



Character Education of Adolescents: A Case Study of a Research Center *

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Abstract

This study describes the theoretical and practical studies at an adolescent research Center in the School of Education at an American university. Additionally, researchers' views are explored regarding the educational environment, activities, and the assessment process in character education. The case study design used in this paper is based on qualitative research methods. The participants comprised 9 researchers who took part in the Center's studies. The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Content analysis was applied to analyze the data of the research. Findings of this paper reveal that the research Center conducted studies on the positive aspects of adolescent development. Additionally, educational environment, activities, and assessment processes in character education are explained in light of the participants' views.

Keywords

Character education
Adolescents
Case study

Article Info

Received: 03.06.2013
Accepted: 02.03.2015
Online Published: 05.20.2015

DOI: 10.15390/EB.2015.2648

Introduction

Character consists of a person's intellectual and moral habits. It includes both good habits, or virtues, and bad habits, or vices; taken together, all these habits form our personalities (Ryan and Bohlin, 1999). The education of character is a complex issue. It includes not only knowing rules and good behavior patterns, but also understanding morality and developing a sensitivity and concern for others (Kupperman, 2005). Every child brings the building blocks of character in rudimentary forms from birth. A basic moral sense is a natural part of the human system. However, it needs to be sustained and nurtured by the people and institutions that are responsible for raising and caring for the new generation of society. These early building blocks of character are: self-awareness, self-control, empathy and fairness. These blocks must be promoted in order to build a positively formed character. Such a character would display a concern for others, a commitment to justice, a sense of personal responsibility, and the intent to be a good person. This process of character development is imperative in building a democratic society (Damon, 2002).

The moral identity of a person is the best predictor of his/her commitment to moral action. During adolescence, identity formation continues as a process of constructing a coherent sense of self. Moral beliefs play a role in one's moral identity formation and one's sense of identity (Damon and Gregory, 1997). According to Colby and Damon (1992, p.168), "goals and social influences are at the centre of moral commitment". They explain the development of moral commitment for everyone at

* This study was supported by the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TUBITAK) through the 2219-BIDEB International Postdoctoral Research Fellowship Program.

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every age by the formation and transformation of goals through social influences. It can be claimed that moral identity and moral commitment need to be considered in character education for adolescents because while they are developing a systematic sense of self, they have to construct moral beliefs to guide them in their actions. Good character traits may be fostered in behaviors based on one's deep moral beliefs. Therefore, moral commitment theory is helpful in designing a character education framework and activities.

There are many studies about the moral and character development of adolescents (Hart and Carlo, 2005; Hart, Atkins and Ford, 1998; Park and Peterson, 2006; Schultz, Barr & Selman, 2001). Some research focuses on the cognitive and social-emotional development of adolescents (Kaya and Siyez, 2010; Roeser et. al., 2000; Steinberg, 2005). Other research explores the positive development of adolescents (Lerner, Dowling and Anderson, 2003; Larson, 2006; Tebes et.al., 2007). Since character education is a complex and multi-dimensional issue, it can be claimed that an interdisciplinary study is the most effective method for answering questions in different fields.

When studies are examined relating to character education in Turkey, it is seen that there are some studies which aim to determine the efficacy of character education programs prepared and implied by particular researchers (Aydın, 2008; Demir, 2008; Katılmış et. al., 2011); other studies examine the self-efficacy of educators regarding character education (Demirel, 2009) and teachers' views on character education (Üstünyer, 2009). There does not seem to be either a developmental or an interdisciplinary study which aims to analyze 12 to 15 year old students regarding their character education.

This study examines a research Center connected to a School of Education at a university in the USA which focuses on interdisciplinary studies on character education. Researchers who work at this Center come from different educational backgrounds. The studies conducted here and the researchers' views about character education are presented as an example of and a guide for a systematic research on character education. Findings of this paper have practical implications for policy makers, educators, and parents.

These questions are addressed in the study:

- What kind of studies are conducted at the research Center relating to character education in the USA?
- How should the educational environment be organized in order to promote character education for adolescents?
- What kind of activities can be organized in character education?
- What kind of assessment methods can be used in character education?

Method

Research Approach

This study is designed as a holistic single case study. The chosen research Center is the “representative case which represents typical projects and the lessons learned from these cases are assumed to be informative about the experiences of the institution” (Yin, 2003, p.41). Additionally, case study research is useful to provide “an extension of experience for practitioners and policy makers” (Stake, 2005, p.460). The researcher identifies functions of the Center through examining documents and interviewing the Center’s researchers.

Participants and the Study Context

This study was conducted at a research Center in the School of Education at a university in the USA which has a center for studying various issues relating to youth development. It aims to understand youth, in particular, their moral and character development, and, broadly, their positive development. The main goal of the Center’s researchers is to understand adolescents’ traits, their capabilities, the positive aspects of their development, and their civic contributions. For example, some questions they study are: How do youth develop a sense of purpose?, How do youth develop as contributing members of their communities? Results of these studies and the views of researchers are important for all related to the field of education.

Each participant’s country, connection with the center and his/her field of study are shown in Table 1 with their code names.

Table 1. Participants of the Study

| Participant | Country | Connection with the Center | Field of Study | |
|-------------|---------|----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | John | USA | Director | Developmental Psychology |
| 2 | Susan | USA | Consulting Professor | Developmental Psychology |
| 3 | Lisa | USA | Graduate Student | Developmental Psychology |
| 4 | Emily | USA | Research Associate | Education |
| 5 | Jane | USA | Graduate Student | Developmental Psychology |
| 6 | Thomas | USA | Former Graduate Student | Developmental Psychology |
| 7 | Nancy | USA | Former Graduate Student | Developmental Psychology |
| 8 | David | Korea | Graduate Student | Developmental Psychology |
| 9 | Laura | Finland | Visiting Scholar | Education |

As seen in Table 1, there are nine participants in the study. Participants are introduced below in terms of their research interests:

1) John is a life span Developmental Psychologist. The general field of his study is human development and his main focus is on the years of adolescence and early adulthood. His–main emphasis is on psychological processes, like cognition and emotion within individuals, but he is also interested in the sociological and cultural components of development. His first group study was on the early development of moral values and he examined the development of concepts, such as justice, authority and friendship. Most recently, he has been investigating one’s life purpose and moral purpose.

2) Susan is a life span Developmental Psychologist. She has conducted research on one’s moral and civic development in higher education. She has participated in research on undergraduate character education. She has also studied at various colleges and universities in USA. One particular study investigated how college students engage in the political process in the USA.

3) Lisa is a PhD student in Education with a specialization in developmental and psychological education. She also has teaching experience in high school. Her research primarily focuses on the influence of schools on several related outcomes in adolescents including: the development of purpose, commitment to serving others in the spirit of service and justice, and adolescent spirituality.

4) Emily received her PhD degree in Curriculum Development in the Teacher Education Department of this university. She also has an art education background. She has conducted studies on how young people develop purpose, defined as an aspiration to do something, and also on how they make a contribution to the world, defined as participating in some charitable, social or service program.

5) Jane is a PhD student. She studies adolescent psychological development. She is interested in promoting positive youth development by conducting psychological research which presents useful information for education policy makers and practitioners.

6) Thomas received his Ph.D. in Educational Psychology focusing on child and adolescent development. He is interested in educational psychology, adolescent and emerging adult development and positive youth development. He is a former graduate student of this university and was involved in the Center's projects from 2005 through 2009.

7) Nancy received her PhD degree in Child and Adolescent Development. Like Thomas, she is a former graduate student of this university and was involved in many projects at the Center. Her research interest focuses on child and adolescent development, moral development and positive youth development.

8) David is a second year PhD student in the School of Education at this university. He received his Master of Science Degree from the Institute of Science and Technology in Korea. He is especially interested in moral development and moral education. He employs the neuroscientific method to measure the degree of students' moral development.

9) Laura is a professor at a School of Education in Finland. She is interested in various issues related to education and pedagogy, particularly the ethical aspect in teacher education since she believes that teaching is an innately moral profession.

Role of the Researcher

This researcher received her PhD in Primary School Education specializing in values education in the social studies curriculum. She studied at the research Center noted in this paper as a visiting scholar for a six-month term from September 2012 to February 2013. She examined both theoretical and practical studies regarding the character education of adolescents. Various resources and documents from the Center about character education were examined. These resources contained information about research projects conducted by members of the Center, journal articles, books and book chapters. This researcher interviewed participants who are studying at the Center. This researcher participated in project meetings at the Center in which progress and problems were discussed, proposals for new projects were introduced and researchers were asked about their interest in the new projects.

Data Collection Tool

Interviews, and document analysis were conducted to gather data for this study. Interviews were the main data collection sources of this study. An interview protocol was prepared by this researcher. Seven interviews were conducted individually in person according to a schedule. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was audio taped. Two participants who were former graduate students at the Center, now teach in other universities. Therefore, the same interview form was sent to them via email and returned by them. Each participant was assigned a code name and their code names were used to cite their views in the results.

Documentary analysis is one of the secondary data sources of this research. This researcher examined documents about character education at the Center. These documents were reports about research projects conducted by members of the Center, journal articles, books and chapters in books. Additionally, the researcher participated in three project meetings at the Center in order to observe discussions about their current studies. This researcher took notes and culled any references to character education.

Analysis of Data

Content analysis is used in this study to “identify the core meanings of the data” (Patton, 2002, p.453). According to Mayring, qualitative content analysis is a useful technique especially for case study research. Qualitative content analysis can accommodate the complexity of the social data. Moreover, it provides an opportunity for the integration of context and different materials or evidence (Kohlbacher, 2005). This researcher divided the data into content analytical units. Following the research questions from the interview protocol, data were put into categories and revised during the process of analysis.

Identifying the researcher’s role, introducing participants with selection criteria and giving information about the social context are all important in terms of the reliability of this study. Additionally, using multiple methods of data collection helps support both reliability and internal validity (Merriam, 1998, p.207). This researcher introduced her role in the research and gave information about the participants. Document analysis and interviews were used as different sources of data in this study. Additionally, analyses were done by another field expert independently. Then, researchers compared their thoughts regarding differences on their themes and reached an agreement.

Results

Studies of the research center related with character education

Studies which were conducted at the Center generally focused on general purpose and civic purpose of youth, civic identity and participation, analysis of moral exemplars, and entrepreneurship of youth. Analyzing the developmental process regarding morality and character is one of the main focuses of the studies at the Center. The development of the concepts of justice, authority, friendship, and other related concepts and the early development of moral values are interests of the researchers at the Center. Additionally, how youth develop civic motivation and purpose in citizenship and civic development were the questions that were addressed in projects. Analyzing moral exemplars in terms of specific values and virtues, such as humility, truthfulness and faith, was another project that was conducted by the researchers. It can be said that the multidisciplinary work on development and the collection of empirical data for explaining phenomenon are significant contributions of the research studies at this Center. Findings regarding documents and project meetings of the Center relating to character education are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Findings regarding Studies Conducted at the Center related to Character Education

| Type of the Studies | Time Period | Focus of the Studies |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|--|
| Research Projects | 2002-2013 | Development of civic purpose A developmental analysis of moral exemplars Entrepreneurship among young people Civic identity and participation |
| Journal Articles | 1997-2013 | Development of youth Purpose Character development Teacher training Citizenship education Civic engagement Positive youth development Ethics American identity development Professional education Entrepreneurship in adolescence Moral identity Values education Political development |
| Books and Chapters in Books | 1997-2012 | Child and adolescent development Citizenship education Purpose Moral development Ethical sensitivity Character education |

As seen in Table 2, the professionals at the Center focus their studies on purpose, positive youth development, moral and character development in childhood and adolescence and citizenship education. It can be claimed that the Center aims to understand youth development and examine how young people adapt to their society as good citizens. The participants explained their views about the aims of the Center. Thomas, for example, explained his views regarding studies at the Center, as noted below:

Broadly, I have always thought of the Center as an interdisciplinary center for studying various issues related to youth development. The specific issues on which the center's attention is focused at any given time may vary based on the important issues of the day, as well as the interests of the Director and others in the Center. During John's tenure as Director, the aims have been to better understand youth purpose in particular (including civic purpose), moral and character development, and positive youth development more broadly. Additionally, the Center has been a crucible for discussion of various other issues germane to youth development, mostly through guest speakers, visiting scholars, and research collaborations.

Thomas emphasized the interdisciplinary structure of the Center and main subjects which are dealt with at the Center. Jane, another participant, mentioned the fact that the Center focuses on the positive aspects of development. She said that *"The Center does mostly research positive processes. How youth develop as civic individuals, people who are parts of society in their community as contributors, aims of the center are to try to understand how youth develop aspects."* Lisa, a third participant, pointed out the educational dimension and contribution of the studies conducted by Center's researchers. She said that *"The Center does psychological research on adolescent development and converses with different fields of education. Moral education and character education and those sorts of things are the specific focus for our projects."* According to these findings, it can be claimed that the Center makes contributions to the research literature in terms of positive development and presents significant information that is relevant to education policy makers and practitioners.

Educational environment for character education

Findings regarding the educational environment for character education are presented in four themes: curriculum, school environment, teachers' role and responsibilities, and school-parent-community collaboration.

In the curriculum theme, it was found that character education should be integrated into the school curriculum as well as with extracurricular activities. Academic integrity seems to be one of the fundamental dimensions of character education. Lisa indicated her views:

Schools can make these issues part of how they teach. Also, there are a lot of opportunities in the school curriculum for students to sort of help each other. Academic disciplines should incorporate the study on these kinds of issues on character education.

The school environment theme includes school culture, parent-teacher interaction and community cooperation. Creating a culture in schools which nurtures virtue is important for character education. Susan suggested that a positive school culture should encourage:

Some basic habits, habits of honesty, and virtues like humility and a sense of responsibility, and there are a lot of things that people call virtues. I think they have to be developed. But they are not developed during a lesson. Students have to actually live it and get feedback on it. They have to live it in a culture that supports it. So they have to learn in a way that allows them to practice each virtue.

In the school environment, character education materials, such as, books, journals and articles should be available for teachers, students and parents. Talks and seminars on character education would also be useful for parents, teachers and school principals. A common set of standards can be created and schools can network people who are committed to work together for character education.

Teachers need to take roles and responsibilities in the educational environment for parent-community collaboration-based character education. Firstly, teachers should be aware of the importance of purpose for both themselves and their students for character education. Teachers should have information about their students in terms of their character traits and developmental characteristics. A positive teacher-student relationship is very important for character education. Teachers need to pay attention to their role as models for their students. Emily indicated the importance of the teacher-student relationship:

One of the things I am really interested in is the teacher-student relationship. Kids would like to feel teachers know who they are. Teachers have challenges, but they are very important for character education and purpose development and moral development. Looking at how teachers develop relationships with students and how they can know who they are, what are their interests and goals are important. What are their goals for participating and contributing to society?

Findings of this study reveal that according to the participants, character education cannot be achieved without school-parent-community collaboration. Parents must support responsibility in their children and encourage their children in terms of good character traits. The school and community also need to work together to build good character in students.

John explained his experience regarding this issue as follows:

Well, the only thing to do, I think, is bring the parts together. And it takes a lot of time, but that was something we did for a while. If you go into a town, if you bring together parents, teachers and the police, librarians, and the local media and the city mayor and if you bring them all together and you create a common set of standards and network people who are committed to work together to communicate the standards to the young people and we invite the young people, too. They have something to say about it. I think that is the way to do it.

Activities in character education

Findings regarding activities in character education are comprised of six themes: dilemma discussions, roundtable discussions, real life experiences, teaching moral exemplars, using stories, and developing long term projects. According to the participants, dilemma discussions and roundtable discussions are activities which can be used in character education. Laura shared her model which she called "roundtable discussions" for parent-community collaboration-based character education.

Well, I have suggested a model. I called it roundtable discussions in school. That is a very practical and concrete thing. We can take an issue, some issues that are problematic in the school or problematic in the whole community. And school can arrange discussions where they can invite students, parents and teachers. And they can invite like a critical friend, somebody who is coming from outside of the school. And that can be like a policeman or a lawyer or somebody who has a different aspect and can give their own perspective, you know, to these discussions. And those discussions could be held regularly.

Character education should be related with real life. Real life activities that students can get involved in and interact with the community make students see how they can contribute to their society. Service learning should be incorporated with courses. This connects character education practices with all courses in the school curriculum. Teaching moral exemplars is important in terms of showing virtues with real life experiences. Additionally, telling stories is important in character education. John explained his thoughts as "*..and also tell stories and teach stories about people who have done very valuable work in these areas. And that is easy to do in history and literature, but even in science...the teacher can teach about great scientists.*" Also, character education activities and experiences should continue over a long period of time and not be restricted to short lessons. Long term projects for character education may be much more effective for students. Students should also be active in the character education process.

Assessment methods in character education

Participants' views about assessment in character education are categorized into five themes: reflective diaries, discussion activities, writing activities in classroom, observations, and interviews with students and parents. The reflection of experiences is very useful in the assessment process of character education. Lisa explained her views regarding assessment in character education:

Sometimes reflection might be through discussion an instructor has with her students. Sometimes, it might be through some sort of writing exercises. Some ways that they can sort of step out of whatever they are doing or thinking about ... What do these mean to me? What do these mean for people I'm working with? What did I bring in to that situation? What did I learn from that situation? These are important things for students to deal with.

Additionally, participants claimed that observations were needed to see the effects of character education on students. It was also suggested that interviews with students and parents might supply data about students' acquirments regarding character education.

Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestions

Many of the Center's studies deal with the development of purpose, civic engagement and citizenship education, and moral and character development. It can be said that all these issues are important for character education. The results of this study show that the Center focuses mostly on the positive aspects of adolescent development. Positive psychology is defined as "an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions" by Seligman et al (2005, p.410). It further defines positive individual traits as the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom at the individual level. Also, it focuses on civic virtues and the institutions that motivate people to be good citizens who exhibit virtues like responsibility, nurturance, tolerance, and a good work ethic (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, s.5). Positive psychologists study people's goals and values on creativity, morality, and spirituality in support of higher purposes. Therefore, the search for meaning and purpose is the significant point in the positive psychology movement (Damon, Menon and Bronk, 2003). Since character education is interested in building good character traits in students, it can be said that positive psychology studies can help those involved in character education to develop strategies which are pertinent to the developmental necessities of young people.

Findings regarding the educational environment for character education focus on curriculum, school environment, the teacher's role and responsibilities, and school-parent-community collaboration. Participants claimed that character education should be included in all school curriculum, as well as in extra-curricular activities. Williams et. al. (2003) presented an integrated and experiential curriculum as a model for character education at the high school level in their study. Findings of their study suggest that the program helps students develop respect for others and their environment. According to results of the study, the school environment should be a place where character education is a part of the school culture. Jones and Stoodley (1999) suggest family and community involvement in their character education program which they called "community caring". Lickona (1991) emphasizes that character can be fostered in a social environment. Therefore, if schools aim to develop good character traits in students, they must provide a moral environment for character education. In other words, schools must set a moral culture to support that growth.

Findings of this study show that teachers should be aware of their role and responsibilities in character education. They need to have interactive relationships with their students. Ryan and Bohlin (1999) mention some specific competencies that teachers need in order to conduct character education. Firstly, teachers must be good models for their students by exhibiting good character traits themselves. Also, they should give character education priority in students' development. Teachers should provide activities for character education in school and in the community which will provide students experience in behaving ethically. Milson (2000) aimed to understand the perceptions of social studies teachers about the main themes of contemporary character education. According to the results,

teachers agreed that character education is a valid social studies goal and that they do pay attention to character education in their social studies curriculum/methods courses. In another study, Milson (2003) examined efficacy beliefs of K-12 teachers for developing character in their students. The results of the study showed that teachers mostly have a positive sense of efficacy for character education, but are not sure about their abilities to provide character education for students who lack good character. Teachers play a significant role in character education. Therefore, character education should be an important part of teacher training programs. Revell and Arthur (2007) examined student teachers' attitudes and experiences of character and values education in schools. The data of their study revealed the inadequacy of teacher training programs in terms of moral and character education.

Results of this study point out that school-parent-community collaboration is one of the vital components of character education. Wrobel (1997) recommends the collaboration of teachers, the school, and the community in sharing common goals as a team in character education. Atkins, Hart and Donnelly (2004, p.73) claim that schools can support moral identity development via social relationships with nonparental adults. Berkowitz and Bier (2005), and Brannon (2008) underline the fact that character education begins at family, and parent collaboration is very important for character education.

Dilemma discussions, roundtable discussions, real life experiences, teaching moral exemplars, using stories, and developing long term projects are mentioned as activities suggested by the participants which may be effective in character education. Yussen (1977) examined seventh, ninth, and twelfth grader adolescents' written moral dilemmas. In the study, it was seen that most frequently, dilemmas focused on interpersonal relations. It can be said that moral dilemmas can be used to teach character education in relationship to the social problems in society. Tirri and Pehkonen (2002) examined the moral reasoning and scientific argumentation of adolescents who are gifted in science. The results of the study revealed that students identified different relevant dimensions regarding the moral dilemma under discussion. The principles and values in solving a dilemma differ according to a student's moral sensitivity. Williams et. al. (2003) indicated that their character education program was successful at higher education level. They explained that teachers motivate students to take responsibility for their own lives. Also, models of high character values, integrated and experiential curriculum, and active education were the other components of their program. It can be said that both findings of this research and related literature emphasize student-centered activities, real life experience, and role models in terms of good character.

Results of this study show that reflective diaries, discussion activities, writing activities in the classroom, observations, and interviews with students and parents are assessment methods in character education. Similarly, Thomas (1991) emphasizes that assessments of character education should include assessment of reflection and critical and creative thinking regarding the values that students develop. Bryan and Babelay, (2009) recommend a four-step method of reflective practice that includes "the details of a situation; the relevant virtues; the relevant principles, values, and ethical frameworks; and the range of acceptable courses of action" for ethics education in medical schools. Boyd, Dooley and Felton (2006) measured affective learning by having students write about their experiences in agriculture education. Results of their study showed that some students expressed affective learning at higher levels of the affective taxonomy and increased their level of reflective writing. Husu and Tirri (2003) examined one teacher's moral reflection in light of philosophical theories. They aimed to point out how abstract philosophical theories can be transferred into real-world issues in education and how these samples can support teachers in their ethical reflection. Results of this study and mentioned studies from the literature point out importance of reflection in assessment of character education.

In conclusion, it can be said that the research Center which was featured in this case study of character education deals with the positive aspects of adolescent development. Their research suggests that the educational environment for character education should consider curriculum, school environment, teachers' role and responsibilities, and school-parent-community collaboration. Participants mentioned activities such as dilemma discussions, roundtable discussions, real life experiences, teaching moral exemplars, using stories, and developing long term projects for character education. They recommended assessment methods such as reflective diaries, discussion activities, writing activities in classroom, observations, and interviews with students and parents. The results of this research point out that character education studies can be organized properly to track the developmental features of students and their development can be supported with real life experiences. All school curriculum, the school environment, teachers, parents and also the community should contribute to this process. Students need to understand the purpose for character education, and participate actively in this process.

These suggestions can be put forth in light of the results:

- Character education research centers in educational faculties with the purpose of conducting theoretical and practical studies on character education would benefit the Turkish educational system.
- Developmental features and needs can be considered in character education studies.
- Character education should be emphasized throughout the entire school curriculum.
- All school and community settings should include character education activities.
- Teachers should be aware of their role and responsibilities in character education.
- Real life experiences are important to make character education effective.
- Reflective assessment methods can be used in character education.

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