Character Education: From Theory and Research to Practice

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One of the great challenges for character education, and for all of education for that matter (Colin, 2009), is to base educational practice on a foundation of research and theory; i.e., to increase the prevalence of evidence- and theory-based practice. While most would agree that educational practices in general, and for the promotion of character development in particular, would be more effective if they were based on and aligned with empirical evidence and scholarly theoretical underpinnings, sadly this is all too uncommon. Furthermore, beyond the obvious justification of increased effectiveness in achieving the intended goals of such educational practices (e.g., development of empathy, mathematical competency, self-knowledge, literacy), rarely do we ask the broader justificatory question of "Why do we want to apply evidence to practice?"

Farley-Ripple et al. (2018) have offered a detailed analysis of a range of possible purposes for why one might apply evidence and theory to educational practice. Instrumental purpose is the straightforward attempt to apply evidence to improving practice. But one may do so instead for conceptual reasons, which is more of a meta-application; i.e., studying how decision-makers use research to inform practice. A strategic purpose would be to manipulate evidence to attain specific goals, such as greater sales of a curriculum or influence with policy-makers. A fourth type of purpose for applying evidence to practice is symbolic, which is to create the perception of evidence-based practice, as is often the case in marketing communications and strategies.

In this paper, we focus on the first purpose, instrumental intentions to improve educational practice by basing them on scientific research evidence and scholarly theory. We argue that (1) education tends to underutilize research and theory in its selection and development of educational practice and (2) authentic goals of educational practice would be achieved more effectively if practice was driven by research and theory. We would hope that this were the understanding and intention of all educational designers, consumers, and

practitioners. Nowhere is this more important than in shaping the character, especially the moral character (Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Shields, 2011), of our youth.

However, the road to hell is allegedly paved with good intentions. Intending to design and use evidence-based practice is highly desirable, but such intentions are far from enough for such they often do not get adequately enacted. There are three main ways that such intentions go awry: (1) the problem of evidence; (2) difficulties in technology transfer; (3) the need to align specific evidence with matching goals and practices. We will deal with each of these in turn.

The Problem of Evidence

The first challenge, namely the problem of evidence, itself has multiple parts. First and foremost is the question of what should count as evidence to inform practice. One way to understand this is to raise the question of why the particular educator or educational institution wants to use research evidence and theory-driven practice. I am frequently asked for guidance by practitioners in identifying evidence-based practices. I am also frequently asked by educational developers (e.g, curriculum writers) to help them design, implement, and/or identify research to support their educational products. The first question I ask them is why they want it. Their purpose helps determine the type and level of evidence appropriate for them.

At the highest level are those who want evidence that will be accepted by the scientific community and/or policy makers (at least for policy-makers who rely on scientific evidence, such as the US Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse or the National Registry of Evidence-based Practices and Programs). For such audiences, they will need high level scientifically-designed research studies. The "gold standard" has long been randomized-controlled trials (RCTs); however, they are in short supply. This is so for many reasons, including that they can be very difficult to accomplish, require sophisticated methodological expertise, and are often expensive to execute. I would argue that they are also often inappropriate. Educational practice tends to be more effective when delivered by educators who value and believe in the specific practice and its goals. Randomly assigning treatments (educational practices) to classrooms or schools means that many of those

implementing will not believe in and/or care about the specific practice, thus reducing the likelihood of effectiveness. There is less concern about this in the medical world, where randomly assigning patients to different pharmacological treatments is less susceptible to the beliefs of the patients or medical professionals (although there are placebo effects, etc.).

In the field of character education, this is particularly important to consider. For many, teaching in a way that is designed to foster the development of character, particularly moral character, is a polarizing and often anxiety-producing endeavour. For instance, it is becoming clearer, and not surprisingly, that school leadership is critical to effective school-wide character education (Berkowitz, 2011, 2012). When randomly assigning treatments to schools, one will inevitably encounter school leaders who have agreed to participate, yet who have mild or no interest in character education in general (or the specific approach being implemented in the study) and cannot function as instructional leaders because they have no expertise or interest in the practice(s). Such schools are much less likely to effectively implement. In such cases, even the best evidence-based effective practices are also much less likely to be effective in those schools. The same argument can be made at the classroom level for teachers who are uninterested or disbelieving and are assigned randomly to implement. This may in fact be a large part of the reason that the US Department of Education's and Centers for Disease Control's Social and Character Development (SACD; Haegerich & Metz, 2009) program reported such limited effects of seven character education programs. The emphasis of SACD was on RCT design and not the strength of the selected programs. More importantly, this led to many implementing schools not being authentically interested in the assigned character education program.

A wise solution to RCTs leading to implementation in less than optimally committed schools and classrooms was the strategy of the Developmental Studies Center (now the Center for the Collaborative Classroom) in their studies of their Child Development Project (now reconstituted as Caring School Communities). They vetted prospective school districts for the RCT study by only selecting those where the vast majority of schools were authentically interested in such a program (Battistich et al., 1991). Then they randomly assigned schools within each selected district to implement the CDP, thereby greatly

increasing the likelihood that those implementing would be invested authentically in the value of the implemented practices and the program they comprised.

One partial solution is to include implementation assessment, often known as fidelity checks, on one's research design. This means to collect data (such as through practice logs, observations, etc.) of both the extent (how much and how often) and quality (accuracy) of implementation. Many studies (e.g., Colby et al., 1977; Solomon et al., 2001) have been salvaged by being able to differentiate those who implemented with fidelity from those who did not, even when randomly assigned to do so.

Hence, we frequently need to look beyond RCTs to other forms of scientific research. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an overview of research designs, so it will have to suffice to state that there are many types of research designs that are scientific but do not include random assignment to intervention conditions (i.e., whether or not the classroom or school implements the practice being investigated in the research study). There are, for example, many quasi-experimental designs available, such as when schools or classrooms elect to participate, rather than being randomly assigned.

Regardless of whether one adopts the "gold standard" research design (RCTs) or some other scientific design, practitioners need to know how to generate such research or where to find existing relevant research evidence. Both of these questions are challenging.

Many years ago, after hearing the same request from educators repeatedly ("how I can do research to test the effectiveness of my practice?"), I wrote a "primer" for the Character Education Partnership (now Character.org) on what to consider before venturing into the turbulent waters of program evaluation research (Berkowitz, 1998). I structured it around a series of twelve questions to ask oneself while contemplating such a venture. The fourth question was "Can you live with disconfirmation?" That really takes many educators aback. Research is not a guaranteed affirmation. It is supposed to be objective and a test. So the possibility exists that the research evidence gathered will not support the effectiveness of one's efforts. In fact, it could even produce iatrogenic results; i.e., results which demonstrate the harmfulness of your efforts. One colleague, actually a pioneer in the field of character education curriculum development, called me after reading the Primer. He told me that he really liked it and it really helped him. His explanation caught me off guard. As a pioneer, he had been struggling for a long time to sell his curricula, as the market had not

yet developed. He recognized that his moment had come with the advent of the Character Education Partnership and Character Counts, both in 1992 and both greatly increasing interest in character education. “I realized I shouldn’t do program evaluation because I can’t afford to find out my curriculum doesn’t work.” I applaud him at least for his honesty.

I typically do not recommend that educators take on program evaluation themselves, because there is an expertise, knowledge base, and science behind it. In the Primer, I do give suggestions about how to find partners with program evaluation expertise; e.g., from local universities. Joseph Hoedel, a practitioner who developed a successful and popular high school program on leadership and character (the Character Development and Leadership Program; cf. Hoedel, 2005), struggled for many years to collect meaningful data on his program. Then he partnered with a scholar and managed to assemble adequate evidence of effectiveness (Hoedel & Lee, in press). Larger organizations such as the former Developmental Studies Center and the Committee for Children can afford to have such expertise within their own staff.

It is important to note that before one engages in new research, it is prudent to first consider what is already known. Look to see if there are any research studies that already address your question. One could do a literature review of research (or find already existing ones) to see if the kind of research contemplated already exists. This is likely when one is implementing an already existing and widely used practice or program, but not likely if one is crafting one’s own program. There are many good reviews of existing programs, both for the individual program (usually available from the program’s website) and for many programs. Examples of such comprehensive program reviews are What Works in Character Education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007) and many on the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning website (www.casel.org). See Berkowitz, Bier & McCauley (2017) for a list of such program reviews. One can also look to vetted registries of effective programs, such as the National Registry of Effective Programs and Practices (NREPP).

If, however, as is often the case, one’s goal is not the imprimatur of scientifically valid research evidence, then other forms of research or scholarly support may be appropriate, and, in many cases, more easily attained.

A more sophisticated alternative strategy would be a conceptual argument for the validity of the practice/program by demonstrating its synchrony with scholarly theories

(e.g., from philosophy, educational science, and social science). Marilyn Watson's (Watson, 2019) work is a good example of using theory (in her case attachment theory) to design and justify her model of developmental discipline.

If that is not possible either, then expert opinion can be used. Of course, again, this would not provide the kind of evidence needed for scientific validation (like RCTs and quasi-experimental studies would), but could suffice if one's purpose was marketing to educators or others who purchase educational materials. A similar level of evidence could be garnered from anecdotal information such as case studies (although it is important to note that case studies can be done in a scientific manner and would then potentially count as scientific empirical evidence, although this is beyond the scope of this paper). And if neither of these are possible, then one may rely on testimonials from educators who have used the materials.

The Problem of Technology Transfer

It would be excellent if all who choose educational programs relied on these kinds of evidence. They do not. Many rely instead on a variety of far less valid sources and strategies for selecting educational practices and programs to implement. Often authorities such as school district administrators or governmental entities mandate the use of certain practices or programs, without having any empirical or theoretical justification. The notorious DARE drug prevention program is an example. Despite a body of evidence showing its ineffectiveness, it was very widely mandated (Note: DARE has since been redesigned to incorporate evidence-based practices). Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports was re-construed as a school-wide strategy (it has been designed as a strategy for a narrow set of children with particular special needs) by a US government employee and put in federal legislation leading to widespread adoption, despite much pushback from educators.

Other reasons for adopting programs/practices are educational fads, which ones come with funding, simple proximity to developers or adopters, peer recommendations, and sheer intuition/taste. All of the blame certainly does not fall on the shoulders of the practitioners and other adopters of educational programs. Blame for not attracting practitioners to adopt effective practices and/or programs surely also lies with the

developers, theorists and scientists. One version of this is what Lawrence Kohlberg called "the psychologist's fallacy" (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972). Kohlberg had developed a theory of the development of the capacity to reason effectively about moral issues. He also developed pedagogical approaches to promoting such development in classroom and schools. But he found that educators were not overly interested in his educational ideas. What he realized was that just because his theory of moral reasoning development was psychologically compelling and important, the core notion of developmentally different forms of moral reasoning was not overly compelling to educators. Hence, they were not enthusiastic about changing their curricula, schedules and practices just to promote critical thinking about moral issues. As one high school principal told Kohlberg himself, "I have real problems here; fighting, drugs, sex. I need help with that." What was not clear to him was how discussing hypothetical dilemmas in the classroom would impact such problems. In fact, moral reasoning development is related to cheating, delinquency, and other undesirable behaviors. The proponents of the Kohlberg approach, however, failed to understand that they could not assume their psychologically significant work would be seen by educators as compelling enough to commit time and resources.

There are a few guidelines that can increase the likelihood that those who develop effective programs and practices can also be effective in technology transfer; i.e., getting practitioners to be aware of and adopt their programs and practices. One is simply to present their work in a digestible format. Simplify the language; communicate clearly. Avoid techno-speak and psycho-babble. Another way is to market their products more effectively, including wider dissemination of their products and the evidence for their effectiveness. Of course, this includes targeting the appropriate audiences and crafting messages in ways that fit the desired audience.

Yet another strategy is high-quality effective professional development. In our *What Works in Character Education* review (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007), we found that all 33 evidence-based programs we identified had at least optional professional development. When educators feel knowledgeable about and competent with a program or practice, they are more likely to adopt it and utilize it. This also impacts the fidelity of implementation once adopted, which is critical to replicating the results of effective implementation in the research base.

Educators tend to listen to valued peers. Adoption can be increased by testimonials and demonstrations by respected colleagues or other educators.

Lastly, authentic partnerships between developers and implementers can lead to greater usage of evidence-based practices and programs. Rather than simply handing the material to the practitioners, listening to the practitioners' concerns and suggestions may have the double benefit of increasing practitioner buy-in while also potentially improving the program or practice.

The more we can get educators and other educational consumers to understand the nature, level and appropriateness of what counts as evidence of effectiveness, the more effective we will be at achieving our educational goals.

The Problem of Alignment

Even when educators and/or program developers opt to implement an evidence-based program or practice, they still may fumble the ball by not aligning the chosen implementation strategies with the desired outcome goals.

Many years ago, at a small conference, Roger Weissberg, then the head of the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), suggested I pay more attention to the importance of having clear logic models for my work. This was new terminology to me, in part because I was relatively new to the world of educational practice. Over the years, I have come to rely more and more on his advice and on the value of logic models, much to the eventual frustration of many of my graduate students and program developer colleagues.

This was brought home poignantly to me when a high school principal I had mentored approached me a couple of years after graduating from my *Leadership Academy in Character Education* (LACE), an intensive year-long program for school leaders (Berkowitz, 2011). He was excited to tell me about the new character education initiative in his high school, but first he wanted to tell me what prompted it. They had caught a small but significant number of students engaging in academic cheating. Some staff subsequently did some research on academic dishonesty and were surprised to find that it was highly prevalent in high schools and colleges. So they decided to leverage character education

practices to reduce academic dishonesty in their school. He commenced to regale me with the details of a very well-crafted initiative to implement service learning across the entire school and academic curriculum. They had chosen a practice with a lot of solid scientific evidence backing its effectiveness. They had invested in high-quality sustained professional development to increase the competency of the staff to implement it effectively. They had chosen to integrate it across all the areas of the core academic curriculum. And it was a school-wide mandate. All of these are characteristics of effective implementation.

In other words, they had no difficulty with the first problem, The Problem of Evidence, as they chose a practice with good scientific evidence. And they clearly had no Problem of Technology Transfer as they chose to adopt it and did so effectively including the use of high quality professional development. Unfortunately, they failed to solve the Problem of Alignment. I said to him, "That is very impressive. You had an important character challenge in your school and decided to actively tackle it. And you chose a very effective character education practice, service learning. And you implemented it very intelligently by mandating it school-wide, investing in high quality professional development, and integrating it across the curriculum." He was beaming with pride, when I said, "I have one question however. What does service learning have to do with academic integrity?" Service learning has been shown to have many important effects both in character development and academic success; however, it is not related to academic integrity. He had misaligned his implementation and outcome goals.

Having a clear logic model for design and implementation (as well as for program evaluation for those who wish to tackle assessing the effectiveness of their programs) helps avoid this problem of misalignment. At the minimum, such a logic model should include (1) the outcome goals for the initiative, (2) what is known about what influences those outcomes, and (3) the specific educational strategies, justified by #2, to be used to promote the desired outcomes.

Notice that I began the list with the outcome. This is sometimes called "backward design." The idea behind backward design is that you plan your journey by first selecting your destination. Where are you trying to arrive? In the case of the misaligned high school principal above, the outcome/destination was a school without cheating; i.e., a school with academic integrity. There is research on what produces academic integrity (e.g., McCabe &

Trevino, 1996). One element for effective practice for example is the empowerment of students (rather than authoritarian imposition). If one knows that, then one can choose to design an authentically student-led honor system, for example. The point is that this is a "logic" model. This suggests that there must be a logical connection between the implementation strategy and the targeted outcome.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it needs to be understood that educational innovation in general, and in character education in particular, is a complex system with many parts and many players. Emphasizing authentic partnerships at all levels is advisable. When concerned with going from theory and research to practice, those partners include groups that often live in different worlds and speak different languages; that is, scientists and practitioners. So the challenge of partnership is both more important and more challenging to achieve.

In order to increase the effectiveness of character education, we need to implement and design programs and practices that actually work. Hence, we need to be concerned about the pipeline between the world of theory and research and the world of educational practice. To do that we need to understand the challenges of evidence, the difficulties of technology transfer, and the ways of ensuring the logical alignment of implementation with targeted outcome goals.

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