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Moral education the **CHARACTER***plus* **Way®**

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Traditional approaches to character education have been viewed by many educators as an attempt to establish self control within students to habituate them to prescribed behaviour and as nothing more than a 'bits-and-pieces' approach to moral education. While this is accurate for many character education programmes, integrated multi-dimensional character education embraces both moral education and character formation. Students learn to identify and process social conventions within the core values of the school and community and have opportunities to learn practical reasoning skills in schools where character education is integrated into all aspects of the schooling process. Reported in this article are several studies, including two large-scale experimental investigations, that show integrated character education results in an improved school environment, student pro-social and moral behaviour, and reading and maths test scores. Schools become more caring communities; student discipline referrals drop significantly, particularly in areas related to bullying behaviour; and test scores in moderately achieving schools increase nearly 50%.

Introduction

A wide chasm exists between traditional character education proponents and moral development educators. Within the moral education community, character education is often viewed as the process of establishing self control within students to habituate them to prescribed behaviour. Some programmes invite this type of analysis. Some character educators focus on rewards for self-control and behavioural follow through (see Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support [PBIS], 2010) while others focus on specific 'character lessons' to teach prescribed virtues (for example, Character Counts, 2010). These approaches to character education have been rightfully described as the 'bag of virtues' approach to moral education.

The traditional approach is insufficient for effective character education implementation in schools. Corrigan (2007a, 2007b) proposes a much broader conceptualisation of character education referred to as the *integrated multi-dimensional*

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approach. This approach embraces both moral development and character formation as advocated by Nucci (1997).

We define *morality,* according to Turiel (1983), as interpersonal behaviour considered to be right or wrong by most societies. That is, morality governs behaviour separate from the binding rules that preside over most social interactions. Such moral behaviour refers to actions such as bullying, stealing, and name calling that impact on others and have their underlying foundation in justice and the welfare of others. Defined this way, morality is embedded in actions that pertain to the welfare and fair treatment of individuals.

Morality overlaps with, but is different from, social conventions. Morality is governed by universal truths accepted by most societies without the necessity of specific social rules. In contrast, social conventions are governed by the rules or norms of a particular social group or situation. For instance, whether or not children play contact games on the playground and how these games are played are matters of social convention. Rules are established for acceptable conduct in such games. However, during a contact game it is not acceptable, outside the rules of the game, for a child to deliberately hit another child to cause physical pain and injury. The rules of the game are social conventions; hitting outside the rules of the game is a moral issue. In many instances, the line between social convention and morality is blurred. For example, students engaged in discussion or debate are guided by social conventions such as speaking one at a time, taking turns and listening to what others have to say. If an individual causes psychological distress (for example, embarrassment, anger or fear) by using language that deliberately hurts another person, the behaviour is beyond social convention and becomes a moral issue.

Complicating the issue of social convention and morality in education is the wide social diversity of US public schools. Adults and children enter school settings from varied backgrounds with diverse social beliefs and understandings. This heterogeneity makes it difficult to reach consensus on core values and often leads to honest differences in the understanding of social conventions. Thus, educators must intentionally develop shared social norms and moral understanding within the school community.

Before discussing moral education as espoused in The CHARACTER*plus* Way®, we need to look at practical reasoning as applied to character education (adapted from MacIntyre, 1985 and Brinkman, 2007). The relation of moral theory to moral practice has been analysed for many years. Theories are tools to assist in solving problems and improving the world. For example, in asking a baker what it takes to produce a high quality loaf of bread, theory guides practice. Moral theory as reflected in moral conduct is assessed by viewing individual behaviour.

Character is an acquired human quality derived from learned practices that achieve intrinsic outcomes, devoid of external rewards. Individuals of character develop practical reasoning ability to analyse conflicting situations and decide on appropriate actions for the greater good. They remove their own desires from a situation so they can judge what to do when various solutions produce different, sometimes incompatible, outcomes. A recent example is that of the instructor who, although it cost him his life, used his own body to cover the classroom door to protect his students from

gunfire (*Virginia Tech Massacre*, 2010). These actions are learned within the context of social tradition.

Moral development is embedded in integrated character development. Rather than being a 'bag of virtues' designed to control student behaviour, integrated character education is a school and community process for educating the whole child in a healthy, caring environment. A school of character is a community that begins by establishing social conventions within community traditions and continues with moral development through role modelling, student, home and community interactions, student discussion and reflection, and students' active involvement in their own learning. Thus, character development is integrated into all aspects of students' learning experiences.

Integrated character education: The CHARACTER*plus* Way®

Context

The foundation for The CHARACTER*plus* Way® is CHARACTER*plus*®, a kindergarten to year 12 (ages 4–18) character education process based on the Ten Essentials developed in 1988 by St Louis, Missouri, school districts and the McDonnell-Douglas Corporation. CHARACTER*plus*® is a division of Cooperating School Districts of Greater St. Louis, Inc. CHARACTER*plus*® offers a wide variety of character education services to member districts in eastern Missouri and south-western Illinois. In addition, it offers in-depth assessment and contracted character education training services to interested schools or districts.

Assisting elementary and secondary school leaders to develop healthy environments, The CHARACTER*plus* Way® is a comprehensive whole school and community process incorporating CHARACTER*plus*® Ten Essentials, along with data-based planning and collaborative classroom practices that foster students' moral, ethical, social and cognitive development. Students in healthy schools have voices in their schooling and other aspects of their lives, are part of a caring school and classroom atmosphere, and are academically, emotionally and physically safe (Glasser, 1998; Schaps, 2003).

A powerful approach to successful moral education is the inclusion of multiple entities such as the school and the family. Using a school-plus-family approach, students' sense of belonging to a healthy school community is bolstered by deliberate facilitation of shared social conventions and moral development. The school environment—the way things are accomplished in the school and classrooms—becomes the milieu for developing practical reasoning skills that capitalise on students' shared social conventions and thus their feelings of belonging within the school community. As early as the elementary years and continuing all the way through high school, the school environment has an impact on pro-social behaviour, including how students treat each other, bullying, stealing and gang activity (Lovat & Clement, 2008).

A healthy school framework provides the foundation for students' development of practical reasoning, which results in feelings of connectedness in a caring community.

Bonding is a primary determinant of shared social conventions and moral development and leads to pro-social behaviour (Blum, 2005).

A healthy school provides a supportive, warm and accepting environment where students are valued, have a sense of safety and belonging, and teachers and students form relationships of genuine trust, respect, caring and appreciation (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2005). Healthy schools incorporate deliberate teaching and learning strategies that develop and maintain strong social conventions and moral integrity.

Process

The CHARACTER*plus* Way®, an integrated character education programme, adapts processes and content from three different sources:

(1)   Deming's Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) planning cycle (Deming, 1986);
(2)   CHARACTER*plus*® Ten Essentials (Gibbons *et al.*, 2005); and
(3)   four components of Caring School Community™ [CSC] (CSC, 2010).

The CHARACTER*plus* Way® is implemented in two phases:

(1)   Taking stock. School leadership teams assess where they are and where they want to go.
(2)   Skill development. School leadership teams learn and share skills for integrating character into all aspects of student life.

Phase 1 is the process of 'getting everyone on the same page'. Utilising available data, school leadership teams determine where they are, where they want to go, and how they are going to get there. The entire community—school staff, students, parents, and other community members—is invited to help determine the core values of the school.

Phase 2 begins the implementation process. During this phase, schools build the foundation for character education in the curriculum. First, character-related discussions are intentionally infused into teaching units in all curriculum areas. Secondly the approach is experiential—character is learned through role modelling and collaborative structures such as class meetings and cross-grade grouping. Through these experiences with interactive and collaborative structures, social conventions are established and practical reasoning is developed, which allows students to determine the moral implications of their behaviour.

The CHARACTER*plus* Way® is implemented through the following activities:

Assessment.   School health assessment by parents, students and staff, and process implementation assessment by staff are completed each January–February (see www.charactersurvey.com). Grades 3–12 may be surveyed; most schools sample grades 4, 8 and 11. Certified staff members complete staff and implementation surveys. Student discipline information is recorded November–April every year.

School reports.   During school leadership team training, school teams receive reports with their data aggregated at the school level.

Staff development.   An ongoing process with three components:

(1)   coaching,
(2)   school leadership team training institutes, and
(3)   networking.

   Coaching.   Coaches meet regularly with school leadership teams for planning and development. They attend community meetings, supply staff development within schools, and coordinate survey assessment.

   Training institutes.   School leadership teams, composed of the principal, two teachers, two parents and a counsellor or social worker, meet together for initial or advanced training during the summer. Programme implementation begins the school year following initial training. Initial training is for schools ready to begin implementation; advanced training is provided in succeeding years. The initial two-day institute focuses on team building and background knowledge. It includes the Ten Essentials, taking stock (using the school reports), and planning for implementation. The two-day advanced training focuses on taking stock using pre-test–post-test school data and delves more deeply into integration of character education strategies into classroom practices.

   Networking.   Networking provides opportunities for school leadership teams to share successes, address concerns, and study new strategies for implementation. During the first implementation year, three networking sessions are held; in subsequent years, two.

Content

Ten Essentials for developing an effective character education programme (Gibbons *et al.*, 2005) are:

 (1) Community participation,
 (2) Character education policy,
 (3) Identified and defined character traits (core values),
 (4) Integrated curriculum,
 (5) Experiential learning (hands on and collaboration),
 (6) Staff development,
 (7) Adult role modelling,
 (8) Evaluation (includes data-based decision making),
 (9) Student leadership and
(10) Sustaining the process.

The theoretical framework for The CHARACTER*plus* Way® is drawn from Glasser's (1969, 1998) fundamental needs and Deming's (1986) humanistic organisational principles, which utilise staff and student involvement to determine classroom and school-level social conventions and student acquisition of practical reasoning skills in moral development. In a healthy school environment, the basic needs identified by Glasser—survival, power, love, belonging, freedom and fun—are met for both students and staff. These needs are condensed into three constructs:

(1) *Autonomy and influence.* Students have opportunities to engage in meaningful conversation to help decide class norms, work with others, engage in meaningful relationships and enhance their learning, addressing the basic needs of power and freedom. Carl Rogers (1969) was an early champion of person-centred learning, which encompasses the construct of autonomy and influence. Cornelius-White (2007) reports in a meta-analysis that person-centred learning strongly influences teacher–student relationships, student moral development and student achievement.

(2) *Belonging.* Through the development of shared social conventions and mutual moral development, students feel connected to their school and classroom. Glasser's basic needs of love and belonging fit within this construct. Libby (2004), in a review of literature on school connectedness, concluded that this shared bonding produced a positive association between students' feelings of belonging and their behavioural and academic outcomes.

(3) *Competence.* Students feel safe in the school and classroom when there are shared social conventions and collective moral reflection. Physical and emotional safety is a basic issue for all schools. Students feel competent when they know that they are safe and they have the support of others who care, listen, understand, show respect and are honest, open and sensitive (Poplin & Weeres, 1994). Rogers (1969) saw the goal of education as facilitation of the growth of competent, fully functioning individuals in a democratic society.

The content of The CHARACTER*plus* Way® training includes both an understanding of the foundational substance of the programme and planning and implementation strategies for developing their own character education programme. This content includes the following:

Community partnership, character traits and core values.   The foundation for developing a healthy school—or school of character—is the identification of the core values that sustain community, staff, and students. The foundation for shared social conventions is community traditions. In heterogeneous communities, broad community representation is imperative to determine the moral dimensions supported through school activities and curriculum integration.

Character education policy, evaluation and sustaining the programme.   School leaders go on record in support of character development, which includes, as part of school or district policy, assessment of implementation efforts and funding for continuation.

Data-driven decision making. Data are used to plan and assess processes and outcomes. The Plan-Implement-Refine (PIR) planning model used in implementation is an adaptation of Deming's (1986) PDSA cycle for data-based planning.

Character content and skills integrated into the curriculum. A school of character can best be described as 'the way we do things here'. In the scope of moral development, it is intrinsic—doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do. The CHARACTER*plus* Way® includes four collaborative classroom practices and several cooperative teaching strategies designed to enhance students' feelings of belonging, competence and autonomy and to improve pro-social behaviour and achievement. The classroom practices for all grade levels are class meetings, cross-grade grouping, school–home activities and school-wide activities. Caring School Community™ (CSC, 2010) has developed elementary school level teacher materials for these components; secondary level activities are provided in The CHARACTER*plus* Way® training notebook available from Cooperating School Districts of Greater St Louis, Missouri. These four components can be described as follows:

Class meetings. Glasser, an early proponent of class meetings, devoted two chapters of his 1969 book, *Schools without failure*, to the process. Class meetings provide a collaborative process for student problem-solving, decision-making, planning and reflection. They provide an excellent format for meaningful student input into setting social conventions for classroom and school, a very important issue in United States schools where cultural diversity continually increases.

Cross-grade grouping. At the elementary level (K–6), cross-grade groups typically involve classes at two different grade levels working together on learning activities. At higher grade levels, cross-grade grouping often takes the form of three to five students from different grades or subject areas working together to complete a task.

School–home activities. These are school-initiated activities designed to enhance parent involvement in student learning. These activities provide high interest interactions between parent and child on topics such as family heroes or children's names.

School-wide activities. These school-based collaborative processes enhance the learning of all students, representing movement away from competitive activities with student winners and losers to activities where all students can participate and learn. For example, an art fair is usually a school activity where student artwork is judged for competitive prizes. A school-wide alternative would be to have student workstations set up where students, parents and community members collaborate on art projects.

Community/service learning. Service learning is an opportunity for students to take what they have learned into the real world. High-quality service learning provides a

positive return to the community as it provides a learning experience for students. Social conventions (such as working together for a common goal), moral development (such as understanding how to treat others fairly) and academic skills (such as writing letters) are the by-products of service learning.

Research studies

Several studies (see Table 1 and 2) provide evidence of the effectiveness of The CHARACTER*plus* Way®. Two large-scale four-year experimental studies have been completed. They are:

(1)   Missouri ShowMe CHARACTER*plus*® Implementation Study
(2)   Caring School Community™ The CHARACTER*plus* Way®

The first study was a four-year state-wide (Missouri) project involving 64 elementary and secondary schools randomly selected and randomly placed into groups stratified by school level: three treatment groups and a control group of 16 schools each.

Table 1.   Types of studies reported for Stage 1 and 2 of The CHARACTER*plus* Way® integrated character education process

Implementation stage	Study reported	Type of data collected		
		Staff, implementation and student surveys	Student office referrals	Student test results in language arts and reading
Stage 1 organisational improvement	Study 1: four-year experimental study—64 elementary and secondary schools	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Study 2: five-year evaluation study—29 elementary and secondary schools	Yes	No	No
	Study 3: two-year experimental study—47 elementary and secondary schools	Yes	Yes	No
Stage 2 advancing collaborative classroom practices	Study 4: four-year experimental study—40 elementary schools	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Study 5: two-year middle school evaluation study—four middle schools	Yes	No	No

Table 2. Summary of results for the studies reported for Stage 1 and 2 of The
CHARACTER*plus* Way® integrated character education process

Implementation stage	Study reported	Statistically significant (p ≤ .05) results		
		School environment*	Student office referrals	Student test results in language, arts and maths
Stage 1 organisational improvement	Study 1: four-year experimental study—64 elementary and secondary schools	Positive growth	Decrease	Language, arts
	Study 2: five-year evaluation study—29 elementary and secondary schools	Positive growth	Not analysed	Not analysed
	Study 3: two-year experimental study—47 elementary and secondary schools	Positive growth	Decrease	Not analysed
Stage 2 advancing collaborative classroom practices	Study 4: four-year experimental study—40 elementary schools	Positive growth	Decrease	Language, arts, maths
	Study 5: two-year middle school evaluation study—four middle schools	Positive growth	Not analysed	Not analysed

Notes: * Environment is defined as 'the way things are accomplished in the school and classrooms'—a positive school environment is where students, staff and community members work together to provide a caring school atmosphere that promotes core values in all phases of school life. Data obtained from student, staff and implementation surveys.

A sequential research design allowed one group of 16 schools to start treatment in each of the first three years. The attrition during the four years was three schools: two dropped out of the study and two combined into a single school.

The second four-year experimental study involved 40 elementary schools in a large Missouri metropolitan area. These schools were randomly selected and randomly placed into three treatment groups and a control group of 10 schools, each using the same sequential design as the previous study. The attrition during the four years was two schools: one dropped out of the study and the other school closed.

A third two-year experimental study provides ecological evidence; it was conducted in a large semi-rural K–12 school district in Alabama. In this study, the schools were randomly placed into treatment and control groups of 23 schools, each stratified by school level. Data are also drawn from a longitudinal implementation by

self-selected schools in Missouri and a study of fee-paying middle schools from a large St Louis County (Missouri) school district. For the first four studies, data were aggregated for analysis at the school level.

Three research questions guided these studies:

(1) Does implementation of integrated character education result in improved school environment, defined as *the way things are accomplished in the school and classrooms?* (Addressed in all five studies.)
(2) Does implementation of integrated character education result in improved student pro-social behaviour? (Addressed in three large-scale experimental studies.)
(3) Does implementation of integrated character education result in improved student test results in communication arts and maths? (Addressed in two large-scale experimental studies.)

The first stage of The CHARACTER*plus* Way® is organisational improvement that enhances the 'wellbeing' of the school. 'Getting everyone on the same page' provides the healthy school foundation upon which experiential integration into the curriculum through collaborative classroom practices is added (Stage 2). Three research studies focus on the first stage of implementation; two focus on the second stage.

Both stages have measurable impact on the school environment and student behaviour (see Table 2). Data are drawn from student, staff and implementation surveys (optical scan format) administered during January and February each year.

Within schools, assessment of social behaviour is straightforward when looking at the reduction of inappropriate behaviours, particularly in areas of justice and fairness to others (such as sexist/racial comments, fighting, stealing). Reduction in office referrals was used as an index for improvement in moral development and was analysed in three studies. Improvement in staff perceptions of school environment and increased student achievement also reflect the strength of the moral foundation of the school. Staff perceptions of school environment were examined in all studies. Student achievement was assessed in the two four-year large-scale studies.

Results for Stage 1: organisational improvement

CHARACTER*plus*® staff, student and implementation surveys and the student office referral form were used in the first two studies described below. Each of the surveys used a strongly disagree to strongly agree response scale and fitted on two sides of an 8.5 by 11 inch scan sheet. Survey factors and alpha reliabilities for staff and student surveys are provided in Table 3.

The implementation survey, based on the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education developed by Character Education Partnership (CEP) (CEP, 2010), consisted of 33 items identified using a Q-Sort of 100 statements categorised by 10 character education experts. To be included, a statement had to have at least 80% agreement among the experts. The Eleven Principles and the factor reliabilities for the survey are provided in Table 4.

Table 3. Factors measured on CHARACTER*plus*® staff and student surveys with alpha reliabilities

Factors	Survey	
	Staff (N)	Student (N)
Student feelings of belonging	.92 (6456)	.88 (17,568)
School caring & belonging: school expectations	.95 (6683)	.89 (18,0454)
School caring & belonging: staff–parent relations	.88 (6613)	NA
Staff culture of belonging	.87 (6530)	NA
School leadership	.88 (6551)	.78 (18,192)
Student sense of autonomy & influence	NA	.85 (18,294)
Student sense of altruism	NA	.63 (17,483)
Student feelings of competence	NA	.81 (18,013)

Table 4. CHARACTER*plus*® implementation survey factors based on the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education developed by Character Education Partnership with number of respondents and alpha reliabilities

	Principle	N	Reliability
P1	Character education promotes core ethical values as the basis of good character	6502	.88
P2	Character is comprehensively defined to include thinking, feeling, and behaviour	6497	.86
P3	Effective character education requires an intentional, proactive and comprehensive approach that promotes the core values in all phases of school life	6522	.90
P4	The school is a caring community	6525	.83
P5	To develop character, the school provides students opportunities for moral action	6468	.84
P6	Effective character education includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners and helps them to succeed	6507	.82
P7	Character education should strive to develop students' intrinsic motivation for developing good character	6524	.85
P8	The school is a learning and moral community in which all share responsibility for character education and attempt to adhere to the same core values that guide the education of students	6511	.84
P9	Staff and students demonstrate moral leadership	6469	.82
P10	The school recruits parents and community members as full partners in the character-building effort	6513	.82
P11	Evaluation of character education assesses the character of the school, the school staff's functioning as character educators, and the extent to which students manifest good character	6487	.89

Study 1: four-year experimental study

The impact of the organisational improvement stage of The CHARACTER*plus* Way® can be seen in the four-year experimental study[1] of 64 randomly selected and randomly placed elementary and secondary schools from Missouri into three stratified treatment groups and a control group of 16 schools each. Repeated measures analysis of variance—with the repeated variable being year of data collection and the fixed variables being school level and treatment group—was used. No significant interactions with school level were found.

Statistically significant outcomes with moderate to high effect sizes[2] support the following conclusions:

(1)   Treatment schools compared to control schools showed positive change in school environment as reflected in the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education. Each of the Eleven Principles demonstrated statistically significant ($p < .01$) gains compared to the control group, with a large increase the first year and incremental change in subsequent years, with effect sizes ranging from .25 to .54. Parallel results were found for each of the three treatment groups. As expected, the overall scores for the three treatment groups compared to the control were statistically significant ($F = 12.04$, $df = 9/150$, $p < .01$, ES = .42). The growth in the first treatment group compared to the control group for the total score over the four project years is illustrated in Figure 1.
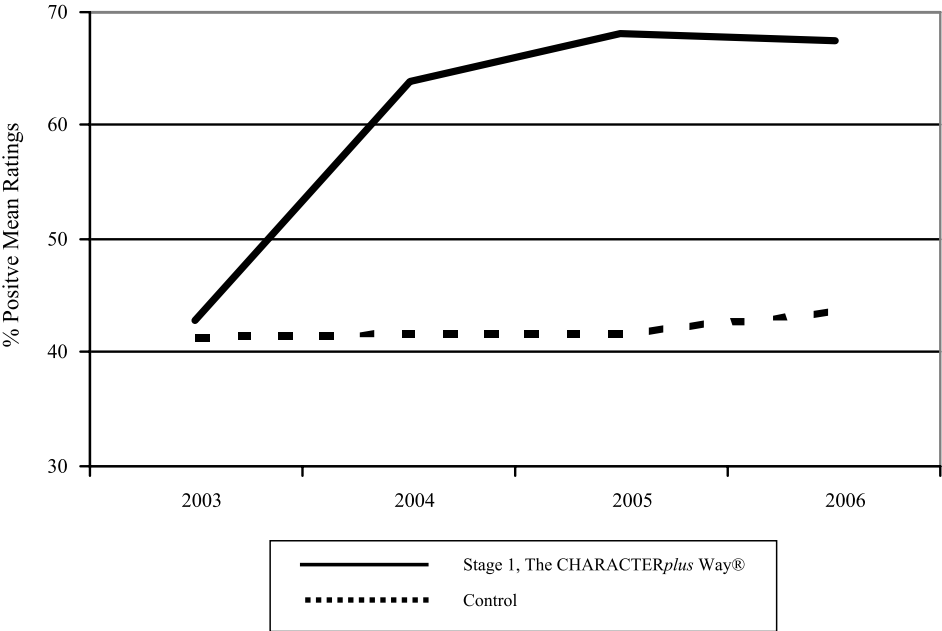

Figure 1.   Study 1 change in elementary and secondary school environments based on certified staff perceptions of the level of implementation of the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education, first treatment group vs. control group

(2) Moral development was inferred through the social behaviour of students. The CHARACTER*plus* Way® schools compared to control schools showed a significant (z = 4.11, p < .01) reduction in discipline referrals (a 41% drop for treatment schools and a 22% increase in control schools). This difference was most profound in areas associated with the following areas of justice and fairness:

   (a) Physical fighting,
   (b) Making sexist comments,
   (c) Making racial comments,
   (d) Abuse to another student,
   (e) Inappropriate sexual contact,
   (f) Vandalism to school property and
   (g) Stealing property of others.

(3) Student achievement was impacted. This showed up most in communication arts where a significantly larger (F = 5.12, df = 1/62, p < .01, ES = .08) percentage of students in The CHARACTER*plus* Way® high implementing schools scored at proficient or advanced levels (42%), compared to low implementation and control schools (36%) when pre-test scores were controlled through analysis of covariance.

Study 2: five-year evaluation study of 29 schools

The experimental study results were supported by a study of 29 self-selected schools. During five years of participation in a limited version of The CHARACTER*plus* Way®, there was statistically significant (F = 8.34, df = 1/28, p < .01, ES = .74) improvement in the environment of the schools as assessed by staff perceptions of implementation of the Eleven Principles. There was no significant school-level interaction. The growth in total score is illustrated in Figure 2.

Study 3: two-year experimental study

The third study[3] of 47 schools (including an alternative school) in a large semi-rural district randomly placed into treatment and control groups stratified by school level showed similar outcomes after just one year of implementation. CHARACTER*plus*® surveys were revised as ShowMe surveys based on factor analytic studies. The factors for the new surveys with alpha reliabilities are provided in Table 5. The ShowMe Implementation survey drew heavily on the classroom practices implementation survey designed for Study 4 below. Six factors were identified:

(1) School is a learning community (α = .86, N = 4,131),
(2) School leadership (α = .83, N = 4,075),
(3) School climate (α = .84, N = 4,040),
(4) Staff collaboration (α = .90, N = 4,090),
(5) Classroom applications (α = .86, N = 4,082) and
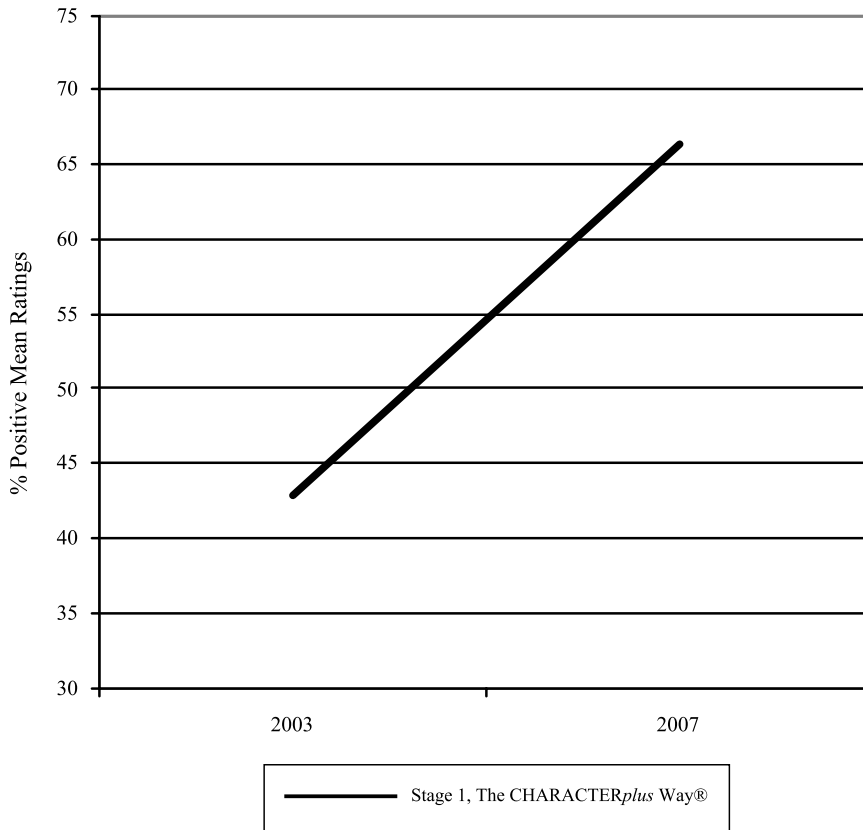(6) Ten Essentials (α = .96, N = 4,018).

Figure 2.   Study 2—change in elementary and secondary school environments based on certified staff perceptions of the level of implementation of the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education

Student discipline referrals were reported daily using a computerised district-wide system that had been in place for several years.

Repeated measures analysis of variance with the repeated variable year of data collection and the fixed variables school level and treatment group was used for analysis. No significant interactions with school level were found. Statistically significant outcomes support the following conclusions:

(1)   The CHARACTER*plus* Way® schools compared to control schools showed statistically significant (F = 69.85, df = 1/38, p < .01, ES = .65) positive change in school environment as reflected in certified staff perceptions of the implementation of the Ten Essentials, illustrated in Figure 3. In addition, staff in treatment schools compared to control schools showed significant positive change on staff perceptions of school as a learning community (F = 9.01, df = 1/38, p < .01, ES = .20) and implementation of collaborative classroom practices (F = 8.32, df = 1/38, p < .01, ES = .19).

Table 5. Factors measured on ShowMe staff and student surveys with alpha reliabilities

Factors	Survey	
	Staff (N)	Students (N)
Students' feelings of belonging	.89 (4236)	.82 (14,900)
Students' sense of school as a community	.81 (4159)	.79 (14,466)
Students' sense of autonomy & influence	.86 (4161)	.82 (14,619)
Parent & staff relations	.89 (4098)	NA
Staff culture of belonging	.71 (4121)	NA
School leadership	.86 (4417)	NA
Students' feelings of competence	NA	.75 (14,619)
Students' sense of school safety	NA	.69 (14,582)
Parent involvement at school	.92 (4192)	.77 (14,459)
Parent involvement at home	NA	.78 (14,454)

(2)   The CHARACTER*plus* Way® schools had a statistically significant (z = 28.60, p < .01) 35% reduction in discipline referrals in one year. All schools were mandated by the district to implement a Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS) process. The CHARACTER*plus* Way® schools identified core values (character traits) through staff, student and community involvement and
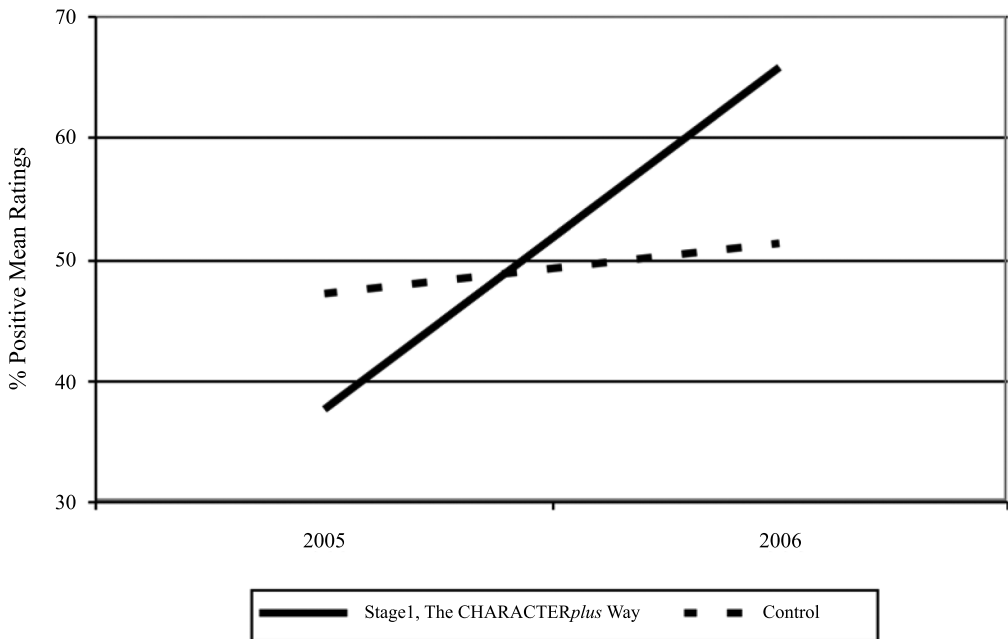

Figure 3.   Study 3—change in elementary and secondary school environments based on certified staff perceptions of the level of implementation of the Ten Essentials for Effective Character Education

integrated these values into the curriculum. The staff of PBIS schools identified positive student traits that they wanted to reinforce in students. The positive traits were posted throughout the school to remind students what behaviours were expected. Extrinsic rewards were provided by the staff to students who exhibited the desired behaviours. The primary differences between the programmes were in who defined the behaviour (school-community or staff) and student motivation (intrinsic through integration into curriculum or extrinsic through rewards for positive behaviour). The CHARACTER*plus* Way® schools were inclusive in defining traits and focused primarily on intrinsic motivation through curriculum integration. Most of these schools provided some external rewards. In PBIS schools staff defined the traits and provided external rewards for students exhibiting the desired behaviour. The result was over twice the drop in discipline referrals (35% compared to 16%) in The CHARACTER*plus* Way® schools compared to the PBIS-only comparison schools. This difference was statistically significant (t = 1.87, p < .05) based on a directional comparison.

Of note, bullying behaviour decreased by 21% at the middle school and 28% at the high school. The decrease at the middle school was accounted for by The CHARACTER*plus* Way® schools, with a 43% drop compared to an increase in middle-school bullying behaviour of 13% in comparison schools. This increase in bullying behaviour at the middle school may reflect a number of problems in the PBIS implementation, such as inappropriate traits selected by staff, inconsistencies in the reward system or ineffective rewards provided. At the high school level, both The CHARACTER*plus* Way® schools and comparison schools displayed 28% drops in bullying referrals.

Results for Stage 2: advancing collaborative classroom practices

Two studies provide the bases for this stage of The CHARACTER*plus* Way®.

Study 4: four-year experimental study

This study[4] was a large-scale externally funded research project in 40 CHARACTER*plus*® elementary schools randomly selected and randomly placed into four groups of 10 schools each: three experimental and one control. These CHARACTER*plus*® schools implemented the four components of a Caring School Community™ (CSC, 2010). They underwent the same data-based goal setting, planning process and staff development as Stage 1 schools. The additional content provided was collaborative classroom practices—class meetings, cross-grade buddies, school-wide activities, and home-side activities—drawn from the Caring School Community™ programme developed by Developmental Studies Center, Oakland, California. These practices provided the framework for student development of social conventions and strong practical reasoning skills.

Survey data collection was based on the CHARACTER*plus*® staff survey (see Table 3) and specially designed student and implementation surveys. The student survey was a modification of the Child Development Project student survey from the Developmental Studies Center. The survey was a four-page, optical-scan booklet that required about 45 minutes to administer. The factors in the survey were:

(1)   Sense of classroom as a community (α = .76, N = 21,354),
(2)   Sense of classroom autonomy and influence (α = .75, N = 20,854),
(3)   Self report altruistic behaviour (α = .84, N = 20,936),
(4)   Sense of well being at school (α = .92, N = 21,629),
(5)   Trust and respect for teachers (α = .79, N = 21,560),
(6)   Concern for others (α = .72, N = 21,246),
(7)   Liking for school (α = .76, N = 21,076),
(8)   Commitment to democratic values (α = .84, N = 22,245) and
(9)   Parent involvement (α = .64, N = 21,536).

The implementation survey administered to certified staff was developed specifically for this study. It included the following eight factors: school as a learning community (α = .76, N = 5391), school leadership (α = .78, N = 5277), resources (α = .76, N = 5380), data utilisation (α = .82, N = 5262), school climate (α = .81, N = 5391), staff collaboration (α = .87, N = 5305), collaborative classroom practices (α = .91, N = 5245) and student pro-social behaviour (α = .81, N = 5304).

Statistically significant outcomes support the following conclusions:

(1)   Stage 2, The CHARACTER*plus* Way® schools scored higher than control schools on school environment as reflected in certified staff perceptions of staff collaboration (F = 3.70, df = 3/35, p < .05, ES = .24), integration of collaborative classroom practices (F = 7.50, df = 3/35, p < .01, ES = .39), and student pro-social behaviour (F = 3.51, df = 3/35, p < .05, ES = .23). The growth curves were similar for all three treatment groups for each of these factors. The changes for staff collaboration comparing the first treatment group with the control are illustrated in Figure 4. The moderately high pre-test scores shown in Figure 4 reflected the fact that these schools were CHARACTER*plus*® schools prior to the beginning of this study.
(2)   Students in treatment schools felt that they were more involved and more often had influence in their own schooling (autonomy and influence, F = 2.50, df = 3/35, p < .05 using a directional analysis, ES = .18) compared to students in control schools during the four-year study.
(3)   Treatment schools compared to control schools showed a significant (z = 2.69, p < .01, ES = .11) reduction in discipline referrals (24% decrease for treatment schools; 42% increase for control schools). This difference was most profound in moral matters associated with justice and fairness where students' actions directly impacted on others and secondarily impacted on areas defined by social conventions (see Table 6).
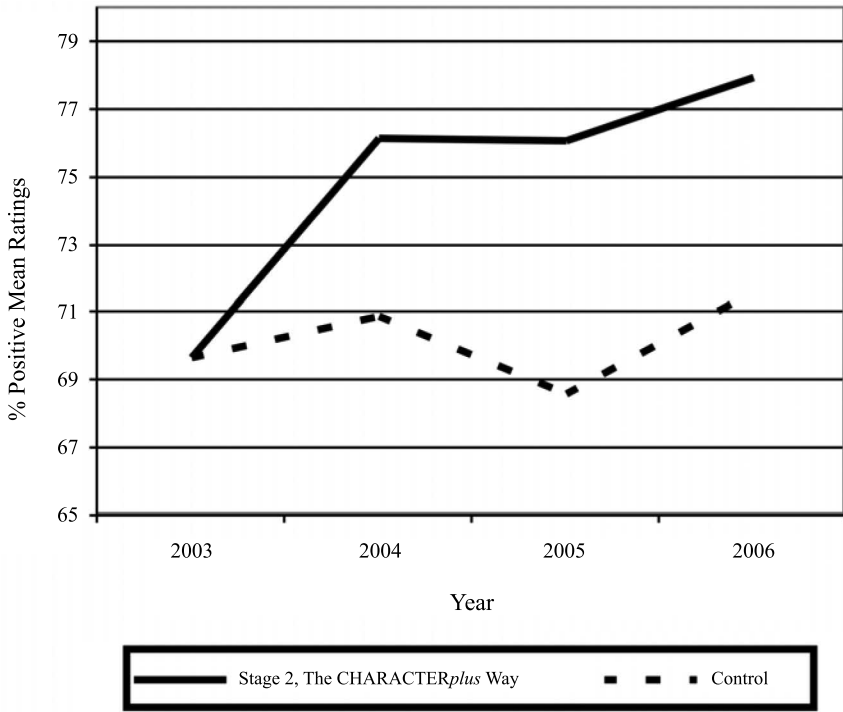
Figure 4.   Study 4 changes in school environment based on certified staff perceptions of the levels of staff collaboration

Table 6.   Study 4. Student discipline referral categories with significant decreases showing improved moral (justice and fairness) behaviour and social conventions

Morality, justice and fairness	Social conventions
a. Acts against persons	a. Failure to comply
b. Abuse to another student	b. Copied homework
c. Physical fighting	c. Refused to follow directions
d. Vandalism to school property	d. Created class disturbance
e. Vandalism to others' property	

(4)   There was improvement in student achievement in treatment schools. On the 2002 pre-test, about one third of the students in each treatment group and control group scored at the proficient or advanced levels in both communication arts and maths. On the 2006 post-test, there were significant differences between the achievement levels for treatment schools and control schools controlling pre-test scores using covariance. In communication arts, 51% of treatment students were classified as proficient or advanced, compared to 38% of the control students ($F = 5.83$, df $= 1/35$, $p < .01$, ES $= .14$); for maths, the difference was 54% to 35% ($F = 4.89$, df $= 1/35$, $p < .01$, ES $= .12$)

Study 5: two-year middle-school evaluation study

This analysis is of 2006 and 2007 survey data of students and staff from four fee-paying Stage 2, The CHARACTER*plus* Way® middle schools. Significant positive change was found in both student and staff assessments of the school environment.

(1)   Using MANOVA with df = 1/296, middle-school staff demonstrated significant (p <.01) positive growth on the following 10 factors assessing school environment:

   (a) School as a learning community (F = 10.65);
   (b) Leadership support (F = 24.86);
   (c) School climate (F = 16.24);
   (d) Staff collaboration (F = 8.44);
   (e) CHARACTER*plus*® Ten Essentials (F = 17.75);
   (f) Collaborative classroom practices and student pro-social behaviour (F = 11.04);
   (g) Students' sense of the school as a community (F = 9.81);
   (h) Parent and staff relations (F = 6.40);
   (i) Staff sense of belonging (F = 8.21); and
   (j) School leadership (F = 15.92).

(2)   Using MANOVA with df = 1/2713, middle-school students demonstrated significant (p < .01) positive change on six of the seven factors assessed. These factors were:

   (a) Students' sense of belonging (F = 9.27);
   (b) Students' sense of community (F = 4.32);
   (c) Students' sense of autonomy and influence (F = 16.12);
   (d) Students' feelings of competence (F = 38.88);
   (e) Students' sense of school safety (F = 7.92); and
   (f) Students' sense of parents' involvement at home (F = 6.91).

Discussion

Moral development is based on relationships with others (for example, family members, adults in the community and peers). It includes an evolving understanding of the impact of one's behaviour on others. Schools are fundamentally involved in the moral development of children whether by intent or by default. The sheer building of positive relationships among adults and children engages with aspects of moral development. Through these relationships students learn social conventions that guide acceptable behaviour and develop practical reasoning skills that provide the underpinning of their moral behaviour. This should be an intentional deliberate process based on positive healthy relationships. Within this context, moral education is a developmental process embedded in integrated character education.

The CHARACTER*plus* Way®, with over two decades of development, is an integrated, whole-school and community approach to educating the total child. The Ten Essentials provide the foundation for healthy school development. Core values are identified and integrated into all aspects of the school. Assessment and monitoring are provided through student, staff, and parent surveys and the PIR planning process. Collaborative classroom practices provide the experiential integration of character into the curriculum that increases student understanding of social conventions and learning of practical reasoning skills.

At all grade levels, within the first few weeks of school, prescribed class meetings are facilitated by school staff to build relationships of trust and fidelity as students establish social conventions of how they want their classroom and school to be. All students participate in these discussions. The first few class meetings focus on concrete issues associated with social conventions (such as how to treat one another, one person speaks at a time, all students share in discussion). As practical reasoning skills develop, students engage in more abstract conversations about issues relating to justice and fairness such as helping others. In addition, class meetings are used for reflection to provide opportunities to spotlight moral, social and academic learning.

The data from these five experimental and pre-experimental studies support an integrated character education process that maximises school health. The studies provide evidence of positive change in school environment. In the three studies where student office referrals were tracked, significant deceases in behavioural problems were documented. Most of these changes were in areas of justice and fairness (moral actions) while other changes reflected social conventions. Academic achievement improved, particularly when collaborative classroom practices were implemented.

These studies provide a solid foundation for the potential benefits of integrated K–12 character education. At this point there is no single experimental study that examines all elements of The CHARACTER*plus* Way® at all grades over a multi-year period. The four-year study focusing on collaborative classroom practices in CHARACTER*plus*® schools is elementary (K–5) only. In the three studies involving elementary and secondary schools, no statistically significant interactions were found between variables analysed and school level, indicating that results could be generalised for all school levels. Further research is needed to determine if that is also the case for academic achievement when collaborative classroom practices are implemented at all grades over a multiple-year period.

Notes

1. Project funded by USA Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, Fund for the Improvement of Education, Partnerships in Character Education Program, Grant R215V020032. All statements contained in this report are strictly those of the authors and do not represent, in any way, the official view or policy of the USA Department of Education.
2. Effect size (ES) is the name given to the index that measures the magnitude of a treatment effect. Small ES ≤ .06; .06 < Medium ES < .14; Large ES ≥ .14. See http://web.uccs.edu/lbecker/Psy590/es.htm (October 11, 2006).

3. Project funded by USA Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, Fund for the Improvement of Education, Partnerships in Character Education Program, Grant Q215S040073. All statements contained in this report are strictly those of the authors and do not represent, in any way, the official view or policy of the USA Department of Education.
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