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# Becoming a better me : an examination of character education at the elementary level

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# Becoming a better me : an examination of character education at the elementary level

## Abstract

The first day of school can be a difficult adjustment for many students. Some . students struggle with new settings and new rules. Each student enters the classroom with personal morals and values. These morals and character traits greatly influence the student's academic and social progress. This paper reviews character building and its unique ability to alter the perception of the student's world. The paper looks at the deficits of character and introduces possible solutions to restoring character in elementary-aged children. A closer look at the history of character education lays the foundation for a better understanding of character.

Becoming a Better Me: An Examination of Character Education

at the Elementary Level

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

———————

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

———————

by

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August 2005

University of Northern Iowa

This Research Paper by: Lori D. Dobbin

Entitled: Becoming a Better Me: An Examination of Character Education

at the Elementary Level

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master

of Arts in Education.

6-21-05

Date Approved

Adviser/Director of Research Paper

6/28/05

Date Received

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The first day of school can be a difficult adjustment for many students. Some students struggle with new settings and new rules. Each student enters the classroom with personal morals and values. These morals and character traits greatly influence the student's academic and social progress. This paper reviews character building and its unique ability to alter the perception of the student's world. The paper looks at the deficits of character and introduces possible solutions to restoring character in elementary-aged children. A closer look at the history of character education lays the foundation for a better understanding of character.

Character education is the understanding and practicing of basic morals and values. Character is described as the "distinguishing qualities or principles to which the person subscribes as a guide for his or her behavior" (Murphy, 2002, p. 13). Isaac (2001) and Murphy (2002) noted that an individual's perception of character influences the choices he or she makes each day. According to Murphy (2002), these choices are based on the ability to distinguish right from wrong. A majority of Americans associate the qualities of character with well-known heroes and leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and firefighters who worked ground zero on September 11th. These extraordinary individuals showed courage, responsibility, loyalty, and respect to themselves and others. In Aristotle's' writings, he attributed actions of good deed to core morals and personal values (Murphy, 2002).

Researchers identified morals as the core element of character. According to the character education literature, morals are a set of standards relating to right and wrong actions and acknowledged on a universal level (Carbone, 1987; Murphy, 2002). Children perceive morals as laws that protect human worth, such as "not killing another" and "telling the truth" (Nucci, 1989, p. 13). Values also play a significant role in character development. From an educator's perspective, values are a "set of beliefs and ideologies which motivate people at the present time" (Bottery, 1990, p. 6). Values consist of personal preferences (like religious

orientation) and set expectations (classroom rules) (Murphy, 2002). Since morals and values are person specific, the practice of character education programs in schools attract scrutiny from all angles. It is often difficult for parents, teachers, and community leaders to agree on a standard set of morals and values. For counselors to teach skills that build character, they must be sensitive to different moral and value systems (Murphy, 2002).

Character education programs teach the skills of good character and provide valuable tools to live a fulfilled life (Damon, 2002; Isaac, 2001; Murphy, 2002). Skillful educators isolate situations in the classroom and use them as character building lessons. As an example, a teacher may acknowledge the acts of responsibility as students complete and submit their homework. Aristotle highlighted three steps to building character: providing information, feeling passionate about the choices, and committing to the actions (Murphy, 2002). Based on the research, counselors teach character education by helping students distinguish right from wrong through individual and group counseling sessions, as well as in classroom lessons. Character education programs acknowledge the existing skill students have acquired throughout their childhood.

The purpose of this research on character education is to examine character education programs and their impact on child development. The research is supported by historic leaders who had professed the benefits of building character

in children by structured curriculums. The exposure of character education in public schools helps children identify personal morals and values and directly influences their decision-making process. This research examine how counselors can ensure that all students are offered opportunities to build character.

<div align="center">History of Character Education</div>

Character education is resurfacing in the schools (Murphy, 2002). Although the idea of character education has been around for years, it was labeled by other names, such as moral education, religious beliefs, or identity development (Chapman, 1977).

Character education has been traced back to the first development of civilization. Elders transmitted to younger generations important life lessons, underlining morals and values, through stories. These stories served as guides and expectations for children who will inevitably transition into adults.

Leaders of character education believed that building character in children directly affected self-respect, work ethics, and relationships with others (Damon, 2002; Sommers, 2002). Character education literature has a rich history of prominent leaders who shared common objectives but differed in approaches to building character.

*Aristotle*

The first attempts to civilize children came "2,300 years ago ... when Aristotle advocated for more guidance and discipline" for children (Sommers, 2002, p. 26). As a Christian philosopher, Aristotle believed that all children were born sinners, yet capable of acquiring the skills to practice good moral. Adults, such as parents, were encouraged to guide their children through lessons of morals, and consistently use punishments and rewards to discipline them. Parents used this systematic approach to shape the behaviors of children who were capable of controlling their emotions and behaviors. Children who were incapable of acquiring the basic morals and values remained sinners in the eyes of Aristotle and supporters (Damon, 2002).

*Rousseau*

Unlike Aristotle's view of children being born sinners, Jean Jacques Rousseau believed that they are only corrupted by the negative events in their lives. Rousseau believed that all children were born with good natures. He protested against the use of structured lesson plans because he speculated that they interfered with the natural upbringing of children (Sommers, 2002). Rousseau wanted parents and educators to use children's initial good nature and to reframe from preaching moral actions. Parents were instructed to guide their children by nurturing the existing "feelings into action" through positive reinforcement and

discussions (Sommers, 2002, p. 28).

According to character education literature, the public was anxiously waiting for a reform in the delivery of virtues (Murphy, 2002). Rousseau introduced a side of moral education that was more carefree and allowed room for self-discovery. He opted for a less directive approach to teaching morality to children. Yet, some followers felt that he was too radical with his insistence in abandoning rote teaching. A few parents and educators continued to think that children intended to be bad and harmful to others (Damon, 2002). They felt that carefree teaching allotted too much freedom to children. Other educators feared that children would miss the moral lesson if all structured guidance were absent. However, Rousseau's carefree techniques were warmly accepted by many modern school districts (Damon, 2002).

*Sizers*

In the 1970's, character education strongly re-emerged into the education systems. Educators found that the Aristotle's directive approach to moral education was too rigid and ineffective (Damon, 2002; Sommers, 2002. Teachers felt that Rousseau's supple approaches often created confusion in the classroom environment and among students, because students lacked a clear understanding of their morals and values. Educators and parents wanted an approach that balanced between structure and flexibility (Sommers, 2002).

In the 1970's Theodore and Nancy Sizer, a Harvard school couple, campaigned for moral education that focused on building autonomy and independence in children.  The couple believed that "teachers should never preach or attempt to inculcate virtue; rather, through their actions, they should demonstrate a fierce commitment to social justice" (Sommers, 2002, p. 31).  Role models were more effective than memorizing lessons of honesty, integrity, and responsibility when working with children.   Teachers noticed that students were more likely to mimic their behaviors of good character while in their presence.  Education shifted from inculcating morals to urging teachers to help students discover their own values.

*Dewey*

John Dewey, a philosopher of education, had witnessed years of ineffective approaches in the delivery of character education.  Under his philosophical ideas, Dewey believed that character education was a "process-oriented approach" (Murphy, 2002, p. 29).  His focus turned to teaching students the method of self-reflection and decision making.  This approach allowed students to make choices based on their morals, values, and experiences; it was perceived as a tool used in any decision making process (Murphy, 2002).  His philosophy is widely used in schools across the country.

The teachings of character education transformed from a directive style in earlier years to a student-centered approach in recent years.  The directive style

trained adults to be proactive in the classroom; the student-centered style encouraged children to embrace their autonomy and independence and be "their own best guides in life" (Sommers, 2002, p. 33).  The controversy between directive approaches and student-centered approaches prohibited the unification of a single approach in classrooms, but the directive approach predominated because children were more likely to transcend virtues when faced with clear expectations, adult guidance, and guidelines.

<p style="text-align:center">Theory of Moral Development</p>

Lawrence Kohlberg, a distinguished leader in moral education, also known as character education in schools, is recognized for his extraordinary contributions in the academic community (Chazan, 1985; Lamme, Krogh, & Yachmetz, 1992). Kohlberg began his work as an psychologist and was interested in Piaget's original studies of moral development.  A career opportunity arose when Piaget interrupted his inquiries concerning moral development to solely focus on cognitive development.  Kohlberg accepted the challenge to continue the investigation on moral development.  Kolhberg's vision and research were similar to Piaget's structure, such as interviews with children and the creation of a stage theory (Lamme, Krogh, & Yachmetz, 1992).

Initially, Kohlberg believed that moral education played an insignificant role in the overall concept of children's development.  Blatt, who studied under

Kolhberg, believed that moral education did influence moral development as he had discovered in discussion groups (Lamme, Krogh, & Yachmetz, 1992). Kolhberg was intrigued by Blatt's findings and delved into this concept, which signified the start of the second era in his career (Chazan, 1985). A man who once believed that moral education was inane to child development (Lamme, Krogh, & Yachmetz, 1992), now advocated for the young "moral philosopher" (Theories of Behavior Modification, n.d. ¶ 3; ).

In Kolhberg's moral development theory, he argued that the individual and society are interrelated, and that one cannot exist without the other (Chazan, 1985). Chazan (1985) used the example, "Justice as concern for others means that individual human existence is inextricably linked to social contexts; concern for others is... a basic defining characteristic of human moral situation" (p. 70). Furthermore, morals were expressed through human actions which were delivered in a social context (Chazan, 1985). For a counselor, teaching morals was a matter of creating a social environment which supported an "open, informal classrooms, where there is a great deal of interaction among students and their environment, facilitate moral development" (Theories of Behavior Modification, n.d, ¶ 4).

The moral development model was divided into six stages (Chazan, 1985). Kolhberg believed that stages "build on each other... with each stage being more cognitively complex than the previous stages" (Theories of Behavior

Modification, n.d, ¶ 1).  An individual must have graduated from a single stage before preceding to the next.

The first two levels of stages, stages 1 and 2,  meet the basic needs of an individual.  The moral judgment "resides in external, quasi-physical happenings, in bad acts, or in quasi-physical needs rather than in persons and standards" (Chazan, 1985, p. 71).  During stages 1 and 2, children learn to distinguish the basic right from wrong.  An individual in stage 1 has an egocentric characteristic and is mainly concerned with obedience and punishment issues (Chazan, 1985).  The objective in stage 2 is to satisfy the self.  During stages 3 and 4, an individual will judge morals based on good and bad roles.  Stage 3 is the practice of seeking approval and stage 4 is maintaining social order.  Actions of conformity are seen in stages 5 and 6 of Kolhberg's model.

School counselors have the most impact in stages one through four because those stages mature before the age of 18 (Chazan, 1985).  Kolhberg contended that a child must generate these moral principles on his or her own.  Chazan (1985) and Lamme, Krogh, & Yachmetz (1992) agreed with Kolhberg that moral development cannot be taught directly to an individual.  However, the role of the counselor or teacher is to guide the student through the moral development process (Theories of Behavior Modification, n.d.).  The student will acquire moral education by interacting with his or her environment.  Educators build

character in the students when they actively facilitate conflict resolutions, acknowledge good deeds, and become role models.

<div align="center">A Character Education Program</div>

The first leading program of character education was the Character Counts! Coalition. The organization was founded in 1992 by educators, youth leaders, politicians, and ethic theorists (Damon, 2002; Murphy, 2002; Sommers, 2002). The parents who voiced their concerns about the well being of their children inspired members of the coalition. The parents, teachers, and community leaders all agreed that the "old-fashioned moral education" should be integrated into the daily curriculums (Sommers, 2002, p. 36).

The Coalition believed that an empathetic citizen with good moral character sets the tone for the present and future well being of the whole society (Murphy, 2002). The Coalition explored "ways in which character and values could be instilled in young people in all areas of their lives" (Murphy, 2002, p. 32).

As a result of the conference, Coalition members came up with a set of core ethical values which supported a democratic society (Murphy, 2002, Sommers, 2002). Educators, parents, and organizations came together in efforts to improve the character of young people based on the values: "respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, caring, justice, fairness, civic virtue, and citizenship" (Sommers, 2002, p. 37). The Coalition delegated to teachers, schools, parents, communities,

and youths the responsibility of teaching moral education to others.

In recent years, a dozen states in the United States have "mandated character education through legislation" (Murphy, 2002, p. 33). Some schools are now required by law to integrate character building skills into the standard curriculums. Other states strongly encourage schools to practice character education and are awarded with grant monies by the federal government. The vast majority of character education programs across the nation revolve around the core ethical values defined by Character Counts! Coalition: trustworthiness, respect, fairness, responsibility, caring, and citizenship (Arizona Character Education Foundation, 1999).

*Trustworthiness*

A trustworthy student is reliable and able to earn other people's trust. Teachers describe a trustworthy student as honest, loyal, has integrity, and keeps promises. As an example, a trustworthy student returns a textbook he had borrowed from a friend. Acts that violate trust are lying, being a passive bystander to bullying, and consistently breaking promises. Character education teaches students to put their words to action (Mellen, 2004).

*Respect*

Respect is having the ability to show honor and consideration for oneself and others (Arizona Character Education Foundation, 1999). The Coalition described

respect as an ability "...to show solemn regard for the worth of people, including yourself" (Baker, 2004, p. 3). Respect is a quality that can be seen in multiple scenarios in a given day, such as engaging in a phone conversation, interacting with store clerks, observing parents' behaviors at an athletic event, or using manners and abstaining from hurting others. Showing respect expresses to others that they matter and lets others know that you matter (Mellen, 2004).

*Responsibility*

What a person does or does not do illustrates responsibility (Mellen, 2004). Responsibility is the obligation to be accountable for the outcome of a task. For example, children who have few school absences and hold a positive attitude towards education are labeled as being responsible students. Responsibility is judged by the actions that are taken based on attitudes and self-control, with an awareness of the consequences (Mellen, 2004).

*Fairness*

Fairness is the act of establishing "moral standards for decisions that affect others" (Baker, 2004, p. 7). Fairness is the ability to listen to others and "play by the rules" in problem-solving situations (Adkins, 2001a, p. 8). It is important to teach students that fairness does not mean equal (Mellen, 2004). For example, in a lesson about fairness, the teacher asks students to divide the materials among the group members. Some students may prefer one object to another, and other

students may choose not to take an object. In the process, students will learn to distribute items based on the needs and wants of each group member (Baker, 2004, p. 7).

*Caring*

Students demonstrate care by "being kind, helpful, and generous" to others (Adkins, 2001a, p. 9). Caring people are considerate and conscious about how their behaviors affect others. Caring individuals do not show selfishness in their actions, but rather practice empathy and understanding (McIntyre, 2004). As an example, a student may share his or her snack with a friend who is without one. Caring usually occurs with the intent of not gaining anything in return.

*Citizenship*

Adkins (2001b) defined citizenship as "doing your share to help your family and make your community a better place" (p. 9). Citizenship means obeying the rules and protecting the environment by cleaning up after oneself. Students forming a committee to clean up graffiti on school property are demonstrating citizenship. They are actively promoting a clean and safe environment at their school.

Character education focuses on trustworthiness, responsibility, respect, fairness, caring, and citizenship through positive learning experiences. Students build good character by identifying those skills within themselves and then in

others.  Educators view each skill as something that can be learned and practiced

in schools, homes, or communities.

<div align="center">Why Teach Character Education?</div>

Typical objectives in a character education program are "promoting the

development of sound character, a sense of self-worth, democratic values, ethical

judgment, and self-discipline in students" (Murphy, 2002, p. 60).  Character

building effects many areas of a person's life; ranging from relationship issues to

maintaining good academics.  Character education offers students the tools to

make efficient and effective choices.

According to Lamme, Krogh, and Yachmetz (1992), "it is important to teach

values to children as an integral part of the school curriculum as well as in their

everyday home life" (p. 23) Children who repeatedly practice virtues begin to

"cultivate good habits" (Murphy, 2002, p. 59).  Heslep (1995) noted that "people

without habits reflecting standard of conduct are said to lack character..." (p.7).  In

addition, building character increases self-esteem, which is the underlying element

of all moral behaviors.  When children feel good about themselves they are less

likely to seek power over others, which may result in physical harm (Lamme,

Krogh, & Yachmetz, 1992).

*Statistics*

Building character in students increases a sense of empowerment and self-

control.  Amundson (1991) speculated that children with good character are less

likely to engage in or condone violent behaviors, such as bullying.  The American

Justice Department reported that 1 out of 4 children has been a victim of bullying

and 1 out 5 students reported bullying others (National Institute of Health [NIH],

2001).  Educators have seen higher frequency of fights among younger students

compared to older students who are likely to engage in more serious crimes (NIH,

2001). One way character education has been effective in schools is by increasing

positive behavior of students and building a sense of community at the school

(NIH, 2001).

Character education has been considered a pioneer in changing the attitudes of

students towards school.  A study conducted by the Josephson Institute stated that

70% of high school students cheated on an exam within the past year (Mellen,

2004).  In middle school, the study reported that 25% of students said they would

lie to get or keep a job (Mellen, 2004).  Actions such as cheating and lying appear

to have less severe consequences but can easily escalate into destructive

behaviors.  Character education programs address issues like cheating, lying, or

stealing and redirected students' to choose positive behaviors. (Arizona Character

Education Foundation, 1999).

When character education programs were implemented into the schools,

teachers and principals witnessed an increase in attendance and decrease in

disciplinary referrals. A study tracked 524 schools across the nation who had actively participated in the Character Counts! program. The study showed that 22% of the schools reported an increase in attendance, 51% saw a decrease in disciplinary referrals, and 70% noted an improvement in school climate (Arizona Character Education Foundation, 1999). Building character in individuals helped redefine the identities of young children, influenced their perception of themselves, and increased respect for themselves and others.

Character education empowers children to think of alternative ways to be successful and feel good about their choices. Children begin to take responsibility and evaluate the consequences of their actions. Children not only build character but also establish a healthy identity.

## Teachers of Character Education

Researchers and educators believe that young children enter school equipped with a set of virtues which were transmitted to them by their first teachers, the parents (Murphy, 2002). According to Isaac (2001), parents initiate character education and are the most influential to developing the child's attitudes toward life. School and community settings also aid in the development of character by serving as role models. Isaacs (2001) stated that "one of the most important ways of training people is by example" (p. 13).

Educators noted that students who have a clear understanding of character,

morals, and values become "proactive achievers discovering what it means to

develop potential for themselves and the world around them" (Gholar, n.d., ¶ 1).

Students who practice character building skills show improvements on test scores,

increase in attendance, and a decrease in unwarranted behaviors (Murphy, 2002).

*Counselors*

The Kilgour Elementary School in Cincinnati, Ohio, recognized that school

counselors were instrumental "in the development of sound character" (Murphy,

2002, p. 67).  Counselors worked with students to address social, academic,

career, and personal development issues.  According to the American School

Counselor Association (2004), counselors offered counseling services to all

students through individual discussions, group work, and classroom presentations.

School counselors specialize in helping maladjusted students function in a

school environment and in the community (Murphy, 2002).  Students who have

problems functioning in a classroom may lack self-confidence, social skills, and

effective decision-making techniques.  One of the responsibilities of school

counselors is to provide the tools, techniques and skills necessary for children to

function in society.  Through the work of creative activities, such as literature,

role playing, and art, counselors are able to develop sound character in students

(Murphy, 2002).

Murphy (2002) noted that school counselors create a "climate for character

development in schools" (p. 65).  Counselors serve as leaders in implementing

character education programs.  They have access to excellent resources and the

flexibility to devote time to the programs.  In efforts to promote character

education, counselors may post signs and bulletins around the school campus or

address specific issues in newsletters (Mellen, 2004).  Counselors are proactive at

spreading the word about character education.

A school counseling program is supported by a solid curriculum (Murphy,

2002).  School counselors must orchestrate communication among parents,

educators, and students in order to obtain the information needed to create a

curriculum (Mellen, 2004).  An essential step to developing character education

curriculums is to set clear and attainable goals.  These goals, or objectives,

motivate and guide participants in a common directions.  Also, the goals help

align character education curriculums with academic state standards (Terhaar,

2004). In a character education program school counselors are responsible for

creating opportunities for students to develop and practice good character.  The

school counselors play many roles in a character education programs, such as

advocate, teacher, inspirational leader, and coordinator.  The most important role

is opening up lines of communication with parents, educators, and community

leaders (Linn, 2004).

*Parents*

At an early age, children are taught the value of life from their parents.  Parents express compassion and empathy, which reflect care.  They show trustworthiness and responsibility by following through with what they say they would do. Parents make attempts to be fair and admit to their mistakes.  They are role models of respect and citizenship within their families, neighborhoods or communities (Isaac, 2001).

Parents transmit morals and values to children by modeling good character in their choices and actions (Hutcheon, 1999).  Lessons of integrity, honesty, and respect help shape the identity of children.  Children who receive love from their parents are more likely to show love to others in later years of life (Hutcheon, 1999).  Hutcheon (1999) believed that humans are not born with a set of morals and values; rather, they acquire the skills by interacting with their parents or their immediate surroundings.  Humans need character skills to survive in a society dependent on social interactions.

Parents are the most influential to children in regard to acquiring morals and values.  Counselors must acknowledge parents as leaders for their children (Gauvain & Huarad, 1998).  Counselors must attempt to collaborate with parents during workshops or conferences to thoroughly discuss the qualities of a character education program (Bottery, 1990).  During these workshops, the counselor can

encourage parents to share situations when they have taught character building skills, such as responsibility. The exercises may instruct parents to list each character trait the parents would like to reinforce, along with suggested activities. For example, under responsibility, the parent may list tasks like doing chores, doing homework, and being accountable for actions. Brief exercises to define character trait gives everyone established baselines and solidifies the message (Lamme, Krogh, & Yachmetz, 1992). When a child hears the parent and counselor using the same language the message becomes more effective and powerful.

The school counselor can encourage parents and teachers to work together in committees. A special committee can be developed to specifically address character building. Parents and teachers can provide feedback, enhance curriculums, and implement character education activities throughout the school. For example, parents may volunteer to decorate the school halls with oversized signs that represent a specific character trait. The school counselor may opt to serve as the facilitator of these committees where he or she can address topics such as discipline, homework, time management, communication skills, nutrition, and drug and alcohol use.

*Teachers*

Teachers have a unique advantage to educate young minds. Teachers spend a

large amount of time with students each day and they get to know them on a personal level. The extensive time frame and classroom environment is ideal for teaching character education. Character traits are reflected in students' actions, thoughts, and daily events. Instead of separating character education from the normal curriculum the teacher should include or integrate character traits into the natural flow of the classroom (Bottery, 1990; Murphy, 2002). As an example, a third grader can assist a special education student at lunch by picking up the trash that surrounds that table. The counselor can isolate the incident and explain to other children how the child has role-modeled care and citizenship.

The responsibility of the educator is to acknowledge the action and help the student identify the character traits that were practiced. The school counselor's role is to train and suggest ways for the teacher to add character education into the curriculum without taking away from the lesson. The counselor can also introduce fun and educational activities that address character education to help enhance the original lesson (McIntyre, Rosebery, and Gonzalez, 2001). Character education can even be integrated into a math lesson; for example, the teacher and students can discuss the responsibility of a community to maintain a strong economy (Roberts, 1998).

*Communities*

A majority of communities welcome all opportunities to discuss the future and

ideal laborers. Community leaders understand that the children in schools today will be tomorrow's employees. Teachers and parents will benefit by networking with community leaders and inviting them to school functions. Community leaders can reiterate the importance of being punctual (responsible), interacting with co-workers (respect and fairness), showing honesty (trustworthiness), and giving back to the community (caring and citizenship). Quality character education programs aim to close the gap between parents, schools, and communities (Lamme and Krogh, & Yachmetz, 1992).

## Conclusion

The paper reviewed the evolution of character education. Aristotle and his followers used character education as a tool to teach children values and morals. They believed that a structured learning environment was ideal to build character in children. In contrast, Rousseau believed that children were capable of learning values and morals simply by participating in their social environment. Both pioneers applied different approaches, yet held the same passion for teaching character education. Character education has survived throughout history because people honor values and morals.

The term character was defined as the understanding and practice of basic morals and values. People made choices based on their perception and knowledge of right from wrong, and utilizing learned virtues. Individuals' actions

were the foundation of developing character; it is what individuals do or does not do.

Character education changes the way students feel about themselves and others. Studies have shown a decrease in negative behavior referrals and an increase in attendance. Role-modeling good character often influences the behaviors of others.

Lawrence Kohlberg, the founder of moral development theory, believed that a morally educated person had the awareness to face conflict and devise a reasonable resolution (Chazan, 1985). Character education programs help children develop keen decision-making skills.

School counselors serve as character educators, with capabilities to build bridges between teachers, parents, and community leaders. Character education programs work best when the student's social world functions as a single unit. Character education equips students with a reliable map to the journey of life.

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