The Application of a Strength-Based Approach of Students' Behaviours to the Development of a Character Education Curriculum for Elementary and Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT: Character education programs have gained increasing interest in the past decade and are designed to produce students who are thoughtful, ethical, morally responsible, community-oriented, and self-disciplined. However, curriculums to develop character education programs have not always been readily embraced by either educators or students. Character is diffuse, abstract, and global and is not easily operationalized into lesson plans. Personal strengths of students, on the other hand, are important aspects of character that have the added advantage of being concrete, specific, and experiential. In this paper, it is argued that by developing a curriculum of character education that is based upon students' strengths in multiple domains of functioning, it is possible to achieve the goals of character education.

RESUME: Ces dix dernières années, les programmes de formation du caractère ont suscité un vif intérêt. Ils sont conçus pour façonner des étudiants réfléchis, éthiques, responsables moralement, soucieux de la collectivité et auto-disciplinés. Il est à noter cependant qu'éducateurs ou étudiants n'ont pas toujours voulu suivre les cursus afin de construire les programmes de formation du caractère. Le caractère étant diffus, abstrait et général, il n'est pas facile d'en cerner ses fonctions afin de les rationaliser dans des leçons. D'un autre côté, la force personnelle des étudiants représente un aspect important du caractère. Elle a le mérite d'être

Journal of Educational Thought
Vol. 45, No. 2, 2011, 127-144.

concrète, explicite et empirique. Dans cet article, la possibilité d'atteindre les objectifs de formation de caractère en élaborant un cursus de formation du caractère dans moult domaines d'activités avec la force personnelle des étudiants comme outil de base, est contestée.

In the past decade, the modern education system has undergone significant change to address current social issues, expanding beyond the traditional focus on strictly academic learning to take a more holistic approach to education (Short & Talley, 1997). In addressing these social issues relevant to children and youth, primary and secondary schools have been "inundated" with specialized prevention programs that cover a wide range of topics, including AIDS, alcohol, careers, conflict resolution, morals, multiculturalism, and violence, amongst many others (Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). Character education programs are a significant and growing part of this movement, which have been implemented across the United States in response to a perceived moral decline in America (Romanowski, 2003). In fact, a wide variety of character education programs are currently being implemented across North America. Since 1995, the U.S. Department of Education has awarded at least 97 grants to state and local education agencies for the development and implementation of character education programs through the Partnerships in Character Education Program (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). In addition, the Ontario Ministry of Education has recently implemented the Character Development Initiative, which requires all publicly funded school boards in the province to put into action a character education program within the 2007-2008 school year (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). The number of states and provinces that have sought out character education programs clearly indicates that these are a desirable and much needed component in our educational system.

Simply put, character education refers to programs designed to promote positive character development in students. These programs are generally meant to identify and develop positive character traits in students, fostering a "socio-moral competency," to produce children and youth who demonstrate these traits in their thoughts and actions (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Park, 2004). The expectation is that students who participate in a character education program would then graduate as morally responsible and community-oriented adults. A broader

definition of character education is sometimes utilized which may include any programs that may indirectly instill moral virtues or good character in students, such as social and emotional learning, volunteerism, prevention-oriented, or service learning programs (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Park, 2004). However, the difference between character education, by the strictest of definitions, and these other types of programs is the direct focus on the development of specific desirable character traits in students as opposed to a narrower outcome focus, such as developing a caring school environment, social or problem-solving skill development, or the prevention of specific health problems or behaviours. This is an important distinction when one considers the underlying framework which will guide the construction and subsequent evaluation of a character education curriculum. Thus, in this paper the term *character education* will be used to describe programs that target specific trait development.

There are many character education programs in existence, with varying degrees of complexity, components, and methods of implementation. Despite these differences, there appears to be a well defined understanding of what is necessary for an effective character education program. At a systemic level, it is important that there is active involvement and support for the program that includes not only the individual classroom or school, but also parents and the broader community (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Greenberg, Weissberg, O'Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik, & Elias, 2003; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). In addition, the delivery of character education by teachers (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Romanowski, 2003) and the outcomes of a given program should be monitored (Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). With respect to the curriculum itself, practice in applying interpersonal, emotional, and moral behaviours or skills should be a component (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). Opportunities for peer discussions should also be provided to develop a capacity for moral reasoning and problem solving (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Romanowski, 2003; Steen, Kachorek, & Peterson, 2003). In addition, good character should be evident in adult role models (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Steen et al., 2003; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). Furthermore, the specific curriculum should be developmentally or age appropriate for the students receiving it (Revell, 2002; Romanowski, 2003).

There is also variation in the number and selection of traits targeted in different character education programs. However, these differences are consistent with the idea that desirable character traits may vary

somewhat between communities and cultures (Bock, 2006; Bulach, 2002; Park, 2004). The specific traits targeted may vary from program to program, but tend to include variants of honesty, responsibility, respect, caring, citizenship, fairness, empathy, courage, initiative, perseverance, integrity, and optimism (Bulach, 2002; Davis, 2003; Park, 2004; Steen et al., 2003). One set of traits that has been used to form the basis of a character education program is referred to as the six pillars of character, which includes: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Character Counts!, 2007). Though it is advisable for any school community interested in implementing a character education program to closely examine which traits are a best fit, it is likely that some close variation of the six pillars would be included as these are fairly fundamental traits.

Once the set of desired character traits have been chosen for a character education curriculum to target, there remains a large and rather fundamental problem for character education. That is, character itself, as an abstract concept, cannot be measured directly, but instead must be measured indirectly through an individual's behaviours over a period of time (Bulach, 2002; Davis, 2003; Steen et al., 2003). Indeed, one character education program was evaluated using a behaviour checklist based upon desirable and undesirable behaviours that were related directly to desired character traits, with the findings that children who participated in the character education program achieved more positive scores (Bulach, 2002). Another approach has suggested that the assessment of character strengths, as reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, may be a viable solution to this problem that maintains the positive focus of character education (Park, 2004; Steen et al., 2003). Essentially a strength-based approach "unpacks character" by breaking the abstract and general character traits into more specific and measurable components, referred to as strengths (Steen et al., 2003). Thus, a consideration of strengths may be critical to establishing the validity and success of a character education program.

The primary goal of this paper is to provide an argument for the considerable merit of a strength-based approach in teaching a character education curriculum to students of all ages. A strength-based approach is intrinsically consistent with the fundamental goal of character education, which is to identify positive qualities in students and then to nurture these qualities so that they may flourish. The particular strength-based approach described in this paper reflects the

competencies and characteristics that students have either already acquired in meeting the demands of daily living or those which have been emphasized as being valued assets for any student to have. The focus on students' strengths related to day-to-day experiences should make the topics of a character education curriculum both interesting and practical for students and teachers alike. This is critical because a common student criticism of character education is a lack of relevance to real life in lessons (Romanowski, 2003).

The strengths described in this approach are identified as specific behaviours of students that are organized around ten topics, or domains of functioning, which could serve as a concrete and useful way for teachers to arrange their lesson material for teaching the pillars of character education to students. The content of each topic can be tailored into lessons appropriate for the developmental level of students in different grades, which, as noted above, is important as different behaviours, issues, and teaching strategies may be more relevant at different grade levels. As will be further discussed in this paper, the identified behaviours and topics of this strength-based approach have a direct relationship to one or more of the pillars of character education. Finally, in this character education curriculum with a focus on strength-based programming, character education and student strengths become intrinsically linked together and provide a medium both for developing the strengths of students and for helping students to embrace and to internalize the valued pillars of character education.

Essential Themes in Strength-Based Approaches

Originally proposed by Wieck, Rapp, Sullivan and Kisthardt (1989) within social work, the term *strengths perspective* or *strength-based approach* has since been incorporated into many disciplines as a framework for working with children and adolescents (Jimerson, Sharkey, Nyborg, & Furlong, 2004). The strength-based approach emphasizes positive attributes rather than focusing on what is wrong with children and adolescents. Strength-based perspectives seek either to identify and amplify existing strengths or to provide opportunities to develop new strengths (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Within the field of psychology, Epstein and Sharma (1998) defined strength in children and adolescents as those:

> Emotional and behavioural skills, competencies and characteristics that create a sense of personal accomplishment; contribute to satisfying relationships with family members, peers and adults;

> enhance one's ability to deal with adversity and stress; and promote one's personal, social and academic development. (p. 3)

In an attempt to expand on this notion of strength and in view of the fact that almost anything could be considered a strength (Saleebey, 2006), another definition of strength is as a set of personal competencies and characteristics of the child or adolescent that were developed and embedded in culture and valued both by the individual and by society (Rawana, Brownlee, & Hewitt, 2004). This definition presumes that strengths can develop from the everyday life experiences of students. This latter point easily allows for discussions to occur in the classroom whereby identified strengths of students can be related to their behaviours and can also be tied into lessons on character development. This method of teaching a character education curriculum also allows for an emphasis to be placed on attributes that are valued both by the student and by society and thus reflects the virtues of good character.

Strength-based approaches are generally seen as being optimistic and holistic in nature, and are alternative ways of working with children that are in contrast to the traditional deficit-based approaches to addressing behavioural issues at school. This former approach is seen as more empowering, hopeful, and solution-focused (Corcoran, 1998). A strength-based approach has been embraced and applied within the education setting especially to those areas that involve students with behavioural issues. Hewitt (2005), for example, has emphasized the effectiveness of strength-based programs in the classroom by stating that,

> Although in some ways it is helpful to know what the child cannot do and what he does not like, focusing on it does little to solve the problem. We have a choice. We can stay stuck in the problem or we can look for the solution. Talking about what the child cannot do or does not like brings us no closer to finding out what he can do or what he does like. Nothing is ever fixed by looking at it and bemoaning the fact that it is broken or worthless. (Hewitt, 2005, p. 5)

Strength based approaches allow educators and family members to view the full potential of the child, and recognize the areas that either contain strengths or could use further development, as well as the areas in which the child may more easily attain success (Pye, 2006). This knowledge allows adults to set more appropriate expectations for the child (Walrath, Mandell, Holden & Santiago, 2004) that may include working on elements of character that require further development by

drawing on existing areas of strengths. Thus, an understanding of the strengths present in a class may help teachers to effectively implement a character education curriculum.

Framework for a Strength-Based Approach to Character Education

In the strength-based approach described in this paper, strengths are compartmentalized into domains, which are areas of functioning that the student engages in on a regular basis. A relatively simple way to describe these domains is to separate them into two major categories: *Contextual Domains*, which represent a focus on the context of the student's interaction with others, and *Personal Developmental Domains*, which represent the more individualized functioning of the child. The Contextual Domains include: School, Peers, Family/Home, Employment, and Community. The Personal Developmental Domains include: Personality, Personal and Physical Care, Spiritual and Cultural, Leisure and Recreation, and Current and Future Goals. Both the Contextual and Personal Developmental Domains naturally reflect behavioural responses to the day-to-day demands of daily living which become increasingly more complex over the course of a child or adolescent's development. Some contextual demands, such as those present in school and family functioning, begin early in a student's life while others are encountered as the student gets older, such as employment or community involvement. Similarly, within the personal developmental domains, we have also included domains that may be more pertinent to students in the early grades, such as personal and physical care and leisure or recreation, followed by domains that become more relevant as the student gets older, such as spiritual and cultural development and current and future goals. The organization of behavioural information into domains of functioning provides a framework that can be used to facilitate the development of character education lessons.

Table 1. Domains of Strength

Contextual Domains	Personal Developmental Domains
Peers	Personality
Family/Home	Personal and Physical Care
School	Spiritual and Cultural
Employment	Leisure and Recreation
Community	Current and Future Goals

There are specific strength behaviours that can be identified in each of these domains of functioning, which can be used to make character education lessons concrete and relevant to students. Below is an example of the School Domain and the identified strength behaviours that have been adapted from the Strength Assessment Inventory (SAI; Rawana, Brownlee, & Hewitt, 2006). The SAI is a behaviour checklist comprised of the ten Domains of Strength described above. There are 116 items on the SAI, which are rated by adults familiar with the child on a four-point likert style scale of "not at all," "sometimes," "often," and "very often," or as "does not apply." Each item reflects a specific positive behaviour, or strength, of the child. We have attempted to show how these behaviours could be associated with one or more of the six pillars of character education. This illustrates how strengths and character education can be directly connected both in a curriculum and, more importantly, in the minds of students.

Table 2. Strength in School Functioning

Strength behaviours	Pillars of character education
Studies for tests	Trustworthiness, Responsibility
Uses note-taking in school (e.g., copying from the board, writing what the teacher is saying)	Responsibility
Uses listening skills in school	Responsibility, Respect for others
Pays attention in class	Responsibility, Respect for others
Works independently in the classroom when appropriate	Trustworthiness, Responsibility
Completes homework assignments	Trustworthiness, Responsibility
Achieves at or above grade level in reading	Responsibility, Citizenship
Completes work on time in the classroom	Trustworthiness, Responsibility, Citizenship

Has a positive relationship with school staff	Caring, Respect for others, Citizenship
Gets involved in school sports (e.g., tries out for teams, supports teams)	Responsibility, Caring, Respect for others, Fairness, Citizenship
Gets involved in school activities	Responsibility, Respect for others, Citizenship
Seems to enjoy school	Responsibility, Caring, Citizenship
Attends classes	Trustworthiness, Responsibility, Respect for others, Citizenship
Arrives on time for classes	Trustworthiness, Responsibility, Respect for others, Citizenship

For example, the strength inherent in "studies for tests." as one of the behaviours within the School Domain, reflects the qualities required for trustworthiness or responsibility. A student who applies him or herself to the task of studying must also be a student who is showing responsibility in this area and is ultimately trustworthy in that he or she can be relied upon to engage in this behaviour when necessary. Similarly, another behaviour in the School Domain, "has a positive relationship with school staff," reflects that the school staff member is valued as an individual and in this sense the student must also care about the relationship with the staff member and be respectful of him or her. This is the essence of good citizenship where students and teachers are complimentary both in their societal roles and in the sense of belonging to a common institution such as a school. Thus, there is clearly a connection between the concrete behaviours described with a strengths domain and the more abstract character traits that character education seeks to instil in students.

While a strengths based approach is consistent with the philosophy of education the intent is to accomplish the educational objectives set by a school board or system by implementing a positive and empowering means of achieving new behaviours that is specific, concrete, practical, and meaningful to the student. The intention here is not to judge the ethical value of what the student is doing so the issue of morality is not central to the intent of this approach.

Important Components of a Character Education Curriculum Based on Strengths

There are several notable features and benefits to the aforementioned strengths-based framework that are relevant to the development of a character education curriculum. Such a curriculum could be developed so that lessons or units are based on topics of interest related to the ten domains of strength listed above. Although there should be some degree of consistency in the topics being taught throughout the school (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004), teachers may be creative in how they teach these topics to their students using a variety of activities or discussion suitable to the developmental level, behaviours, and interests of the class. One critical emphasis of these activities and discussions should be on the connection between the targeted character traits and the strengths that students generally already show in day-to-day activities. Doing so would make these abstract character traits concrete and relevant to the students. Students are known to focus on their own experiences when trying to understand character education, but this can impede their openness to, and thus the effectiveness of, the program if the fit between these experiences and the values being taught is not apparent (Revell, 2002). Identifying a set of concrete strength behaviours and relating these behaviours to the valued character traits, provides an opportunity to demonstrate the relevance and congruence between the two. Students could be asked to discuss and identify the links between their specific strengths and particular qualities of character education. Within this curriculum, strengths could also be reflected upon in understanding or interpreting narratives, which have been shown to be a useful method for teaching character education to younger students (Bailey, Tettegah, & Bradley, 2006; Revell, 2002). For older students, who are generally more capable and interested in looking at complex and broader issues (Revell, 2002; Romanowski, 2003), the strengths of historical or public figures could be considered as could the relevance and demonstration of strengths in current events or the media as a method of understanding character. Thus, strengths can be used both to direct attention back to concrete student behaviour and can be expanded to explore character in other individuals or situations. In order to foster the important connections within the school and between the school, home, and community that are important to program effectiveness (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004), the

overall curriculum should be presented in a standardized order within a school. However, the lessons should also be flexible enough to address current concerns with the class or the greater community. This addresses another critical component of program effectiveness, which is tying character education back to the real-life behaviours of the students (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Greenberg et al., 2003; Steen et al., 2003; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004).

The strength-based approach to character education also presents the opportunity for addressing how students may expand or build upon available strengths in order to achieve desired goals. This introduces the problem solving and moral reasoning component that is necessary for effective character education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Steen et al., 2003), while continuing to relate the lessons to concrete, relevant, and positive student behaviours. One strategy that could be used in setting goals or addressing a specific moral dilemma is the exploration of existing strengths and how they could be applied to reach that goal or resolve the dilemma. The underlying purpose of this strategy is to help the student develop an appreciation for the idea that strengths are assets which can be used or have been used in day-to-day interactions, and which can further be used in future problem solving.

Furthermore, building on the students' strengths that are already evident in these domains will allow for behavioural issues to be addressed in the classroom. Thus, it also provides the opportunity for future practice of character-congruent behaviours, a necessary component of character education programs (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). In addressing any problematic behaviours, teachers could consider and discuss with the class which strengths have the most potential for resolving the specific concerns observed in the classroom and then encourage the students to consider using those strength behaviours to resolve their difficulties. If a student is behaving in a way that is inconsistent with his or her strengths this inconsistency can be brought to the attention of the student and also provide the student with a sense that through the use of strengths the student has other options for behaving more appropriately. This approach can also be implemented with groups of students to encourage them to be more focused on seeing the relationship between strengths and the things that they have control over in terms of their school behaviours.

By approaching behavioural difficulties in these ways, the teacher is using the problem solving skills described above with the additional

benefit of promoting the expression of strengths to address external difficulties. Students are then developing a repertoire of character-congruent behaviour in their daily lives. This approach is also consistent with the notion of a student taking responsibility for his or her own behaviour, as the student is highly involved in the problem solving process and subsequent positive behavioural choices. Furthermore, a focus on building strengths and increasing positive development is thought to also produce a drop in negative behaviours, with strengths serving as a buffer (Park, 2004; Steen et al., 2003). Thus, implementing a strength-based approach to character education can both directly and indirectly improve student behaviour while promoting an internalization of values, the underlying fundamental goal of all character education programs.

Goals of a Character Education Curriculum Based on Strengths

One goal of a strength-based character education curriculum is to bring character traits to a concrete level, so as to facilitate their internalization, while maintaining a positive focus. As Park (2004) commented, positive institutions will help instill positive traits in students, which will in turn lead to positive life experiences. A focus on character strengths in the school is inherently an environment that will foster positive development in students (Park, 2004; Steen et al., 2003). A character education curriculum based on strengths allows for students to actively engage with both strengths that they already possess and those that they should be encouraged to cultivate. In this manner, teaching about skill acquisition and character development can maintain a positive focus and refrain from pointing out particular deficits in students. Since strengths are demonstrated as particular behaviours that are easily recognized and understood, they can readily be absorbed into the minds of students as a reflection of abilities relevant to day-to-day life experiences. Moreover, teaching the relationships between these strengths behaviours and the more abstract pillars of character education could facilitate the students' internalization of these pillars as both important behavioural goals and desirable character traits.

A second goal of strength-based character education is to provide a framework that supports strengths and character development both in the school and in the broader community. This approach to character

education brings together both new and well-understood information, consolidating it into a framework that sets the stage for learning and dialogue about different strengths and character traits. An examination of community values and resources can facilitate further conversations about what elements in a community promote strengths in students and what elements in a community discourage their expression. Taking this into consideration is important as the values students learn out of the school context can significantly affect their receptivity to and thus the effectiveness of character education programs (Revell, 2002). Developing an understanding of the greater community context becomes a way of building awareness amongst students and staff in a particular school. It is also information that should be brought to the attention of family members and authorities within the community to produce dialogue between school personnel and parents about helpful community resources for consistency and widespread support of character development. As noted above, this global dialogue and support is vital to the success of character education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). The strength-based framework provides a concrete focus to improve this communication.

A third goal of this character education curriculum is to provide a method for the empirical evaluation of the program's success. In this approach to teaching character education, particular strengths in a domain of functioning can be evaluated using a strengths inventory to compare the frequency of their occurrence by the students in the classroom both before and after curriculum units on that domain or at various points throughout a student's educational career. Indeed, this concept of evaluating character strengths has prompted the creation of the Values in Action Classification system to broadly measure positive characteristics in adults and adolescents (Steen et al., 2003). However, the inventory used in evaluating a character education program should likely be brief, child-oriented, and specific to the given curriculum. This idea of evaluation also fits well into the overall requirement by educators that any curriculum program should have a built in evaluation procedure and is critical to ensure that the program is an efficient use of resources. As a major criticism of character education in general is that one cannot claim efficacy unless there is a way to assess character development (Davis, 2003), this empirical evidence is critical. It also allows for the opportunity to assess the efficacy of the character education program in instilling values that will extend and endure beyond the student's classroom experience.

Conclusion

The fundamental goal of character education is to help students adopt a set of character traits or values, which are internalized and reflected in their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours as their character develops. The six pillars of character education are a set of important positive characteristics that are inherently holistic and developmental in nature. They represent values that, when internalized, eventually become an integral part of an individual's personality, influencing all aspects of a person's thought, emotions, and behaviours. In other words, an individual's behaviour is always related to some aspect of their character. While these are valued outcomes, educators do recognize that they do not easily develop in all children, thus forming the need for character education. However, character is a diffuse, abstract, and global concept which may be difficult for children to conceptualize and relate to. In contrast, the concept of personal strengths, as represented by positive behaviours, is concrete and specific and can be linked to a child's day-to-day functioning.

In our opinion, character is an elusive concept that may not be readily appreciated by younger students. It is our belief that, by translating this concept into behaviours which are actual strengths of the child, it would be easier for the child to understand and experience character as real and exciting and as something that he or she could embrace. A strength-based approach to the teaching of character education helps the student to achieve this sense of reality by helping them to recognize that their existing behaviours reflect strengths in many areas and that, therefore, this must be an important part of their sense of self and their emerging character development. A strength-based approach can also provide the foundation for the more abstract and complex lessons relevant to older students. Working with student strengths and having conversations with students about these strengths provides a forum for open discussion about the applications of strengths, and thus character, in students' day-to-day life. One of the advantages of this approach is that it creates a more positive environment within the classroom and the school.

Character education ultimately reflects an interaction between personal development and social functioning. If a social situation is artificially imposed, the relevance to the individual's personal life and development may be lost. The strength-based approach discussed in this paper avoids this imposition by focusing on the real life experiences and

behaviours of students. An overall developmental perspective is applicable across different grades because it reflects the child's priorities as they unfold. Strength-based approaches are a good way of interfacing personal development and character development because they mesh with the personal experiences of the student and bring the discussion to a level of concreteness that students can relate to. They also allow for the teacher to bring the topic back for conversation based on the subsequent real-life experiences of the students, such as how they reflected trustworthiness on the playground at recess, to support ongoing character development.

In order to properly and effectively implement a strength-based character education curriculum, the full support of teachers, administrators, and the community are required. Ultimately, this curriculum would benefit the students by developing an understanding of what it truly means to have a strong character and by working to instill the desired character traits. Students would enter a post-secondary school or work setting with amore highly developed sense of morality and principles, which could only better society. Programs such as these are invaluable because they teach skills that can be used throughout life and not just in the classroom. Why not equip our children with the tools they will need for a full, happy, and successful life?

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