

Character Education: A Missing Link to Students Uncivil Behaviour

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Abstract. The central theme of this paper discusses the role of character education on students' behaviour. It first explores the background of character education and the reason to give it the needed attention in recent times. Though character education has been taught for decades, character and moral problems still persist in alarming proportions in our schools and the larger society. Lots of people agree that we need to reinforce character education to improve students' moral as well as academic life. This study provides a theoretical framework using the psychology of moral development. Again, the study looks at the nature of character education in the global sense and how the concept was pursued during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods in Ghana. With the spate of indiscipline in our schools and societies how could character education be explored to stem the canker.

The study recommends among others that character education should be taught based on harmonious religious, cultural and societal trajectories in our schools and the larger society. Furthermore, policy makers in education should endeavour to implement in schools character education through the collective efforts of all social institutions such as the home, religious bodies and the mass media be integrated as an approach to resolve moral dilemmas and indisciplinary behaviours confronting students and the society.

Keywords: Character education, Policy makers, Moral education, Unhealthy behaviour and Traditional African Education

Introduction

School authorities, parents and other stakeholders in education seek for reasons the increase in violence and all sorts of inappropriate behaviours exhibited by students. Teenage substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, gang activity and bullying behaviour (Bulach, 2000), are increasing, yet schools often have to focus on other important things including drop-out prevention, academic progress, examination scores and sports. In an article titled "Bullies on the rise" published in the Atlanta Journal and Consortium, 29, August, 1999, it was reported that one of the most insidious and work place violence is on the rise globally. This clearly indicates that we need to do something about this in our society and school in particular and to have students practice behaviours that are more civil and moral in nature than reported. If students practice behaviours associated with forgiveness, kindness, sympathy and loving, those unhealthy behaviours will minimize to ensure campuses free of violence, bullying and other inappropriate behaviours. UNESCO (2019) indicates in its report that globally, almost 1 to 3 students have been bullied in any other form by their peers at school. Many people attribute this phenomenon of dangerous behaviours in school to breakdown of the family and the lack of effective character training in our schools and homes. With the increasing spate of students' agitations and rioting without seeking the necessary protocols in addressing their grievances, it is quite expedient to find out the nature and extent of character education in our schools and the impact of this education on behaviour.

It is a gainsay that stakeholders in education are calling for a renewed commitment towards character education in Ghana. With many students entering school without the basic

values that have built our country, we need to make sure our children are on the path to respect, honesty and civic virtue. This is because there has been a depressing report of students' cheating in exams, stealing, lacking self-discipline and commitment towards school work (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999). Prior to various policies in Ghana's education such as no caning by teachers and other strict codes with respect to punishment, school authorities were devising their own ways of dealing with disciplinary problems and unhealthy behaviours to curb the upsurge of this menace.

During the last decade, the trend to teach character has changed. People now talk about the importance of character and personal integrity (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999).

Today, the global online village is active perpetually. Youth currently spend an average of 8.33 hours per day on social media (Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005). Prior to this global village emerging phenomenon and its negative aspects, the local village provided children with a daily adults-child conversation through which the youth learned about values, lifestyles, effective communication and points of view. The advent of formal education sought to contribute to this character training using varied approaches. What we are witnessing in recent times is that adults are largely absent in the global village and technology filters are not enough. As a result, children need to develop internalized processes to filter messages and acquire content knowledge provided them by technology and modernity. Skills grounded on good character and values will enable Ghanaian youth to benefit from today's world and offer them opportunities to manage the risks they encounter and to make responsible choices on a lifelong basis in school and the entire society.

The Main Issue

The main focus of this study may be expressed in a single sentence as "how is the school and the society teaching character education in the twenty first century (C21st) to stem the tide of uncivil behaviour in schools and the larger society?" In this study, aspects concerning character education such as the theory behind, background and nature, historical perspective of character education in Ghana and impact have been dealt with.

The Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the features of character education and how it is taught in schools in Ghana and the society to resolve uncivil behaviours that has engulfed our entire societal fabric.

The Method

The research method applied in this study is the reviewing of the literature on character education. In this method, books, articles (national and international), memoranda written in respect of character education were examined to shed light on the subject.

Theoretical Framework on Character Education

Two different approaches were identified in dealing with character education and how to enhance it. It must be understood against the backdrop of a theory of moral development. According to a neo Aristotelian view on the psychology of moral development, (cited in a Framework of Character Education, 2017) in which the current framework is grounded, there are a number of pathways to becoming virtuous. These pathways include early family upbringing, although it does not exclude the adjustment of negative moral traits formed in early childhood. Depending on the nature of the education that moral learners receive, they may progress rather seamlessly through a trajectory of habituated virtue, developing into autonomously sought and reflectively chosen virtue, which in turn provides them with intrinsic motivation to virtuous action. The second one is The Character Education Manifesto by Ryan

and Bohlin (1999, p. 190). They assert that the business of character education “is about developing virtues - good habits and dispositions which lead students to responsible and mature adulthood”. We have seen that the appeal to habits and dispositions is not entirely satisfactory given the status of these notions in contemporary psychology. However, dealing with virtues is also fraught with difficulties. One problem for virtues is the specification of what it entails. How does one “fill out” a particular virtue? How should any virtue be manifested in concrete situations? Aristotle argued famously that virtue lies in the mean between excess and defect. Virtue aims for the intermediate of passions, appetites and actions: “to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right ways, is what is both intermediate and best, and that is characteristic of virtue” (Aristotle, NE 1106b). Undoubtedly, there are strengths and deficits in these frameworks. But we cannot deny the fact that in dealing with character education morality is paramount. However, it is seemingly given less attention in Ghana’s post-colonial education reforms.

Background to Character Education

Character education dates back to the era of the philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. Two goals are outstanding in education, that is, to help students become smart and good. The concept of character education, an approach to moral education, can be considered not new and it is as old as education itself. Therefore, the emergence of character education in formal education can be traced to the colonial period in the United State of America. During the period, schools provided explicit character training by instilling moral values largely based on the beliefs and ethics of Christianity to students. However, between the 1940s and 1960s, it appeared to fall out of favour due to the rapidly growing pluralism and secularisation of the entire American society.

Character education has been given multiple names over the years such as value education or moral education (Howard et al., 2004). Yet, Snarey and Samuelson (2014) point out considerable differences between the concepts of character education and moral education as two contemporary approaches influenced by “two giants” in the field, namely, Jean Piaget and Emile Durkheim. Snarey and Samuelson (2014) indicate that moral education is mostly influenced by Jean Piaget as it emphasizes students’ participation in moral thought and action through moral dilemma discussions, role play, collaborative peer interaction and a democratic classroom and school culture. Character education, is however, mostly influenced by Emile Durkheim. According to Berkowitz (2012) character education generally focuses on teaching positive character traits and virtues directly to students, reinforcing positive behaviour and providing role models. Lickona (1991) believes that since the time of Aristotle and Socrates, character education has been an important part of young adolescents’ teaching and training. Lickona (1991) indicates that from the beginning, character education became a significant mission in American public schools. As he puts it: Realizing that smart and good are not the same, wise societies since the time of Plato have made moral education a deliberate aim of schooling. There was a large interest in educating for character development starting at the end of the nineteenth century and continuing through the first four decades of the twentieth century, essentially interrupted by World War II. It was mostly a traditional approach, focusing on the inculcation of desirable habits. John Dewey (1922) posits that character is the ‘interpenetration of habits’ (p. 38) and the effect of consequences of actions upon such habits. This behavioural orientation has an important legacy for the development of the field. John Dewey once again focused attention on the need for moral development education. Dewey (1934) stated, “The child's moral character must develop in a natural, just and social atmosphere. The school should provide this environment for its part in the child's moral development.” Later, Dewey (1964) also criticized the schools for separating the acquisition of knowledge and the growth of character.

After World War II, there was a vacuum in education concerning educating for positive youth development. But with the social and political upheavals of the 1960s, a resurgent interest in this age-old challenge arose. In response to societal questioning of moral values and policies, numerous approaches to socializing youth were proposed. One was moral education, as described above.

In the late sixties an interest in children's character development surged because of Kohlberg's theory of children's moral reasoning levels and the values clarification theory by Rath, Harmin, and Simon. Kohlberg formulated a six-stage theory of moral reasoning which children, through discussion, could move from their present moral reasoning stage to the next higher stage (cited by Snarey and Samuelson, 2014).

Nature of Character Education

In the past, there have been multiple attempts to define character education. According to Howard et al. (2004) character education is about how to prepare individuals to make ethical judgments and to act on them, that is to do what one thinks it is right to do. Therefore, Howard et al. (2004) note that character education significantly prepares our youth to make good decisions as they confront educational, social, political and economic issues and challenges in life. Character education includes all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people develop positive personal strengths called virtues. Character education is more than just a subject. It has a place in the culture and functions of families, classrooms, schools and other institutions in societies. Stopplesworth (2001) also studied the perception of students and teachers in a character education programme. Stopplesworth defined character education as “any class, programme, club, or initiative that directly promotes or encourages values.” (p. 71). In a broader scope, Williams (2000) considers character education as any intentional approach in partnership with parents, school and the community that is meant to help young people and children become principled, caring and responsible individuals. In a broad sense, character education permeates all subjects, wider school activities, and a general school ethos; it cultivates the virtues of character associated with common morality and develops students' understanding of what is excellent in diverse spheres of human endeavour. Schools should aid students in learning to know the good, love the good, and do the good. Schools should enable students to become good persons and citizens, able to lead good lives, as well as become successful persons. Schooling is concerned centrally with the formation of character and benefits from an intentional and planned approach to character development.

More recently, Sojourner (2014) points out the significance of partnerships with parents in character education; Sojourner maintained that schools adhering to the strategy of partnership with parents in the pursuit of a positive school climate, consequently demonstrated a safer school environment of respect, caring and less “antisocial behaviours”, healthier relationships and excellent academic achievement. According to Lickona (1988 p. 420) character education is designed to accomplish three main goals. These are; to promote development away from egocentric and excessive individualism and towards cooperative relationship and mutual respect. Secondly, it is geared towards fostering growth, the capacity to think, feel and act rationally. Lastly, to develop in the learner the idea of fairness, caring and participation. In achieving these, Lickona advocates for self-respect, social and moral values inculcation in the student. Character education is about the kind of person a child will grow to be and the early Greek idea of character suggests that moral goodness is essentially a prediction of persons and not acts.

The spate of indiscipline in our Ghanaian society today and the world at large seems to suggest that character education which was hitherto held in high esteem has been thrown to the dogs in our schools and the society at large. Character education is a large group responsibility involving schools, families and neighborhoods. It is for teachers, parents and students to come

together and programme out a plan, share and promise to institute code of ethics for the good of all. It is as a result of this that Lapsley and Narvaez (2007) say character education is both popular and controversial. This is because the fact that character education holds out the hope of what a person can be as opposed to what they are naturally made up. Character education is not the same as behaviour control, discipline, training or indoctrination. These principles help to explore the general ideas that give direction to practices. Quality character education promotes prosocial relationships and caring school and classroom communities. So, the development of character is considered a traditional goal of formal education (Lickona et al., 2007).

Historical Perspective of Character Education in Ghana

The society depends on teachers and schools to give children knowledge and at the same time character. This is as a result of the fact that children must have character to benefit from knowledge they get from school. According to Asare-Danso (2018) character education in Ghana could be traced to the pre-colonial period (from 1820-1850). During the period, the subject formed an integral part of Traditional African Education. Before the advent of Western Education, the people of Africa in general and Ghana in particular had their own traditional form of education. This Traditional African Education was meant to attain the following goals:

- i. To develop the child's latent physical skills.
- ii. To develop character.
- iii. To inculcate respect for elders and those in position of authority.
- iv. To develop intellectual skills.
- v. To acquire specific vocational training and to develop a healthy attitude towards honest labour.
- vi. To develop a sense of belonging and to participate actively in family and community affairs.
- vii. To understand, appreciate and promote the cultural heritage of the community at large (Fafunwa, 1974, p. 20).

During the colonial era (1851-1956), character education continued to be provided for the people of Ghana. In that period, the school took over the teaching of the subject from the home. Certain colonial educational policies however, affected the teaching of character education in Ghanaian schools during that era. The European merchants (Portuguese, Dutch and the Danes) used the castles that were serving as trading posts for the establishment of the Castle Schools at Elmina, Cape Coast and the Christiansborg, Osu (McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975, pp.17-20; Graham, 1976, pp.1-7). During that same period, the colonial government again adopted the Basel Mission educational policy (McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975; Graham, 1976) and encouraged the teaching of character education in (the Gold Coast) Ghana. Under Governor Guggisberg's Sixteen Principles of Education, which was laid before the Legislative Council of the then Gold Coast for approval in 1925, the 7th principle stated: "Character training must take an important place in education" and the 8th principle stated: "Religious teaching should form part of school life" (McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975, p.57). The 7th Principle of Education therefore promoted the teaching of character education, all of which with the aim of ensuring proper character training of the younger generation.

The post-colonial ideas about character education saw the era where the first president of Ghana Dr. Kwame Nkrumah sought to promote his ideology of "Ghana Young Pioneer Movement".

Membership of this movement was opened to all young people in Ghana, both male and female. The movement was formed in all basic schools in Ghana, and Headteachers were to help with the implementation of this new educational policy. The Young Pioneer Movement was meant to perform the following functions:

- To train the mind, the body and the soul of the youth of Ghana.
- To train them to be up to their civic responsibilities so as to fulfill their patriotic duties.
- To foster the spirit of voluntarism, love and devotion to the welfare of the nation Ghana.
- To inculcate into the youth “Nkrumaism” – ideals of African personality, world peace, social and economic reconstruction of Ghana and Africa in particular, and the world in general (PRAAD, 1961; Asare-Danso, 2012a).

In an attempt to emphasis character education in Ghana, civic education was taught in the early 1970s. As part of educational policy reforms Cultural Studies was removed from the basic school curriculum in 1994 which generated a lot of concerns as to what will happen to the children in terms of character formation. In the end, a National Education Reform Review Committee (NERRC) was set up in 1994. Based on its recommendations, character education was reintroduced, under the title Religious & Moral Education and a syllabus was developed by the Ministry of Education, Ghana in 1998 for the teaching of the subject. This was instituted to train the child’s mind, head and heart and possibly reduce moral decadence and its associated consequences.

Various educational reform programmes have also sought to revamp the teaching of character education in Ghana. The teaching of various subjects and co-curricular activities like sports and games, music and dance, cultural display were all geared to train the mind, heart and the soul and consequently, ensure the good of the learner and the society.

Impact of Character Education

Several research displayed multiple convincing reasons why character education is necessary and should form part of schools’ educational programmes and students’ life in general. In their report, “What Works in Education: A Report for Policy Makers and Opinion Leaders” Berkowitz and Bier (2005) state: Notwithstanding episodic “back to basics” movements in education that have suggested that schools should only focus on academic achievement, it has been widely recognized, for a very long time that schools cannot avoid influencing students’ character development for better or for worse. Berkowitz and Bier (2005) argue that it is essential to effectively implement character education in schools for multiple reasons; among these were that teaching character in school settings cannot be avoided. Another reason lies in the fact that a nation become great and successful when its people are good citizens. Berkowitz and Bier (2005) further explain that character education is “good politics: as long as humans have experimented with forms of self-governance, it has been recognized that self-governance itself depends upon the character of citizens”, hence, being successful depends on how good of a character individuals have. Integrating character education into the schools’ curricula undoubtedly, will lowered suspensions of students, while school attendance increased. Moreover, character education will constitute an important part of the schools’ climate and schools a safer places to learn.

The Character Education Partnership discusses the successes of the Character Education Programmes. “They see dramatic transformations; prosocial behaviours such as cooperation, respect and compassion are replacing negative behaviours such as violence, disrespect, apathy and underachievement” (Character Education Partnership, 2012, p.1). “School attendance increases, sometimes drastically in schools where character education was part of the curriculum” (DeRoche & Williams, 1998, p. 23). At one intermediate school in the Southwest in one of the poorest communities in the state, a five-year character education initiative was responsible not only for a decline in the number of student absences but also for that of the teachers. Approximately 50% of staff absences that went over 10 days decreased (Devine, Ho Seuk, & Wilson, 2000).

A growing body of research supports the notion that high quality character education can promote academic achievement (Benninga et al., 2006, p. 449). Several programmes claim an

increase in academic performance when character education is part of the curriculum. Teaching values in every subject is important so that the students can recognize the expectations of good character and how those expectations are recognized and implemented (Elkind & Sweet, 2004). Taking a holistic approach helps to make the students aware of the importance of character attributes and allow them to gain ownership of the programme since they are able to see that good character is expected in every aspect of life (Elkind & Sweet, 2004).

Concluding Remarks

I argue from the foregoing discourse that the current moral chaos in Ghanaian schools, especially at the secondary level, is due to the decline of character education. Undoubtedly, this has led to the upsurge of social vices such as drug abuse, rudeness, impatience, theft and laziness in our schools. Therefore, the question of whether or not character education should be implemented in Ghanaian schools is quite untenable.

Literature search points to the fact that, Ghanaians quest to build a prosperous nation in this twenty first century (C 21st) and technology driven society calls for rigorous engagement of stakeholders on the path to character education based on a harmonious religious, cultural and societal trajectories in our schools and the larger society. Again, it is endearing to note that the hard-core argument that the study of character education is key especially at the pre-tertiary level which will serve as the basis for students' moral upbringing in later years in quite necessary. Hence, policy makers in education should endeavour to implement in schools character education through the collective efforts of all social institutions in the country. Such institutions should include the home, religious bodies and the mass media.

In doing that, students must be made to understand their own being and how they may represent themselves to others during teaching and learning of the school curricula. In the process, students need to be taught persuasive techniques, sound values to evaluate information, choices and decisions while weighing risks and rewards to enable self-expression in various subjects in school.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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