and then act upon them in their life. One example of integrated approach of Character education is Ryan technique or six Es of character education. These steps include:

- 1) Example: Human beings aren't born civilized; we have to learn almost everything important by example. By mentioning real contemporary samples or from earlier period of our history, we can imprint in children's mind a vivid picture of what a good human being is like-that.
- 2) Ethos: Second E, comes from a Greek term for the ethical environment that must be an integral part of school life. It means that instead of talking about general and theoretical issues in morality such as "inappropriate behavior" or "stages of moral development", teachers and other school personnel can create a place where kids can't put one another down, where kids can get a hearing, and where there is a sense of fairness and respect.
- 3) Explanation: The third E, "explanation" is not explaining course materials such as quadratic equations or the causes of the Civil War; but explaining ethical rules, in plain language and related to real life situations.
- 4) Emotion: However, there are limits to explaining. It doesn't always work. There are times when you've really got to appeal to the moral "emotions" the fourth E. There are also exhortations that inspire people—appeals not so much to the mind, but to the heart. You can think of character education as teaching children to know the good, to love the good, and to do the good.
- 5) Experiences: The fifth E, "experiences", is related to moral action. Today, many children have few opportunities to become moral actors because they're not really needed by their families. One of the most constructive movements in schools is giving kids opportunities to behave in responsible, compassionate, moral ways in the larger community (Ryan, 2002).
- 6) Expectations for Excellence: The last E is "expectations for excellence". Children have the tendency to rise to the occasion and are not inspired by mediocrity. Striving for excellence doesn't mean perfectionism. Excellence represent doing one's best, while perfectionism demands an all or nothing approach to goal achievement (Power, 2007, p. 64).

5. Conclusion

Although each of the mentioned approaches has a strong theoretical basis and practical methods that can produce effective results in schools, but each approach have some limitations and defects. When school authorities try to run a single and one-dimensional approach, in fact, they deprive themselves of the benefits of other approaches. So to increase the chances of success of character education programs, "holistic approach" is required. In this case, each approach will play complementary role for other approaches and will cover weaknesses of them. Another point is that the success of any program of moral education, including character education, is realized in three levels: family, school and community but it should be noted that "school" is considered a major base in character education. School character education programs will be successful, only with interaction and cooperation with other levels that are family and the community. For better results, School must contribute families, individuals and social institutions in character education programs. On the other hand, Family and community organizations should also support and appreciate school activities in the field of moral education. The role of the family and society is not limited to supporting and appreciating. The role of adults in modeling the process of moral education is very important. If the values promoted by schools, won't have practical manifestation in adults behavior, school character education programs will not succeed.

Resources

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Notes

Note 1. Ancient Greek spelling.

Note 2. Piaget divided cognitive development to four stages: sensor motor (from birth to 24 months), pre-operational (two to seven years), and concrete operational, formal operational.

Note 3. Socratic Method involves using questions to review one's thinking overall. The questions are designed to look at the quality of an answer that is given. This type of questioning should be used to see the precision, accuracy, depth, clarity, relevance, and breadth of the reasoning made by the student (Paul & Elder, 2007).

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