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Character Education: Integration of an Ancient Theory

by Emily Lombardi

(Education 1100)

"We become just by the practice of just actions, self-controlled by exercising self-control, and courageous by performing acts of courage. Hence, it is no small matter whether one habit or another is inculcated in us from early childhood; on the contrary, it makes...all the difference," (Benninga, 2003). Quoted from Aristotle himself, the vital need for character development in a child's life has not been a foreign matter prior to the 21st century. Aristotle asserts to his students that the way to live in a judicial manner comes from the practice of monitoring unjust actions and acting against them. This same philosophy is only a fraction of the character development program that many educators are pushing for today. Maria Montessori, MD, and founder of the Montessori Method of Education, defines character development as "the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue—that is, objectively good human qualities that are good for the individual person and good for the whole society," (Vardin, 2003). The integration of character education into America's public school system is a crucial component that is just as important as textual education.

Character education emerged within the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1642 (Vardin, 2003). Young students went to school to become literate and learn moral lessons from the most influential book of the 1600s: the Bible. America's founding fathers praised good character and believed that its citizens needed to respect virtues such as the awareness of the common good and knowledge for the law to preserve a democracy (Vardin, 2003). Following the teachings of the Bible in public schools, the McGuffey Readers surfaced in the schooling system and proposed a series of texts that taught students to read and develop traits like honesty, kindness, and courage. Character education continued to shape America's public school system until the middle of the 20th century.

Many writers argue that in the American culture, the 1960s unleashed the "demoralization" theory which was a time where the phrases "Do your own thing" and "If it feels good, do it" molded the popular culture (Vardin, 2003). Vardin (2003) emphasizes the extensive tolerance for all types of rambunctious behavior which was accepted as a way of life. Also, with the advancement of modern technology knocking on the 20th century's doorstep, ways to develop character and courses in moral philosophy evidently went away (Weber, 1998). The restoration of character education in American public schools happened as a response to a dramatic increase in school violence. Weber (1998) claims, "The recurrent shocking incidents of in-school shootings resulting in children across the country, including small-town America, injuring and killing other children and their teacher's suggestions that character education programs that attempt to teach respect for others, responsibility for one's actions, and peaceful resolution of conflict will not soon be abandoned" (para. 2). Schools today need to emphasize the importance of responsibility and the positive development of character in hopes to decrease the level of in-school violence and keep American students safe.

Multiple character education models have been composed to help guide future educators and students on a journey to build self character. One of them, the Montessori Model of Education, displays the basis of character development and ways to integrate these ideas into a classroom setting. Maria Montessori observed that the origins of a child's character surfaces within the first six years of life (Vardin, 2003). Montessori states that the environment in which a child is exposed to will influence his or her future character development. A child's true personality will evolve naturally with the help of providing the child with "productive activity" that teaches right from

wrong (Vardin, 2003). Richard Pring (2001) identifies these activities as “strands of truth, correctness, validity, appropriateness without which there would be no struggle to improve, no searching for the most precise account, no refinement of one’s feelings as they are embodied in one’s best endeavors” (p. 103). Montessori advises that by concentrating on these positive activities, negative traits such as laziness and disorder will be replaced by traits such as sociability and discipline (Vardin, 2003).

Montessori applies her philosophy on character education into a classroom setting. Through children’s engagement in a positive environment and with one another, Montessori identified seven important virtues cultivated as a result of her teaching method (Vardin, 2003). First, she observed that *concentration* was the foundation for a child’s character development and social behavior. The Montessori environment supplies multiple materials and activities for a child to choose from, which enables “her to engage deeply and concentrate, helping her to form and shape her character” (p.33). Perseverance was a virtue that evolved in character development due to the teaching strategy of scaffolding and repetition. A child learns to start and complete an activity which is an important trait for future careers (Vardin, 2003). Patience and respect follow next on the list of observed virtues in which the child learns to deny personal impulses and wait for his or her turn. Helpfulness naturally occurs since Montessori’s environment gave older children the opportunity to aid younger students. Montessori is quoted by saying, “goodness must come out of reciprocal helpfulness” (Vardin, 2003). Young endeavors learn responsibility by participating in group work and keeping the classroom organized. Voluntary obedience emerges not as a result from fear, but rather a willingness to recognize adult’s superiority (Vardin, 2003). Lastly, the virtue of self-discipline appears when a child is placed in an environment with vigorous activity, free will, and working with others.

Character education programs, such as the Montessori Model of Education, teaches children at an early age the important virtues of good character. By setting the foundation of moral thinking and action, American children will learn not only to be decent students, but also decent human beings. Good character qualities will surpass any time period or textual information learned, yet these qualities must be nurtured by trained and passionate individuals.

To meet the present uproar and need for effective teaching techniques of character education in public schools, many colleges and universities are conducting new pre-service education programs for education majors (Weber, 1998). A surveyed population of 600 deans of education schools agreed that core values, such as the ones presented in character development, should be taught in school; yet, only 24.4 percent of these schools offer such programs. In an additional survey, 95 percent of the 61 institutions responded that the inclusion of character education was an integrated course needed in teacher education. Weber (1998) states that of these 61 institutions, 75 percent said that “character education should be a part of both the professional teacher education sequence and the liberal arts in general education courses” (para. 5). Preparation courses for character education teachers must begin with personal ethical/moral development along with the college’s responsibility to guide each student (Weber, 1998). Weber (1998) states the analogy of the unlikelihood of a teacher not prepared in math to teach the subject. Similarly, a teacher not prepared in character education should not teach these important values to students (para. 7).

Colleges and universities are striving to promote more ethical understanding and moral reasoning courses, which are essential for future character education teachers. For example, humanities is a course that is praised by character education models because of the opportunity for engaging discussions of the struggles involved within the human spirit and encounters with evaluating best thought processes (Weber, 1998). The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) introduced a program of ethical/character education twenty five years ago that presented four components that are needed for the appropriate training for character education (Benninga, 2003). The Four-Component Model of Moral Maturity provides educational goals that would appeal to 1) moral sensitivity, 2) moral judgment, 3) moral motivation, and 4) moral character.

Service learning and volunteer programs are highly recommended to move theory out and beyond the classroom (Weber, 1998). With these programs, a teacher will interact with a wide range of individuals with different skills and social levels. Courses involving service learning will advance students' knowledge on a specific subject and put into action one of the basic fundamentals of character education: civic responsibility (Weber, 1998).

Once identifying the effects of character education on a child and how teachers can prepare to implement this program, the next step is to integrate these virtues into the daily curriculum. The integration approach of character education is to add civic virtues into the already-existing curriculum (Weber, 1998). This option is fitting to appeal to contemporary education methods and a small step in eliminating traditional essentialism obstacles. Contemporary education methods include experimental learning, field study, and other progressive appeals. Integration of character education in public schools will thus introduce more student-centered and progressive ways of teaching students.

The focus of character education will help draw teachers away from strict textbook teaching and more into the mind of each individual student. Character education obviously centers on each student. This type of education strives on making every student a rational and ethical human being. Rather than only focusing on the textual information and core subjects, character education will make sure students contemplate on their personal ethics and how their actions affect the people around them. For example, the Catholic based schooling system has shown American culture the positive feedback that character education has on a community of students. The Christian character development theory is based on Gospel teachings, environment, and cross-culture emphasis (Thibeau, 1999). As stated before, the Bible was and is a key testimonial book that teaches students the value of "honesty, sharing, justice, respect, and responsibility" (Thibeau, 1999). Catholics and their beliefs have proven to have lasting effects on their students by not only preaching about living a sacred and holy life, but also living out the good news that God has commanded for His people (Thibeau, 1999). Children will work to help their fellow neighbor and respect their duties as civilized people because that is what they are meant to do as followers of the Catholic faith. Thus, this concludes the need for all students, not just Catholics, to mold into good citizens throughout character education virtues.

By teaching children core values in character education, students will learn how to respect themselves which will hopefully decrease negative school related trends such as cheating and bullying. In Education 1100, we have learned different philosophies that support this theory of learning beyond the classroom. Student-centered philosophies, social reconstruction, existentialism, and scaffolding are examples that allow freedom to integrate character education into curriculum. Character education should not only be integrated in curriculum, but also be presented with great force. The way students build their character on the inside reflects their performance on the outside. From test scores to in-school shootings, the American culture needs to be rearranged and refocused on the success of American students. With the integration of character education, the American public school system will shape solid human beings who will exceed in ethical skills.

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