INTRODUCTION

From the early writings of Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, the word character has the meaning of “to mark” or “to engrave”. If the larger purpose of education is to mould students’ character, then we need to consider a number of highly controversial and contentious issues.

- Should we teach values in schools?
- If so, which values should we teach?
- What is the ultimate goal of any character education program in schools?
- How are students to learn values?
- At what level are behavioral problems solved?

More fundamentally, we would have to examine our assumptions about the underlying theory of human nature and of morality. In this article, I present some empirical studies on character education programs in American and Japanese schools, highlight an interesting debate between Alfie Kohn and other scholars on “How Not to Teach Values” (Kohn, 1997) and draw implications for teachers in classroom practice.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Berreth and Berman (1997) found that schools which had clearly stated core moral values, had caring adults who exemplified these values both at work and in their interactions with students and had provided opportunities for students to engage in community service, fostered the virtues of empathy and self-discipline. This was true for both preschools and high schools. In another study, Elkind and Sweet (1997) reported that the classical Socratic technique led students to recognize contradictions between values they avowed and the choices they had, and could make. In Japan, Lewis & Tsuchida (1998) noted that an important aspect of the elementary education was character (education) besides the other 2 C’s; namely, connection (to school) and (curriculum) content. The Japanese teachers believed that “values...should not just be taught in the 35 periods designated yearly for moral education, but should be embodied in every activity of the school day” (ibid, p.33). Interestingly too, the authors observed that teachers generally avoided using rewards or punishments so as not to cause divisions among students but instead treated them more like members of a bigger family.

THE BIG DEBATE

Against this backdrop, Kohn (1997, p.429) however maintains that “...character education nowadays is, for the most part, a collection of exhortations and extrinsic inducements designed to make children work harder and do what they’re told”. He believes that strategies such as scheduling a value for a month or offering students rewards when they are “caught” being good are ineffective, because extrinsic motivation actually tends to erode intrinsic motivation. Therefore, students are unlikely to have lasting commitment to any of these values and they will soon learn that the point of
being good is only to get rewards. To him, such approaches are tantamount to indoctrination. He argues that a better way would be to engage students in deep, critical reflection about these issues.

While agreeing that Kohn's critique would stimulate a healthy debate because it would force character educators to look more closely at what they are doing, Lickona (1998) and several others (Benninga & Wynne, 1998; Etzioni, 1998; Glanzer, 1998) feel that Kohn's analysis is not complex enough. They maintain that Kohn has failed to address the following questions that would influence one's understanding of morality.

**Should we teach values in schools?**

Many scholars feel that schools and their teachings are already imbued with values (Doyle, 1997; Kohn, 1997; Benninga & Wynne, 1998; Etzioni, 1998; Glanzer, 1998). "Whether or not we deliberately adopt a character or moral education program, we are always teaching values. Even people who insist that they are opposed to values in schools usually mean that they are opposed to values other than their own" (Kohn, 1997, p.432). Benninga & Wynne (1998) go further to suggest that, more precisely, we are always teaching virtues. They define virtues as good or meritorious moral qualities that underlie desirable character traits or habits. They also believe that these traits – and, to some degree, virtues – are not innate and must be acquired through learning and practice in homes, schools, neighborhoods and other agencies. This view is shared by Lickona (1998) who proposes that a distinctive character education program needs to provide students with repeated opportunities to practise good behavior until it becomes a habit – in other words, a virtue. However, he cautions that, in stressing right conduct, we should also not neglect the cognitive underpinnings of moral behavior because character education without moral judgement would become mere conformity training. He sees this as one of Kohn's major concerns and adds that Kohn's worry about narrow, unreflective social training could serve as a useful warning. Therefore, the issue is not whether we should or should not teach values in schools but *which* values, or whose, should we teach?

**Which values should we teach?**

Etzioni (1998, p.447) suggests we can start with the "myriad of values we all share" which would include, for example, fairness, honesty, not stealing, committing rape or murder, not being disrespectful and lying wantonly. Glanzer (1998) suggests that character education programs should attempt to instill these commonly agreed upon virtues among children at the primary level. However, Kohn (1998) argues that it is not always clear that everyone shares these values. He questions the superficial consensus people have about basic values. For example, in theory, we endorse the idea of cooperation, but in practice we set up groups to compete against one another in our quest for triumph (Kohn, 1997)! How then can we respond when basic values seem to be in conflict?

At the secondary school level, Glanzer (1998) suggests that it would be useful and necessary for students to discuss important underlying questions such as:

- Why should we develop virtues?
- In what ways should we demonstrate these virtues?
- How will character address the reality of moral failure?
What will motivate or empower us to attain these virtues?

Benninga & Wynne (1998) and Kohn (1997) advocate that children should reflect on these complex issues. Students need to understand that virtues exist to serve certain ends. Therefore, the various virtues and their ends should be openly discussed and agreed upon by the school community. This leads to the next question: So, what is the ultimate goal?

What is the ultimate goal of a character education program?

Should the ultimate goal be acculturating students to conventional norms of good behavior in order to achieve social stability? Kohn (1997, p.432) regards this as a profoundly conservative agenda. Instead, we should cultivate autonomy "so that children come to experience themselves as 'originals' rather than 'pawns'. With such an agenda, it would be crucial to give students the chance to participate in making decisions about their learning and about how they want their classroom to be". He points out that character education would look very different if this were the goal. However, Benninga & Wynne (1998) argue that children are not adults – their minds are different from those of adults. Therefore, allowing students too much freedom to cultivate autonomy and to make decisions about their learning can be detrimental. Instead, children need age-appropriate but significant responsibilities. Since children learn to make good decisions by making decisions, schools ought to involve them as active participants. This brings us to another important aspect of character education - the way values are taught and learnt.

How can we teach values?

In most character education programs where teaching values are likened to pouring values into students who are passive receptacles, the approach becomes highly debatable. According to Kohn (1998), social and moral development, like intellectual development, should be a process by which the learner is active in his/her construction of meaning. Although Glanzer (1998) shares much of Kohn’s concern about such methods, he takes issue with Kohn when the latter not only criticizes the methods used in character education but also the very importance of developing habits of character. Kohn (1997) does not consider the process of inculcating habits as an educational issue, because habits are unreflective actions. Glanzer (1998) however believes that children must learn good habits. Like willing athletes or musicians who have chosen to subject themselves to gruelling training in order to develop their capacities and form certain habits, Glanzer (1998) argues that educators can also encourage children to think critically about their habits and to develop an internal commitment to good ones. The approach need not be mindless conformity nor does it lessen the need to form virtuous habits. On the contrary, such reflective training can help students make good choices and develop good character.

At what level are behavioral problems solved?

That student behavioral problems exist in schools is evident enough but how educators solve them is even more revealing. Benninga & Wynne (1998) give some statistics of record-breaking rates of distress afflicting young Americans. Kohn
(1998) opines that larger social forces affect crime and anti-social actions. Therefore, trying to “fix the kids” (which Kohn equates with teaching children virtuous habits) overlooks the system(s) in which those individuals learn or live. For example, he suggests that people often lie because they feel that the environment is not safe enough for them to tell the truth. Glanzer (1998) however, argues that children must learn to tell the truth even in situations that are not safe. Otherwise, any attempt at systemic change will fail because the individual within the system lacks character to bring about these changes. We cannot afford to under-emphasize a child’s personal character development. At the heart of this discussion lies the fundamental question...

What are our own assumptions about human nature?

Kohn (1997, p.431) observes that the character education movement seems to be driven by a “stunningly dark view” of children and of people in general. While agreeing with Benninga & Wynne (1998) that there is too much violence in society, he does not think that this tells us anything about our inborn nature. He quotes writers such as Kilpatrick (1992) and Wynne (1989) to argue that the doctrine of original sin lurks behind many character education programs. Kilpatrick (1992) makes strong assertions that most behavioral problems are the result of children’s sheer willfulness. Wynne (1989) admits that his own work was grounded in a pessimistic view of human nature. To Kohn, these writings describe religious dogma and not scientific fact. Glanzer (1998) challenges Kohn’s assumption that one can make a clear distinction between religious dogma and scientific fact when it concerns views of human nature. In fact, he strongly advocates that we should wrestle with deeper questions relating to differing world views and discuss and explore a variety of answers offered, even if they are religious answers.

CONCLUSION

In this review, I have discussed several highly controversial and contentious issues in character education. They represent two opposing views – conservative or liberal. As character educators, we need to study them very carefully and decide for ourselves which arguments resonate well with our bedrock beliefs about children, learning and values. Remember the old adage: when wealth is lost, nothing is lost; when health is lost, something is lost; when character is lost, all is lost.
IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

The following acrostic VALUES seek to offer some suggestions for teachers to note when conducting character education sessions in class.

V
values must be both caught and taught. Most will say that values are caught more than taught. Doyle (1997, p.441), however, stresses that values can, and must be taught. It is a moral imperative. We can start with those values that we can all agree upon. Of course, we will have to contend with the question of general application and we cannot anticipate every contingency. Therefore, it is both desirable and useful to know how to think critically. Lickona (1998) believes that teachers can teach students that a given behavior is wrong and simultaneously teach them why it is wrong. We can do this through example, study and practice.

A
apply, apply, apply. Practice makes perfect. According to Benninga & Wynne (1998), virtues are acquired through learning and practice in homes, schools and other agencies. So, provide students with opportunities to carry out age-appropriate and significant responsibilities (Benninga & Wynne, 1998; Berreth & Berman, 1997). Practice also means real experiences for the students. Above all, practice produces habit.

L
liaise with the parents. In shaping the character of the young, the school and the home must work in tandem. Therefore, since we do not wish for the home to undo what is done in the school, it is wise for schools to work jointly with the parents as partners. Often, this can help teachers understand their students better. Talk with the parents about their children’s performance in schools. At the same time, listen to parents describe students’ behavior at home. Such dialogue enhances mutual understanding and provides a common platform for immediate intervention when the child misbehaves.

U
unity in diversity. In a multi-racial and multi-religious society like ours, schools cannot be sectarian. At the same time, according to Doyle (1997), schools cannot ignore religion either. While parents may expect character
education programs to do justice to their particular worldview, public schools really cannot inculcate values that are uniquely representative of any one particular worldview. The approach is for schools and parents to remain open to discussion, tolerant of the multiplicity of views and accepting of the person. For any character education program, the goal is to mould people of good character. This goal is achievable if we recognise that people matter, take them seriously, show them respect and strive for unity in diversity.

Exemplify through our own examples.
The environment plays a part. But the environment does not only refer to the surrounding physical elements. It also includes people surrounding the students, the good or bad examples they provide and the expectations they establish (Benninga & Wynne, 1998, p.441). According to Doyle (1997, p.442), "...it is the high expectations the best teachers have for us that induce us to give our best". We are very likely to remember our best teachers as those who have left an enduring impression on us because of their strong belief in their calling and the importance of the subject they teach, whether it is physics or art. Now, as teachers, we need to do likewise for our students.

Schools have an important role to play.
Schools are part of our total environment. Etzioni (1998, p.446) believes that everything that happens in school – the total culture and the social environment, shapes students’ experiences that either help build good character or undermine it. Whether these experiences take place in the classroom or out in the field or elsewhere is immaterial. The point is that although character education can be built around a curriculum, it must be made real by what students see in the behaviors of those who communicate the message. Therefore, teachers as well as all others involved in the schooling process have critically important roles to play.

1 You’ve heard it said that practice makes perfect. To be more precise, practice makes permanence. It is practising the right things that makes perfect. Here, the term 'practice' is used in this sense.
SOURCES:


