THROUGH THE EYES OF STUDENTS: HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES ON CHARACTER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The heightened interest in schools contributing to the formation of character through character education has surfaced as a national dialogue. This study examines the students’ perspective and understanding of a character education program implemented at their high school. Findings based on interviews with 144 high school students describe the students’ perspectives regarding the need for character education, program effectiveness, student and teacher resistance, pedagogical issues and concerns, and suggestions as to what works. Based on these findings, suggestions are made as to how administrators and teachers can utilize their students’ perspectives in order to better implement and improve character education.

INTRODUCTION

Character education is broad in scope and difficult to precisely define. For the purpose of this study, character education can best be described “as any school-initiated program, designed in cooperation with other community institutions, to shape directly and systematically the behavior of young people by influencing explicitly the non relativistic values believed directly to bring about that behavior” (Lockwood 1997, p. 179). Character education programs are inten-
tional efforts by schools and teachers to foster good character in stu-
dents and to help them "acquire a moral compass—that is a sense of
right and wrong and the enduring habits necessary to live a good life"
(Ryan & Cooper 2000, p. 451).

Educators can find numerous studies and expert opinions, about
character education, but they are seldom given the opportunity to
view character education through the eyes of students. This article
reports findings from a qualitative study conducted at one particular
high school. It presents high school students’ perspectives and under-
standing of character education.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This study examines one particular high school Character Education
Program (CEP) as described by students and asks the question: What
do students think about the CEP implemented in their school? The
study is descriptive in that it does not evaluate the overall effectiveness
of the CEP, but rather describes students’ perspectives. The study
began by raising the following research questions:

1) What is the purpose of the CEP as described by students?
2) What are the important, exciting, and negative aspects of the
CEP as described by students?
3) Do students view the CEP as effective?
4) What do administrators and teachers need to know regarding
the students’ perspective when implementing a CEP?

**THE SETTING**

This research centers on the school-wide CEP implemented at
Edwardsville High School (he school’s name has been changed) locat-
ed in a rural setting in Northwest Ohio. The school is staffed with five
administrators (two principals, two counselors, and an activity direc-
tor), a coordinator for character education and service learning, and
38 faculty members. The school serves 575 students in grades 9-12.

In response to the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, EHS
administration and teachers met to discuss ways to better the civility
of the school environment, improve academic performance, and
increase community involvement. From these meetings, several
teachers agreed to investigate and apply to the Ohio Department of
Education’s Partners in Character Education grant program. EHS
received a $25,000 grant that was renewed for the 2001 school year. Additional funds were provided in order to examine a service learning option.

EHS formed a character education committee consisting of administrators, teachers, parents, selected students, community members, and local business leaders. Through consensus, the committee developed the following framework served as the basis for the CEP:

- **Vision and Mission:** to value self and others; to desire, know, and do right; and to serve all.
- **Goals:** to improve academic performance to develop and maintain a civil school environment to increase and maintain community involvement.
- **Objectives:** to develop students who know, desire, and do right.
- **Nine Monthly Themes:** respect, responsibility, citizenship, service, sensitivity, honesty, self-discipline, work ethic, and justice.
- **36 Words of the Week**

The Character Education Committee has continued to meet on a monthly basis in order to secure funding and provide program direction.

The CEP consisted of a formal 30 minute class called Team Time for all students every Tuesday and Thursday. Students were assigned to Team Times based on grade levels. The first year lessons were designed to develop the knowing of character. The second year emphasized the desiring of character including conflict resolution and perspective, while the third and fourth years provided students with opportunities to apply various character traits. These lessons used a variety of teaching strategies including reflective questions, short stories, literature, and videotapes. Each team was encouraged to have an ongoing service project.

In addition to Team Times, students we presented with words of the week and various messages on the particular theme of the month. Guest speakers addressed topics such as conflict resolution, anger management, investments, nutrition, and environmental stewardship. The school was filled with posters announcing the trait of the month, the mission statement, and monthly character themes. Classroom
walls displayed posters such as “the Golden Rule Rules” and “Save Sex for Marriage.”

Faculty development included seven teachers attending Thomas Lickona’s Summer Institute for the study of Character Education at the State College of New York at Cortland in the summer of 2000. Upon their return, these teachers became the leaders for the CEP and developed a three year action plan. Throughout the year, several national advocates for character education were invited to the school in order to provide workshops for faculty and administration. Several teachers received mini-grants that enabled them to attend character education conferences and workshops throughout the United States.

The character education committee developed an assessment plan that used Lickona’s 30 question School as a Caring Community Profile (SCCP). The questionnaire was administered to each class at the beginning and end of each school year. Attitude improvements of 15-20% were recorded for the junior and senior classes over the first two years of the program.

METHODS OF INVESTIGATION

Data collected in this qualitative study included semi-structured interviews and spontaneous conversations with students. The purpose of these interviews was to listen to students as they described their experiences, feelings, and thoughts about the CEP. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, while notes were taken during spontaneous conversations.

The interviews took place prior to the start of each school day and during lunch periods. Focus group interviews ranging from six to fourteen students with four of the Team Times classes (two senior, one junior, and one sophomore team time) were conducted, and students from seven classes were taken from class and interviewed in groups of three. A total of 144 students (over 25 percent of the EHS student body) were interviewed; 33 seniors, 47 juniors, 26 sophomores, and 38 freshman.

Through inductive analysis, various themes emerged from the data. The information was categorized according to topics and categories that were predominantly derived from the data itself. Pertinent

1The School as a Caring Community Profile is an instrument developed by the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs, SUNY Cortland, P.O. Box 2000, Cortland, NY 13045
examples and quotes were identified and added to the relevant categories. The findings discussed below were similar throughout the four grade levels and consistent in one-on-one, three-on-one and large group interviews.

**FINDINGS**

This study presents the students' perspectives and understandings of the CEP implemented in their school. The following themes emerged from the data analysis.

**WHY DO WE NEED THIS CHARACTER EDUCATION STUFF?**

Regarding the purpose of the CEP, the large majority of the EHS students that were interviewed understood and agreed with the good intentions of the administration’s rational. They saw the purpose for character education to be “to make us better people.” Students’ responses seemed to accept the basic premise that society, the school climate, and individuals in general need improvement regarding character issues, and they agreed that the administration had "good intentions."

Although most students believed that character education was important, they questioned the need for it in their own lives and the appropriateness of teaching character at the high school level:

There is no need for this program. . . I think more or less we are already comfortable with our values and have decided how we are going to act. (Senior)

I think it should be taught in elementary and junior high because no one is going to change their ways in high school they already are set in their ways. (Junior)

By high school we already have our minds made up on what we are going to be like regardless of what teachers say. (Sophomore)

What they are trying to teach is important but not at our level. We already know this. (Freshman)

These student comments support results from the Josephson Institute's
1998 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth. This study presents findings that the majority of students believe “character was important, and 91 percent were satisfied with their own ethics and character.”

Important to this perspective is not that students believe they fully understood character traits such as honesty, but rather they already knew the superficial level at which these traits are taught within the CEP program. For example, several students disputed a Team Time lesson where a videotaped scenario poses a question concerning if students should return a dollar bill that was found in a parking lot. One student sarcastically commented that the videotapes “are like if Bobby found a dollar on the playground would you turn it into the teacher or keep it . . . who cares it just a dollar. They are kind of cheesy. . . there is more to honesty than that.” Because of what students perceived as a simplistic presentation of character traits, they were quick to dismiss the program or their need for character education citing their prior knowledge and experiences.

Students were satisfied with their character. Their concern centered on the idea that some students chose not to act on their morals. For example, during interviews when students discussed that they already knew values such as honesty, they were asked why there was cheating at their school. The following response sums the majority of EHS students’ views:

Everyone knows what honesty is it is just that many don’t want to be honest. We know what is right and wrong we just don’t do it . . . it is too late to teach these [character traits] (Sophomore).

The argument that they know these character traits and that it is too late to teach character in high school, served as the foundation for the vast majority of students’ argument that the CEP should be used in the elementary or middle school where the program would be more effective.

DON’T TEACH DOWN TO US.

Not only did students question whether values can be taught but they were also concerned with the pedagogical aspects of the CEP. One Senior commented that, “The way it (CEP) is taught right now, it
should be for middle and elementary school. They teach us like little kids.” This quote exemplifies the frustrating climate at EHS because of what students perceived as inappropriate teaching, better suited for elementary or middle school students.

In one particular Team Time, Juniors created acrostic poems describing the various characteristics of being honest. Students argued that they simply went through the motions because the strategy to teach honest behavior waschildlike and demeaning.

From the students’ standpoint, Kohn (1997) rightly argues that most strategies used in CEP programs are limited to simple memory level thinking skills with minimum instructional time spent on developing the more complex understanding of character traits and their application:

The great majority of character education programs consist largely of exhortation and directed recitation. The leading providers of curriculum materials walk teachers through highly structured lessons in which character related concepts are described and then students are drilled until they can produce the right answers. (p. 158)

Student contention surfaced when curriculum and teaching was regarded as demeaning, ineffective, and the traits themselves were reduced to what students perceived as a simplistic level. The following student comments described this disagreement and frustration toward this aspect of the CEP:

The worksheets are kind of a drag. They are teaching us how to be nice to people so they give us a word search. You don’t learn how to be nice to people by doing a word search. Some of this stuff is just ineffective. . . a lot of true and false stuff. I don’t think you can teach character with busy work. It just doesn’t work. (Sophomore)

I don’t think writing a 150 word essay is going to make me a better person. (Sophomore)

This discontent about teaching strategies was closely related to the
curriculum. One student commented that the CEP needs "to address the real problems not these petty things." The curriculum and teaching strategies left little room for discussion or alternative opinions. Students indicated that discussion was limited because there was only one acceptable answer to the "ethical dilemmas."

Another teaching tool used in the CEP was posters. Classrooms walls and hallways were pasted with posters that displayed the words of the week, the nine character traits, and an assortment of character traits and motivational messages. Some of these were made by students, but most were supplied with the character education curriculum. Were these posters effective? Did students notice and read the posters? Citing Berkowitz and McDonnell professors of character education at the University of St. Louis, Berreth and Ernst (2001) argue that there is "no research that suggests that posters, signs, and trinkets foster human development." Several students expressed similar concerns:

Posters are never read. They look like things I would see in my fifth grade class. . . they are not affecting anyone and if they do it is not a very big impact.

The posters are dumb! No one reads them and they are not real!

Although these posters contained clever slogans and had very important messages about character and behavior, it seems that they are irrelevant to students and the overall CEP when simply displayed on walls.

In contrast, when teachers used posters in class and modeled the desired behavior, there seemed to be somewhat greater impact on students. For example, one poster titled "Insert Here" encouraged students to discover the roots to the problems in their lives. Instead of blaming others for late homework, missed assignments or an array of others problems, the poster encouraged students to realize that they are in control of particular situations and are responsible for their behavior and related consequences. Several students commented that one teacher used this poster in an effort to demonstrate that students had the responsibility for their homework and that she would no
longer “nag” and “pester” them for their homework. The students believed that this teacher changed her behavior by applying the poster to her own life and forced them to “own up” to their responsibilities.

Finally, Berreth and Ernst (2001) argued that the shallowness of character education is a concern. In particular, "words of the week" programs where students are exposed to a term describing a character trait are superficial and overly simplistic. Students interviewed at EHS support this perspective. When asked, students seldom recalled the word of the day or week without looking around the room to locate posters that would provide them with this information.

**Student Resistance to Character Education.**

It is clear that EHS students have conflict with the CEP and this conflict often surfaced as a form of resistance. The concept of resistance can best be described as a "principled, conscious, ideological non-conformity which has its philosophical differences between the individual and the institution" (Bennet deMarrais, & LeCompte, 1999, p. 138). Resistance to institutional constraints is more than simple student misbehavior. Rather, resistance involves withholding assent from school authorities such as administrators or teachers and resistive behaviors manifest themselves in school in a variety of forms. All forms of student resistance become problematic for teachers and schools and serve to undermine the CEP.

It is important to note that students’ resistive actions were in no way directed at the specific character traits that were being promoted. Student resistance focused on their belief that they already knew the character traits, on the simplistic strategies used to teach character education, and on their judgment that the traits were being “forced” or “jammed down their throats.”

Student resistance took many forms. First, students ridiculed the character education program.

We mock the program. Like if Mrs. Smith tells us that we should do something then we will exaggerate it times ten. We will beat it to death. If we are learning compassion or something we will be so nice to each other until it is over and out of her sight. We just make fun of it. (Sophomore)
This form of resistance was an extremely effective way for students to cope and deal with imposed school knowledge. They used humor to endure what they saw as unnecessary knowledge that was being forced upon them.

Second, students indicated that they engaged in some of the traditional types of resistance. Students chose to ignore the teacher and talk with other students about "more important things" during Team Times. Others chose behaviors such as sending notes to one another, sleeping, goofing off, or trying to "get the teacher going" as their responses to the character education program that they perceived as being forced upon them.

Finally, because students viewed the CEP material as meaningless or imposed, they often engaged in intellectual resistance. This type of resistance represented a decision on the part of the student not to engage the material in any meaningful way. Instead of some of the traditional forms of resistance that emerge as a student who stops studying engages in "smart-aleck" misbehavior, commits vandalism, or drops out of school; intellectual resistance occurred in the form of vocal questioning or a conscious nonparticipation in classroom activities and assignments.

Some students openly questioned or challenged the place of character education. Others reported: "I do the assignments just to get them done," "I just go through the motions," and "We just play along, do the stupid work and move onto other more important things." There were also students who resisted by completely withdrawing from all aspects of the classroom because they did not want to engage the material or openly challenge the authority.

**Teacher Resistance to Character Education.**

EHS students were not the only ones who engaged in resistive behavior. Based on their Team Time experiences, students suggested that some faculty members also were resistive to the CEP. Because of messages transmitted through the hidden curriculum, students were able to articulate how various teacher behavior suggested faculty opposition to the CEP. The inconsistency of Team Times suggested teacher opposition. Students pointed out some team times strictly followed the CEP; other teachers rushed through the lessons and some Team Times were used as study halls or free time.
There were teachers who bashed and made fun of the CEP by verbally attacking and labeling the CEP activities as “stupid” or “dumb.” This indicated to students that it was alright for students to criticize and oppose character education. Because of the “authority” of teachers, teacher resistance does not legitimize the value or worth of the CEP and justified students’ negative views, nonparticipation, and their own resistance.

Finally, students believed that the teacher opposition was not directed toward the character traits but rather teachers argued that character could not be taught in a separate class, the CEP teaching strategies were problematic, and that it was very difficult to change students’ behavior at this point in their education. Students often cited teacher resistive behaviors as a main reason for the ineffectiveness of the CEP.

**STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF PROBLEMS WITH CEP**

EHS students discussed the effectiveness of the CEP in terms of what they believed hampered the program. For most students, student and faculty apathy was cited as a significant indicator of the CEP’s ineffectiveness. Students also believed that high school students were already too set in their values the CEP to change their behavior. There were numerous comments to this effect:

> I think we know what honesty is and it teaches what honesty is about but it’s not going to make us be honest. Just because we know what the right thing to do is, doing the right thing is a personal decision and it can’t be affected by a character education program like this. (Sophomore)

> Honestly, I doubt that you can make it any more effective. I am 15 years old and nothing Mrs. Smith says to me or any stupid worksheet or videotape about how sensitive or how many random acts of kindness I should do is going to help me or change me. . . I think my character can change but not they way they are doing it. (Sophomore)

Students voiced a concern that even though there were many students in the school who needed character education, it was doubtful that
these students would be willing to learn and change. One student’s comment describes this view “there is no possibility for change in some people” and few, if any, students believed there was a need for change in their own lives.

An important element of character education is that the selected values are embraced and consistently modeled by the faculty (Character Education Partnership, 1999). Williams (1993) argues that according to students, one of the most effective aspects of teaching values is that teachers themselves follow the rules and model the traits. EHS students also saw this as an important issue. They cited the lack of faculty change and consistent role modeling as evidence of the CEP’s ineffectiveness. These student comments illustrate this perspective:

Teachers who are trying to teach character education don’t have the character traits that they are trying to teach. Things that teachers say are rude and shouldn’t be said but they are. Then they tell us to respect others? (Sophomore)

They want us to get excited and fire up about it (the CEP) but when we don’t, they get mad and upset. That seems to contradict the whole character education thing. (Junior)

This demonstrates the need for a change in faculty behavior that is in harmony with the traits of the CEP.

**What Works and Why: Student Thoughts and Suggestions**

For students, what worked really meant what was interesting, entertaining, and worthwhile. Throughout the interviews, not only were students’ negative voices heard but these same students offered suggestions as to how to improve the quality and effectiveness of the CEP. Students believed that any CEP must use a relevant and interesting curriculum that was not isolated but rather integrated within the existing school curriculum. Included in this curriculum was class discussion. For example, one student stated that class discussion proved both interesting and effective:

Last year our teacher was gone and we had Mr. Smith come in
and we put the green book away and we sat around like this (semicircle) and had a class discussion about the value we were on and how it was used in our everyday life. That was so much more productive than reading out of a book.

Relevant class discussion was important not only because of its interest value but also because students heard their peers’ thoughts about various traits and issues.

Second, there were numerous students who made positive comments about one guest speaker they had the opportunity to hear. He was a Vietnam Veteran who was considered interesting because of his real life experiences. Interesting and effective guest speakers who have had relevant stories seem to have been enjoyed by students; however, there was an uncertainty as to their effectiveness in changing student behavior.

Finally, students indicated that popular culture can be an affective tool to engage character traits and offered several examples where teachers used popular culture to develop particular character traits. For example, a freshman Team Time group analyzed the Disney Film Mulan and discussed issues dealing with citizenship and gender roles. Another example of an effective use of popular media was the use of the sitcom The Simpsons. One student described how her teacher showed a segment of a Simpsons episode during Team Time and the class analyzed Bart’s disrespectful behavior toward his parents, peers, and others. The teacher and the ensuing class discussion pointed out the negative aspects of disrespect, how others view disrespectful individuals, and why Bart’s behavior was inappropriate. Suggestions for change were also discussed. The use of relevant popular media is viewed by students as “an improvement from the character education videos.”

**Summary of Students’ Perspectives**

The following is a brief summary of findings regarding students’ perspectives regarding the Character Education Program at EHS:

1. There was little need for character education because students already know the superficial level of character traits that are being taught in the CEP.
2. Topics were irrelevant to their lives and too simplistic.
Students viewed CEP teaching strategies as inappropriate and better suited for elementary or middle school.

3. Students engaged in various forms of resistance because they viewed character education as being forced upon them.

4. Students cited teacher resistance, lack of faculty involvement, and poor faculty role modeling as reasons for the CEP’s ineffectiveness.

5. Students suggested relevant topics, interesting guest speakers, class discussion and the use of popular culture as effective CEP tools.

DISCUSSION

The study raised several fundamental issues regarding character education. First, one of the primary goals of this CEP was to create an awareness in students about character issues. From student conversations, it is clear that the EHS student body seemed more aware of the character traits and issues that were being taught by the school. Most students interviewed had some insight into issues concerning character traits, were quick to provide relevant examples, and were capable to articulate their view on character education. Several students mentioned that the program would have some benefits after their graduation such as helping them raise their own children.

Second, with any CEP we must be concerned about the failure to address social and cultural influences that may play a major role in the development of character. Character education often centers on individual behavior exclusive from the many cultural, economic and social factors that influence individual behavior. Kohn (1997) argues that "when character education programs attempt to ‘fix the kids,’ they ignore the accumulated evidence from the file of social psychology demonstrating that much of how we act, and who we are, reflects the situation in which we find ourselves" (p. 155-156). The assumption is that children can simply be “fixed” by adding character education without ever addressing the causes of “character deficiency.” Before addressing a lack of self control, an individual’s social environment must be considered and included in character education.

Finally, the encouraging results from the School as a Caring Community Profile (SCCP) assessment tool cannot be overlooked. EHS spring (2002) SCCP results indicated that EHS juniors improved
in 26 of 30 areas that are assessed. In particular, all four grade levels improved in areas such as “refraining from put downs” and “not fighting as a way to resolve conflict.” Although EHS lacked a control group for comparison purposes, the administration viewed these results as positive.

Any assessment of the program must be skeptical because EHS students viewed the CEP as one more requirement that must be learned and then given back to teachers in one form or another in order to meet the requirement. For example from interviews, students clearly knew that cheating was unacceptable, and they would likely respond in that manner when answering a given survey. However, these students also acknowledged that cheating was still a part of their school experience.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS**

According to these findings, students presented a unified viewpoint regarding their attitudes toward the EHS character education program. Not only did they express a variety of concerns but also offered valuable suggestions as to how character education could be improved.

1. **Character education must be taught at appropriate levels with appropriate teaching strategies.** High school CEPs must provide a more mature approach to character education by providing opportunities for students to engage in discussion of relevant and complicated character traits and dilemmas. CEP curriculum should include opportunities for implementing character traits when making decisions and topics must be "more relevant," "interesting," "realistic," and "hard hitting." Suggestions from students included issues such as teen age pregnancy, premarital sex, school problems, personal student problems, drugs, alcohol,"real problems addressed and taught in a realistic way."

The administration and faculty should not only use student suggestions but consult sources like Kessler (2000) in order to gain insight into the questions that concern students at different grade levels.

2. **Faculty and students must develop accurate understandings of church and state in order to better address controversial topics.** This concern was prompted by several student comments regarding the school's role dealing with moral or value laden issues.
“I think that if they can’t teach religion they shouldn’t be able to teach character education because in my mind they go hand-in-hand. You know church and state.” (Sophomore)

Because this uninformed perspective is common among students, faculty must be able to articulate accurate understandings of church and state issues and how this is relevant to character education. This will prove helpful in reducing student resistance and will encourage students and faculty to be more open to dealing with these issues.

3. **Character traits should be integrated into the existing curriculum.** Williams (1993) argues that students believed that teaching morals fails "if teachers try to make it a big deal or have a separate class" (p. 22). This view was articulated by several EHS students who were frustrated that they had to spend time in the extra CEP class, time that could be used to prepare academically and get ready for college. If this is the case, then administrators and teachers must consider writing the core values into the existing K-12 curriculum. This approach will prove to be more acceptable and meaningful for students and teachers. For example, the use of current issues might be worthwhile in addressing specific character traits.

4. **Administrators and teachers must develop complex understandings of the workings of student resistance.** They must move beyond simplistic explanations of student misbehavior as laziness, apathy, and seekers of attention. Instead, they must realize that resistance is a powerful force that shapes classrooms. Included in this understanding is an awareness and concern for how resistance influences classroom climate.

One possibility is for students to write a letter to the superintendent, or school board member regarding why character education should or should not be introduced into their school. The assignment should require students to support their positions with examples, consequences, their own personal thoughts and any problems they see with character education. This information will provide teachers with insight into the class climate, their students' views and struggles with character education, and can be used to better implement appropriate teaching strategies.
5. *Administrators must gain faculty support.* Etzioni suggests that administrators hold a faculty retreat to discuss issues and concerns about character education (Berreth & Scherer, 1993). Questions such as: What are the values messages being sent to our students explicitly and implicitly? Are those the messages the faculty wants to transmit? How can the faculty structure teaching, the classroom, and school to bring the messages sent closer to the messages they want to send?

The retreat can be used to discuss the CEP, and selected traits, to develop an awareness of the assumptions about character education, and discuss the faculty’s concerns about implementing such a program. The results of these discussions cannot be cosmetic. The ideas and thoughts of the faculty must be used as a productive tool in planning a character education program in order to increase faculty support. This time can also be used to discuss effectiveness and encourage teachers to model these traits and to be flexible in order to increase a comfortable feeling about particular lessons while meeting students' needs.

6. *Administrators should use students’ ideas and input.* These findings suggest that not only is there is need for administrators and teachers to initially acquire the students' perspective prior to developing a character education program, but also that it is important to continually assess the students’ thoughts and feelings regarding character education. There is no question that the use of ideas and input from a variety students, when they have the appropriate background, will certainly aid in the acceptance and success of any CEP.

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