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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

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#### **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.

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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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STUDIES CENTER™**

**Nonprofit. Research Based. Mission Driven. Since 1980.**

# **The Effects of Classroom and School Practices on Students' Character Development**

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## **The Effects of Classroom and School Practices on Students' Character Development**

Few would disagree that schooling influences students' social and moral development. Unfortunately, in many schools at present these influences are relegated to what has been called the "hidden curriculum," and as such are largely implicit and "unconscious." That is, while teachers and administrators pay careful attention to the academic content to be conveyed in their lessons, and to the efficacy of the instructional processes by which that content is to be conveyed, they pay much less attention to the implications of their practices for students' developing understanding of themselves, other people, and society.

The consequences of not explicitly attending to social and ethical development in school are problematic. At best, relegating school influences on social and moral development to the domain of the "hidden curriculum" does not provide students with clear and consistent messages about how we should live our lives, and denies them an important source of guidance from adult members of society as they strive to understand themselves and the world around them; at worst, it "teaches" pernicious lessons about social and ethical behavior and presents a "world view" and depiction of the relations between individuals in society that works counter to the aims of promoting students' moral and character development.

In this paper, I will present an overview of the effects of classroom and school practices on students' moral and character development. Obviously, a major premise is that attention to social and ethical development should be as explicit and central an aspect of schooling as concern with intellectual development. (Indeed, I believe that social, ethical, and intellectual development are intimately interconnected.) My concern is with what has been called "comprehensive" character education—i.e., a systematic approach to providing students with the broad range of attitudes, values, skills, and motives necessary to being a moral person and a contributing member of a democratic and pluralistic society. The extant empirical research on the effects of the classroom and school practices described here was reviewed in the draft of the chapter (with Dan Solomon and Marilyn Watson) on moral/prosocial development for the forthcoming *Handbook of Research on Teaching*. As participants at this forum have received copies of this chapter, I will not provide references here. Finally, I want to note that the views expressed here are my own, and do not necessarily represent the views of my colleagues or of the Developmental Studies Center.

## Schooling and Character Development

To talk about school effects on students' social and moral development is to talk about the socialization process in schools. As Durkheim noted, school is a "bridge" between the affective morality of the family and the more "rigorous" morality of society. As such, it seems sensible to examine the literature on parenting practices and other socialization processes in families, consider how these might apply to the school environment, and examine extant research on the effects of these practices in schools on students' social and moral development, as we did in our chapter. What emerges, I believe, is a fairly clear picture of the characteristics of schools that should do a good job of promoting prosocial and ethical development in their students. Although the amount of empirical support for the effectiveness of each of the specific dimensions is uneven (in part because they tend to co-occur in classrooms and schools, and some have not been investigated in isolation from the others), across a variety of literatures (i.e., correlational research on parenting practices and school practices, experimental research on specific practices conducted in non-school settings, and experimental and quasi-experimental research in schools) the evidence converges on a constellation of practices that are consistently associated with positive outcomes in the social and moral domains.

*Caring and supportive interpersonal relationships.* Nel Noddings, Carol Gilligan and others have argued that a commitment to care is the basis of morality, and that children learn to become caring by being in caring relationships. The research literature provides considerable support for this thesis. Children who grow up to be characterized as "morally mature" have parents who are warm, trusting, and responsive to their needs. Similarly, the few studies that have been conducted have found that students of teachers who are considered warm and supportive are more helpful and cooperative than those of teachers who are either more "businesslike" and task-oriented, or who are harsh and punitive.

The importance of positive interpersonal relationships to moral socialization is hardly surprising. As social beings, we have a need to belong to a group, to feel accepted and valued by others. We seek relationships with those who meet this need, and strive to maintain these relationships by complying with the wishes of those who care for us, adopting their beliefs and values, and imitating their behavior. Although their relative importance varies over the course of development, this applies both to relationships with significant adults, such as parents and teachers, and to relationships with peers. Thus, a school environment which is characterized by caring and supportive relationships between teachers and students and among students should be optimal for promoting prosocial and moral development, in that such an environment is one which both provides abundant models of behavior consistent with prosocial and moral attitudes and values, and motivates the student to adopt and internalize these attitudes, values, and behaviors. Such an environment should help to promote both of Durkheim's equally important sources of morality—the sense of moral obligation to norms that are shared by a group to whom the individual belongs and whose authority he/she accepts, and the "spirit of altruism" or caring for other members of the community.

*Adult guidance.* Piaget argued persuasively about the importance of dialog and cooperation with peers for the development of moral autonomy and maturity. The necessity of accommodation and negotiation to goal achievement in interactions with others of equal status and authority undoubtedly contributes to the development of perspective-taking abilities and understanding of the importance of considering others' needs as well as one's own in social relationships. Unfortunately, children's interactions often are not characterized by the mutual consideration and solidarity that promote moral development. Whether because they do not understand the applicability of a moral value to a particular situation, or because they do not have the skills to act in accordance with the value, children will often falter in their interactions with others. To effectively promote moral development, educators must take an active role in constructing an environment for students characterized by mutual respect, a sense of common purpose and shared goals, and a commitment to fairness in distributing benefits and resolving disputes.

Teachers can promote their students' character development in both indirect and direct ways. Indirectly, they can structure student interactions in ways that facilitate positive relationships and a sense of shared purpose. Collaborative learning approaches and class discussions, as discussed below, are one effective means toward this end. More directly, the teacher can monitor students' group interactions, and intervene strategically to help them solve a problem in a prosocial way or achieve a level of understanding that they may not have been easily capable of attaining on their own. Teachers can also directly facilitate students' character development by teaching important social skills (e.g., non-violent approaches to resolving conflicts), and helping students to apply those skills in relevant situations.

In the moral domain, teachers *should be* moral advocates. This is not to say that teachers should engage in moral exhortation and power-based enforcement of their views. Rather, teachers should use their "moral authority" as older, wiser, and more expert members of society to help their students attain moral maturity by raising issues, ensuring that all views are heard in discussing problems, and focusing the discourse on fundamental issues of caring and justice.

*Active participation in school life.* Essential learnings derive from active experience, not from simply being told "the facts." Indeed, all learning involves a process of constructing meaning from experience. To promote students' prosocial and moral development, schools should involve students in helping to determine their classroom and school environment. That is, in developmentally appropriate ways, teachers should engage their students in discussions of "ways we want our class to be" and help them to participate in determining class norms and rules. This not only provides important opportunities for moral discourse (see below), but also promotes adherence to norms and rules because one has had a hand in developing them.

Collaborative learning (see below) is, of course, one method of increasing students' active participation in school life. I would suggest that, beyond collaboration on learning tasks, a "democratic," participatory approach to classroom management is likely to have positive effects on students' social and ethical development. A democratic home environment, in which parental control emphasizes the use of reasoning and induction, provides the child with the freedom to assume some responsibility, and

involves him/her in making decisions with the rest of the family (e.g., Baumrind's "authoritative parenting"), has consistently been found to be associated with the development of "moral maturity." Similarly, student autonomy and participatory decision-making play a major role in progressive education, "constructivist" classroom practices, and a number of programs focused on prosocial and moral development (e.g., the "Just Community"), and research on these programs and approaches has found positive effects in a number of areas, including moral reasoning, commitment to democratic values, and positive interpersonal behavior.

*Collaboration.* The ability to work effectively with others to achieve common goals is undoubtedly one of the goals of character education, and one of the skills that the business community has been saying is most lacking in school graduates. Collaboration, in the form of cooperative learning, is one of the most extensively researched of educational practices, and one with perhaps the most consistent set of findings in terms of students' social and moral development. Reviews, including meta-analyses of this research, indicate that in addition to having positive effects on students' academic achievement, cooperative learning generally has positive effects on students' role-taking skills, cooperative actions and inclinations in other settings, altruistic behavior, and interpersonal acceptance and attraction.

*Moral discourse.* In the current version of the *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, Fritz Oser identified moral discourse as the "common denominator" in various approaches to moral education. Certainly, it would be difficult to conceive of any approach to moral and character education that did not involve talking about moral values, but this encompasses very different kinds of "discourse," ranging from moral exhortation by teachers, to moral dilemma discussions involving both teachers and students, to the "value neutral" discussions of values clarification.

There is little evidence to suggest that moral exhortation, at least as a dominant approach, is effective at enhancing children's prosocial and moral development. In the parenting literature, frequent moralizing and exhortation (e.g., Baumrind's "authoritarian" families) is associated with children who tend to be rule-conforming, but not morally mature. (Note that it is likely that "authoritative" parents also engage in some exhortation and moralizing, but this is tempered by extensive use of reasoning and explanation and a tendency not to insist on rigid compliance.) With respect to moral and character education, the efficacy of moral exhortation has been questioned at least since the publication of the Hartshorne and May studies. On the other hand, research on values clarification, which certainly does not involve moral exhortation by teachers, also has not provided evidence that it has positive effects on prosocial and moral development.

If neither moral exhortation by teachers (or other adults) nor "value neutrality" on the part of teachers around moral issues are effective means of fostering students' moral development, what kinds of discourse are useful? The empirical literature provides evidence of the effectiveness of two types of moral discourse discussed by Oser—discourse entailing moral-cognitive conflict (e.g., discussions of hypothetical moral dilemmas in which students are exposed to moral thinking that is more "advanced" than their own), and discourse focused on shared norms and moral community (e.g., the "Just Community" program). Although not as well researched, I

suspect that other types of discourse discussed by Oser are also likely to have positive effects on students' social and ethical development, including discourse aimed at enhancing role-taking and empathy, discourse involving analysis of the moral issues and values in literature and other sources, and discourse directed at moral action.

*Summary.* In short, I am suggesting that the extant research literature indicates that students' prosocial and moral development is enhanced when they are active participants in a moral school community, where they feel valued and supported, and where they have ample opportunities to discuss and reflect on values of justice and caring as they relate to their day-to-day lives, and to learn and practice the interpersonal skills, as well as the intellectual skills, necessary to being a moral person and a contributing member of society.

The argument that schools should function as communities clearly is not novel. Dewey, of course, argued quite some time ago that it was essential for schools to be democratic communities in which students could blend their individual skills and interests, and experience the democratic process through collaborative deliberation and decision-making, thereby developing and becoming committed to common goals. Dewey believed that moral education 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. More recently, Kohlberg came to a similar conclusion, arguing that the kind of democratic social interaction that promotes the development of moral autonomy and maturity rests largely on the development of the collectivity of a set of group norms and an atmosphere of group solidarity conducive to dialogue and mutual respect, and that teachers must play an active role in this collective development. And such views are not limited to "progressive" educators. Although not often noted, Hartshorne and May also came to a similar conclusion, arguing that the "normal" unit for character education is the group or small community, which through discussion and cooperative effort provides the moral support needed for the "adventurous discovery" and effective use of ideals in behavior.

### **Some Implications for Assessment and Program Evaluation**

Adequately measuring the set of practices and conditions discussed above calls for a fairly broad set of assessments—assessments of classroom organization and climate, of teacher-student and student-student interactions, of classroom management and "governance" practices, of the frequency, quality, and content of moral discourse in the classroom, and so on. The effort required to gather reliable and valid indicators of a comprehensive set of practices for the purposes of program evaluation may seem daunting, but I would argue that adequately evaluating any comprehensive approach to character education requires a comprehensive assessment of program implementation, just as it requires a comprehensive assessment of program outcomes. Given the current interest in character and moral education, we have an opportunity, and an obligation, to assess the effectiveness of the various programs that are rapidly proliferating in our schools.

As you are all aware, most extant character education programs have never been evaluated, and of those that have, most of the evaluations have been woefully inadequate, in my opinion. Even in the rare instances involving a comparative research

design, the outcome variables examined are typically few in number (perhaps limited solely to those that can be conveniently gathered from school records), and program implementation often is not assessed at all. Doing a good job of assessing both program implementation and hypothesized program outcomes is critical to determining “what works” in character education. Given the realities of research on school programs (e.g., inability to randomly assign students to schools, and too few schools to randomly assign and assess effects at the school level), “black box” evaluations will almost never provide convincing evidence of program effectiveness (or lack thereof). At the least, it is necessary to demonstrate that program practices were implemented (and that the same or similar practices were *not* implemented in comparison schools) before one can infer anything about program effectiveness. However, gathering implementation data can do much more to contribute to our understanding of character education. Given that variability in level of implementation between sites (schools and classrooms within schools) is virtually guaranteed in any study, having adequate implementation data allows for much richer and more fine grained analyses of program outcomes, and, ideally, for explicit testing of hypotheses about how the program influences students’ character development.

Until much more information is available about the effectiveness of character education programs, it is incumbent upon those of us involved in these efforts to expend the time, energy, and resources necessary to adequately evaluate them. Once a solid body of evidence has been gathered demonstrating that a program was effective in a variety of schools (i.e., more than an “existence proof”), much less formal, comprehensive, and rigorous assessments would be required to “monitor” the program in additional settings.