

About the Developmental Studies Center

Our Mission

Developmental Studies Center (DSC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to children's academic, ethical, and social development. Since 1980, DSC has developed school-based and after-school programs that help children develop capacities to think deeply and critically so they will continue learning throughout their lives and strengthen their commitment to such values as kindness, helpfulness, personal responsibility, and respect for others.

DSC's Programs Develop Skills and Community

Programs for use in classrooms

Caring School Community™ • Grades K–6

The Caring School Community (CSC) program is a nationally recognized, research-based program that builds community—in the classroom, across grades, schoolwide, and with families.

Making Meaning® • Grades K–8

The Making Meaning program is a reading comprehension curriculum that teaches comprehension strategies through read-alouds, collaborative structures, and reflective partner work.

SIPPS® (Systematic Instruction in Phoneme Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words) • Grades K–12

The SIPPS program teaches decoding systematically. It is designed specifically for intervention and covers single-syllable decoding, short vowels, simple consonants, complex vowels, consonant digraphs, polysyllabic strategies, and high-frequency sight words.

Being a Writer™ • Grades K–5

The Being a Writer program is a yearlong writing curriculum—the first program of its kind to bring together the latest research in teaching writing with support for students' social and ethical development. (Available August 2007)

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AfterSchool KidzLit® • Grades K–8

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The AfterSchool KidzMath program provides academic enrichment using cooperative math games and literature-based activities. Kids deepen their understanding and practice important math skills—and have fun.

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**DEVELOPMENTAL
STUDIES CENTER™**

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Toward A More Adequate Assessment of Moral Development

Victor Battistich
Developmental Studies Center

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Toward A More Adequate Assessment of Moral Development

I recently had the distressing experience of reviewing the literature on education and moral development for a chapter some colleagues and I wrote for the forthcoming 4th edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (Solomon, Watson, & Battistich, in press). I say “distressing” because we discovered that we have not made much progress in the past 20 years or so in our understanding of how educational practices influence students’ moral development. Although some aspects of moral development have been extensively studied (e.g., the development of moral reasoning), there is remarkably little research that examines the effectiveness of particular approaches to moral education (Leming, 1993), or even that examines associations of the broad range of existing educational practices with moral development. At a time when there is great interest in and concern about the moral development of youth (and many different programs being implemented in schools), we are in the unenviable position of having very little to say with any degree of certainty about how to go about nurturing that development.

The problem is not simply that, with a few notable exceptions, there is virtually no credible evidence that moral development programs are effective. Even for the relatively small number of programs that have been evaluated, the evaluations typically have examined a very limited range of outcome variables, often only one—the most common being moral reasoning or some discrete behavior deemed to be morally relevant (e.g., cheating on a test). Clearly, focusing on such a narrow set of outcomes is problematic. Although there arguably may be a small number of behaviors that could be classified as “intrinsically” moral or immoral, the vast majority of behaviors are morally ambiguous without knowledge of the actor’s intentions. Likewise, while there

certainly are significant relations between moral reasoning and moral action (Blasi, 1980), the relationships are not simple and direct, but rather are complex and indirect.

This narrow focus on single outcome variables is surprising because there is a general consensus that moral character is complex and multifaceted. In *The Education of the Complete Moral Person*, Berkowitz (1995) points out how, by focusing on isolated aspects of morality in research, we have lost sight of the central goal of moral education—*the development of moral people*. The fragmentary state of research on moral development makes it very difficult to make meaningful progress toward developing demonstrably effective approaches to moral education.

Assessing Moral Character

The first thing I would argue, then, is that we must do a better job of representing the domain of moral character in both basic research on moral development and, more importantly, in studies of the effectiveness of our approaches to moral education. What would this entail? What are the range of outcome variables that should be assessed? Rest (1983) suggested a fourfold typology of characteristics that lead to moral behavior: *moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character*. Berkowitz (1995) described the “anatomy” of the moral person in terms of seven characteristics: *moral behavior, moral values, moral character, moral reason, moral emotion, moral identity, and meta-moral characteristics* (i.e., qualities that are not intrinsically moral, but that support moral functioning). Either of these frameworks provides a useful starting point for thinking about what variables should be assessed in studying moral development.

Conducting more comprehensive assessments is, of course, more complex and difficult than focusing on a single outcome variable, but it certainly can be done, and the findings from such research not only provide a much richer picture of moral

development for informing theory but, assuming a clear pattern of predicted effects across a range of relevant outcome variables, much more convincing evidence of program impacts on moral character. Bebeau and colleagues, for example, have been developing and using assessments aligned with Rest's typology in their research on the effectiveness of an ethical training program for dentists (Bebeau, 1994), and more generally, have outlined educational goals, strategies, and outcome variables related to each of the four domains (Bebeau, Rest, & Narvaez, 1995).

Similarly, in our research on the *Child Development Project (CDP)*, my colleagues and I have used a wide range of assessments, and have found a pattern of program effects on elementary school students that includes positive effects on their *concern for others, commitment to democratic values, intrinsic motivation for prosocial behavior, conflict resolution skill, and altruistic behavior* (e.g., Battistich et al., 1997, in press; Solomon et al., in press; Watson et al., 1997). Figure 1 provides a summary of some of these findings. This coherent *pattern* of effects increases confidence that the program has influenced some enduring aspect of character.

Figure 1 here

The various assessment procedures we have used in our research on CDP were described in a series of papers that appeared in the Winter 1988, Spring 1989, and Summer 1989 issues of *Moral Education Forum*, and many of the outcome measures are available upon request from the Developmental Studies Center. Jim Leming also has recently reviewed a large number of instruments for the Character Education Partnership and constructed a searchable bibliographic index of measures relevant to assessing the effects of moral/character education efforts on the Partnership's website

(www.character.org). These resources make the task of comprehensively assessing the effects of moral education much easier than it has been in the past.

Assessing Social Contextual Influences on Moral Development

Providing more comprehensive assessments of the characteristics of individuals relevant to moral behavior would go far toward improving our understanding of moral development, and contribute greatly to the identification of effective practices in moral education. However, in my view it wouldn't go quite far enough. Development does not occur in isolation, but within the context of a web of social contexts, and I would argue that assessing these social contextual influences on moral development is an important but largely neglected part of our research agenda. It is interesting that the most frequently cited conclusion from Hartshorne and May's classic studies of character education is that moral exhortation and direct instruction were not effective practices for developing moral character. Much less known (or, at least, discussed) is that they also reported evidence of general effects on moral development of school and classroom atmosphere and "morale." Hartshorne and May (1928) found consistent differences between classroom groups, and suggested that each class built up a "habit system which, without much consciousness on the part of the individual members, operates to differentiate it from other groups" (Book One, p. 338). They concluded: "The main attention of educators should be placed not so much on devices for teaching honesty or any other 'trait' as on the reconstruction of school practices in such a way as to provide not occasional but consistent and regular opportunities for the successful use by both teachers and pupils of such forms of conduct as make for the common good" (1928, Book One, p. 414). Following their observations on the distinctiveness and consistency of the moral norms and atmosphere of the school and the class group, they drew the implication that "the normal unit for character education is the group or small

community, which provides through cooperative discussion and effort the moral support required for the adventurous discovery and effective use of ideals in the conduct of affairs" (Hartshorne et al., 1930, p. 379).

It is intriguing that Hartshorne and May's calls for "cooperative discussion and effort" and "reconstruction" of school practices to provide "consistent and regular opportunities" for the practice of "such forms of conduct as make for the common good" are reminiscent of Dewey's approach to education. Dewey believed that moral education should not (indeed, could not) be divorced from the school as a mode of social life, and was best achieved through cooperative social interaction in a democratic community. "It may be laid down as fundamental that the influence of direct moral instruction, even at its very best, is *comparatively* small in amount and slight in influence, when the whole field of moral growth through education is taken into account. This larger field of indirect and vital moral education, (is) the development of character through all the agencies, instrumentalities, and materials of school life" (Dewey, 1909/1975, p. 4; emphasis in original).

More recently, of course, the importance of the social context of the school, or more specifically, of the importance of a participatory democracy and a collective moral atmosphere in schools to students' moral development, is reflected in the "Just Community" programs initiated by Kohlberg and colleagues (e.g., Kohlberg, 1985; Kohlberg & Higgins, 1987). Kohlberg and Higgins (1987) describe the approach to the Just Community as a revision and integration of the perspectives of Piaget and Durkheim:

For Piaget, the development of moral autonomy and moral maturity emerges from the spontaneous dialogue and cooperation between individuals who are peers having attributes of mutual respect and collective solidarity with one another. We believe, however, (1) that such interaction rests largely on the development of the collectivity of a set of group norms and an atmosphere of

group solidarity conducive to dialogue with mutual respect, and (2) that this collective development is one that the teacher must help structure and advocate. ... Thus the opposition between Piaget's focus on interindividual dialogue and exchange and Durkheim's emphasis on collective norms and solidarity is for us not opposed but complementary to our theory of democratic social interaction (p. 111).

For Durkheim a sense of moral obligation to a norm rests on a sense of the norm as being shared by a group whose authority the individual accepts and of which he or she feels himself or herself to be a member. As distinct from obligations to rules and norms (the spirit of discipline), Durkheim views an equally important part of morality to be the more spontaneous spirit of altruism, or caring for other members of the community and the community as a whole (p. 113).

We believe that, rather than relying entirely on spontaneous social interaction to develop an attitude of mutual respect and solidarity ... and constitutive rules of dialogue and fair exchange, the educator and educational system must take a role in developing these conditions of peer interaction (p. 121).

The Child Development Project similarly has as a central goal making elementary schools more participatory, democratic, and caring environments—helping schools to become “caring communities of learners” (Battistich et al., 1997). Indeed, students’ sense of the school as a community plays a critical mediating role in our theoretical model of program effectiveness, and the evidence we have amassed to date is consistent with this model: that is, the effects of program practices on student attitudes, motives, and behavior generally have been found to be mediated by effects on sense of community (Solomon et al., in press; Watson et al., 1997). This is illustrated in Figure 1.

Paying attention to the social context of the school in our research also has surfaced some areas of concern, and strengthened our convictions that, as moral educators, we must be critically concerned with the content of school community values. CDP and the just community program focus explicitly on creating a participatory and democratic environment that explicitly emphasizes values of fairness, responsibility, and concern for others. However, schooling inevitably conveys moral

messages, whether explicitly or as part of the “hidden curriculum,” and these messages may not always support moral development. Theoretically, a supportive classroom or school environment promotes students’ compliance with group norms through their desire to be accepted by the group. That is, the affective bonds that develop among group members promote acceptance and adoption of group norms and values, whatever those norms and values may be. The social environment of the school thus could just as easily have negative as positive effects on students’ moral development. Two examples from our research illustrate this. One difference we have repeatedly found between students at CDP schools and those at comparison schools is in the reasons they give for engaging in prosocial acts. Students at CDP schools focus on intrinsic motives for their behavior; they say that they are considerate or helpful because they are concerned about others’ welfare and that “that is how people should treat one another.” Comparison students, in contrast, emphasize extrinsic reasons for their actions, such as avoiding punishment or gaining approval or a reward. A similar differential effect is illustrated in Figure 2, which plots the effect of sense of school community on moral reasoning among students at CDP program and comparison schools. We found that increases in the sense of school community were associated with increases in level of moral reasoning (i.e., more autonomous reasons) among students at CDP program schools, but were associated with *decreases* in level of moral reasoning among students at comparison schools.

Figure 2 here

Can we explain this seemingly paradoxical effect? Perhaps. We suspect that the answer lies in the fact that the environments at both the program and comparison

schools were generally supportive ones for students, but that the norms and values were in some respects very different. Based on our assessments, the comparison schools were “traditional” schools where authority was vested in the teacher and other adults; the emphasis was on conformity with norms and rules, and conformity was induced through extensive use of extrinsic control (reward and punishment); and students had very few opportunities to make decisions or exert influence in the classroom and school. In short, the environment at the comparison schools was consistent with a heteronomous moral orientation, and the increased acceptance of school values resulting from increases in students’ sense of school community resulted in lower levels (i.e., more heteronomous) moral reasoning. In contrast, the CDP schools emphasized students taking responsibility for their own behavior, extensive discourse about the reasons for rules and why we should behave in certain ways, intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation, and many opportunities for students to exercise autonomy, make decisions, and have influence. Increases in sense of school community among the program schools thus was associated with increased levels (i.e., more autonomous) of moral reasoning.

Conclusions

One conclusion, of course, is that we need to do a better job of representing the complexity of moral character in our research on moral development—both to advance our understanding of moral development and to do a better job of developing effective approaches to moral education. Second, at the *least*, we need to pay attention in our research to the broader social contexts within which moral education programs are implemented. Ultimately, however, I suspect we will need to focus on how to *shape* the social context of schools to more effectively influence students’ development as moral persons.

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