

Character Education as Prevention

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In this paper, an argument will be advanced for the wedding of two disciplines: prevention science and character education. Both are relatively well-developed disciplines and arguing for the legitimacy of either one is not necessary. Rather it is the relation between them that requires justification. That is precisely what I will attempt to achieve here. First, I will argue that the focus of prevention science, especially as it relates to preventing undesirable child and adolescent behaviors, should be broad rather than narrow. In particular, I will focus predominantly on school-based efforts. Most of this argument, however, would also apply to community or family-based efforts. Second, I will argue for an overlap between what is commonly understood as character education and what is commonly understood as prevention. Lastly, I will offer evidence that will demonstrate the preventive value of character education.

Generalized Prevention

Prevention efforts, whether targeting substance abuse or some other behavior (such as unprotected sex, antisocial behavior, suicide, or academic disengagement), come in many shapes and sizes. Examples include curricular information packages, skill training modules, and motivational presentations. Despite the differences in these approaches, they all must address one simple issue: should the prevention effort explicitly target the behavior(s) to be prevented (a "targeted" approach) or should it more broadly aim to address risk and/or protective factors that are generic (a "general" approach)? Battistich and his colleagues (1996) have argued that "preventive interventions should (a) address a broad range of risk and resiliency factors and (b) occur early in the period when a risk factor predicts maladaptation and prior to the onset of problem behavior" (p. 13). In other words, prevention efforts should target children at period before they are already at risk for engaging in problem behaviors and before they have begun engaging in those behaviors.

Dividing prevention efforts into those that take a targeted approach versus those that take a general approach would not be completely accurate, however, because many initiatives actually attempt to do both. Furthermore, research on this topic tends to reveal findings that would support both approaches. That is, while children and adolescents tend to become more deviant (thus warranting a general approach), they also tend to do particular undesirable, interrelated behaviors because of specific factors (thus calling for a targeted approach; Osgood et al., 1988; Cohen et al., 1990). But I am more concerned here with the conceptual distinction rather than the practical one, because the conceptual distinction relates to how we think about and therefore design and implement prevention initiatives.

Prevention efforts that only take a targeted approach are inherently limited. The rich body of information about prevention clearly points to the fact that undesirable behaviors are interrelated and share many of the same causes. Different theorists may disagree on the list or categories of causes, but they agree that a prevention model that views an undesirable behavior as having only one cause is conceptually impoverished. For example, Hawkins, Catalano, and Miller (1992) differentiate between contextual, individual, and interpersonal

clusters of risk factors for substance abuse whereas Lavouvie, Pandina, White, and Johnson (1986) use the categories of psychological, parent, school, and peer risk. Whichever typology one uses, it quickly becomes clear that many, if not most of the specific risk and protective factors are not particular to the behaviors to be prevented. Because it is one of the richest analyses of this issue, we will rely mostly on the model developed by Hawkins and his colleagues to demonstrate this point.

Hawkins, Catalano, and Miller (1992) include the following among their risk factors for substance abuse: aggression, academic failure, low commitment to school, and low religiosity. Among their protective factors are attachment to parents, regular church attendance, social competence, cooperative learning, and school organization. It should be clear that none of these are specific to substance abuse. Indeed they apply differentially to many other undesirable behaviors such as violence, delinquency, and unprotected sex. I do not wish to be misleading and present the argument that risk is fully generic. Not all risky behaviors are caused by the same set of factors. This is clearly not so (Cohen et al., 1990; Osgood et al., 1988). Rather, I want to argue that risk for and protection against such behaviors is often involve factors that are not specific to the targeted behavior. Once this is established, we can move to the next argument; that is, that prevention can be thought of as a matter of promoting human development and not merely a matter of preventing a specific behavior or set of behaviors (Cowen, 1997; Yoshikawa, 1994). This is what I mean by the "general" approach to prevention. I ask the reader to consider the following question: Which child do you think is less likely to use drugs, a child who has many relevant developmental weaknesses (e.g., distractible temperament, rebelliousness, etc.) but has learned the skills to resist peer pressure to use drugs or the child who has plentiful relevant developmental strengths (e.g., commitment to school and family, self-control, good peer relations) but has not learned drug specific prevention behaviors? The intuitive answer is that the child with many developmental weaknesses is at greater risk.

In another article (Berkowitz & Begun, in press), I have argued for another dichotomy: proximal (current) versus distal (past) causes of substance abuse. Proximal causes are those conditions operating near or at the time of the undesired behavior and directly linked to that behavior. For example, local availability of the drug, social isolation, perceived current peer drug use are all potential proximal causes of drug use. Distal causes are those that created the condition for the proximal causes to be effective. For example, inadequate infant-parent bonding, parental modeling of substance use, neurological damage due to prenatal drug exposure may all be distal causes.

Many researchers and practitioners have focused on each or both of these two types of causes. It is worth emphasizing that many of the causes, especially the distal causes are fairly generic. Hence, we need to think about prevention as the formation of the person more holistically. As Peter Benson (1997) has noted, the "failure to pay attention to the development of our young, goes a long way toward explaining the proliferation of health-compromising and future-jeopardizing behaviors among young people that unnerve all of us" (p. xiv). Prevention inherently includes fostering healthy development, and that includes the development of character.

The Relation of Prevention and Character Education

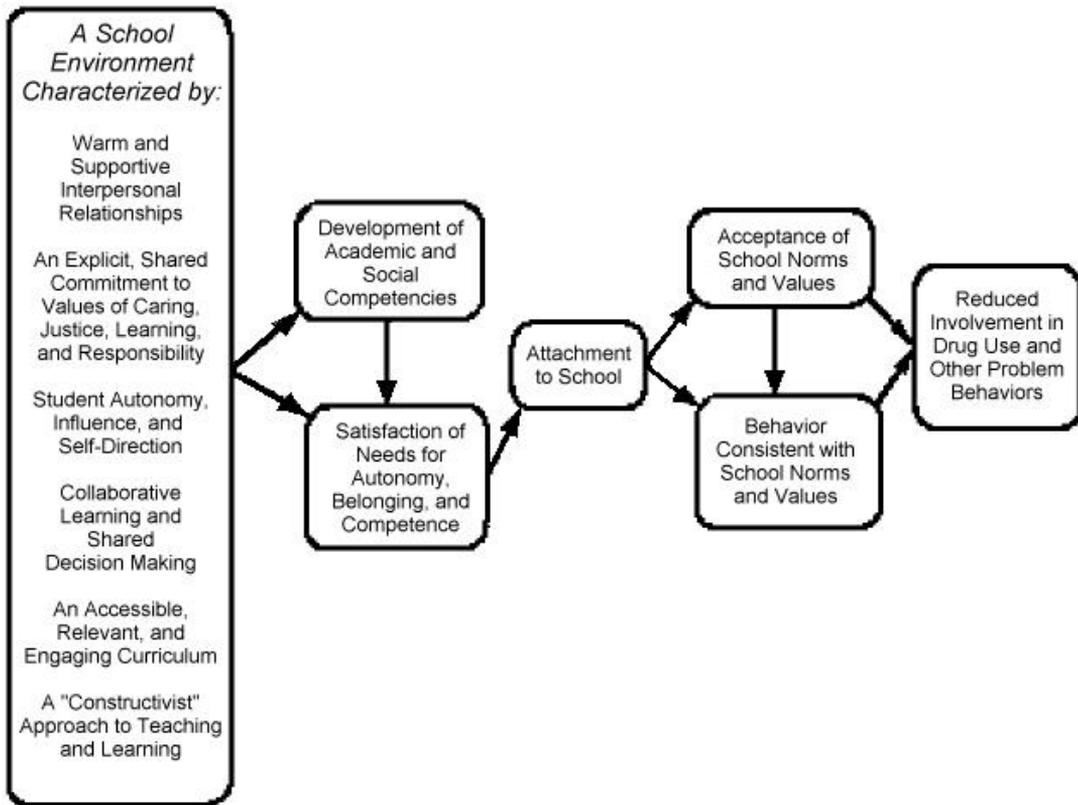
Character education, although it comes in quite varied forms, generally attempts to shape the moral person. Sometimes this agenda stems from a concern for promoting civics and citizenship, sometimes from a reaction against undesirable behavior trends, sometimes because of an enlightened understanding of education, sometimes as a compensation for the

failure of other institutions (e.g., the family or the church). Just as there are varied forms of and justifications for character education, there are also quite varied conceptions of the moral person. Some focus on socially sanctioned behaviors, others on maturity of moral thinking, some on values and attitudes, and yet others on morally-relevant personality traits. More recently, I (Berkowitz, 1997) and others (e.g., Damon & Colby, 1996; Lickona, 1991) have argued for an integrated and comprehensive view of the moral person both conceptually and as a basis for the design of character education programs. In our view, the moral person would be viewed as a composite of moral emotions, reasoning structures, values, personality traits, and so on. Hence, effective character education would focus on promoting or developing attitudes, behavior, emotions, and cognitions. This is not much different from what comprehensive general prevention initiatives are intended to achieve. The similarities between character education and prevention initiatives are plentiful. I will offer some examples.

Prevention programs often highlight the need for parental involvement. Hawkins et al. (1992) suggest that substance abuse is reduced by training parents to "(a) set clear expectations for behavior, (b) monitor and supervise their children, (c) consistently reinforce prosocial behavior, (d) create opportunities for family involvement, and (e) promote the development of their children's academic, social, and refusal skills" (p. 93). Many character education models espouse much of the same agenda for parents. Indeed there is research to suggest that including parents in what has traditionally been school-based peer activities is more effective than the traditional approach in promoting moral reasoning development. Lickona (1983) has presented a detailed model of how parents can promote character development, a model which includes most of the elements listed by Hawkins and his colleagues for preventing substance abuse.

Hawkins and his colleagues (1992) also suggest that, in schools, cooperative learning and school organization can help protect students from abusing substances. The Child Development Project, the most highly respected and most effectively studied character education program, relies heavily on both of these elements (Battistich, Schaps, Watson, & Solomon, 1996). The Just Community Schools approach (Power, Higgins & Kohlberg, 1989) entails an ambitious character education model that centers on participation in and reform of school governance. It is aimed to promote moral reasoning maturity, commitment to school, and responsible behavior. Commitment to school has frequently been identified as a key factor in preventing various undesirable behaviors (e.g., Battistich & Hom, 1997; Resnick et al., 1997).

In looking at summary lists of risk factors for adolescent undesirable behaviors (e.g., Hawkins et al., 1992), we can readily identify many that can also be categorized as goals of character education (e.g., values, alienation from society, low religiosity, low commitment to school, aggression). The same can be done for protective factors or those things that help protect students from engaging in problem behaviors (e.g., attachment to parents, belief in societal values, social skills, cooperative learning, school organization, parent involvement). The Child Development Project (Developmental Studies Center, 1998a), for example, reports that their character education initiative results in gains in, among other things, commitment to democratic values, conflict resolution skills, and liking for school, all of which parallel risk and protective factors listed above. Furthermore, they do so in part by explicitly implementing cooperative learning, school re-organization, and parent involvement, which are also protective factors listed above. So we can see a clear parallel between the means and ends of both prevention initiatives and character education initiatives. They are using similar methods and implementation elements and achieving similar goals.



Another source of support for the relation between prevention and character education is research examining the relation between moral development and substance use. A few findings are worth noting here. First, in our own research (Berkowitz et al., 1998) we have found a clear relation between one's stage of moral decision-making maturity and one's likelihood to use a range of substances (e.g., tobacco, marijuana, cocaine). The more mature one's ability to make moral decisions, the less likely one is to use such substances. Second, we and others have found that children, adolescents, and adults who consider the use of substances to be a moral issue (that is, a matter of right and wrong) use less than those who consider such use to be a matter of personal lifestyle choice (Berkowitz, Kahn, Mulry, & Piette, 1995; Nucci, Guerra, & Lee, 1991). In a recent dissertation, Giese (1998) studied the role of personal meaning about alcohol use in adolescence; that is, how an adolescent understands the role of alcohol in his or her life. Giese observed that personal meaning influenced both risk and protective factors. In particular, adolescents who understand the harmful role in their own lives of drinking alcohol were more protected from using alcohol. We can therefore see direct connections between substance use and certain dimensions of character education. What we still need to examine, however, is whether implementing character education actually leads to a reduction in substance use. Unfortunately, there has been very little research that directly examines the effect of character education on substance use. However, one excellent research project has provided systematic data on this question.

Effects of Character Education on Substance Use

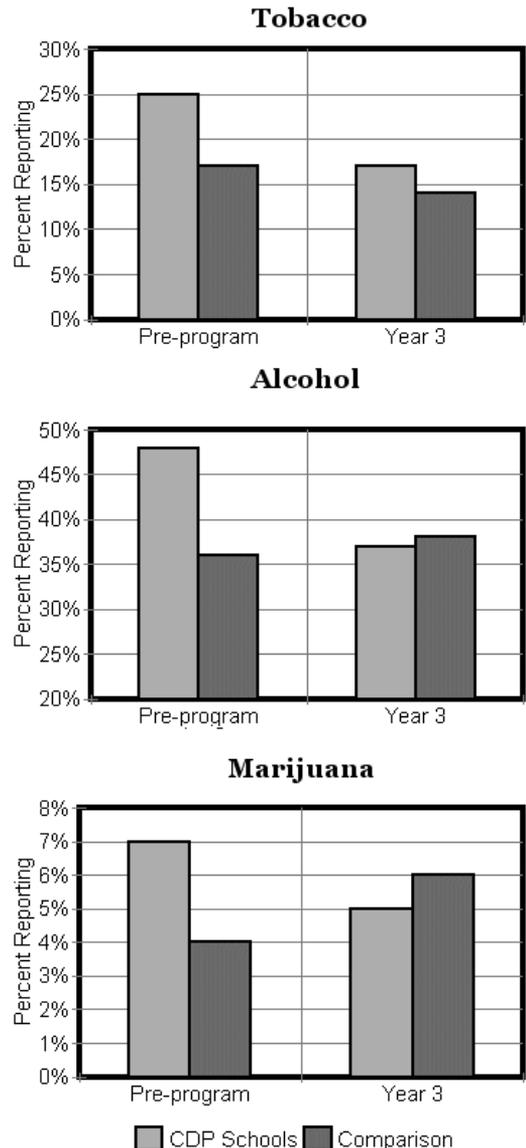
As noted above, the premier character education program is the Child Development Project (CDP). The architects of this program, have been interested for some time in the effects of character education on substance use, and have therefore collected data to answer this question. They have argued that (1) school-based prevention interventions have tended to look at a very limited range of protective factors (Battistich et al., 1996), (2) school as a community is linked with multiple protective factors (Battistich & Hom, 1996; Battistich et al., in press), and (3) research that focuses on health outcomes has now shown the value of using character education to prevent substance use (Battistich et al., in press; Developmental Studies Center, 1998b). In fact, the Child Development Project has recently been selected by the US Center for Substance Abuse Prevention as a model that should be replicated.

The Child Development Project has helped to reduce the use of tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana for 5th and 6th grade students over a three year period while use of the same substances increased or remained stable in matched comparison schools (Battistich et al., in press; Developmental Studies Center, 1998b). Key program elements (Battistich et al., 1996) are (1) "building stable, warm, and supportive relationships" (p. 14), (2) "simultaneous attention to social, ethical, and intellectual learning" (p. 16), (3) "teaching for understanding" (p. 16), (4) "meaningful, challenging, learner-centered curriculum" (p. 17), and (5) "fostering intrinsic motivation" (p. 17). The following figure represents their model of how character education prevents substance use. It is well beyond the scope of this chapter to detail the Child Development Project intervention, which is well documented in publications from the

The following findings have been reported by the Developmental Studies Center.

- Cigarette use declined from 25% of students to 17%, while declining from 17% to 14% in comparison schools.
- Alcohol use declined from 48% of students to 37%, while rising from 36% to 38% in comparison schools.
- Marijuana use declined from 7% of students to 5%, while rising from 4% to 6% in comparison schools (Developmental Studies Center, 1998b, p. 4).

In his 1991 book on character education, Lickona wondered whether "Child Development Project students will be less likely to be represented among . . . students who get involved in substance abuse?" (p. 29-30). The answer apparently is "yes."



This is the only scientific assessment of the impact of character education on substance use. However, other efforts at using character education to prevent risky behavior have been made. Two examples of more therapeutic initiatives that explicitly utilize moral or character education components to reduce risky behavior will be presented briefly.

Gibbs, Potter, and Goldstein (1995) have described a comprehensive program aimed at helping troubled adolescents develop the skills and maturity to avoid antisocial and other problem behaviors. This program (EQUIP) is designed to use peer-helping to build interpersonal skills, including character traits such as empathy and moral reasoning maturity. It is also specifically intended to reduce antisocial behaviors and drug abuse. Currently it is being implemented in a juvenile correctional facility as the substance abuse adjunct to the traditional corrections program. Future research will reveal whether such a program has similar effects with troubled youth as the Child Development Project has with mainstream elementary school children.

A more directly therapeutic model has been presented by Blechman and Hall (in press). With a similar rationale as the EQUIP program, they argue that "juvenile offenders . . . rely on a self-centered coping style. The most serious and stable juvenile offenders do not feel (or anticipate feeling) anxiety, fear, shame, guilt, or remorse; do not consider the moral implications of their actions" (p. 6). The character language in this argument is quite clear. This argument is then used to generate a risk and protective factor model of delinquency, specifically within the family system. Finally, this "Prosocial Family Therapy" model offers therapeutic interventions that includes character-building components (e.g., "treat others as you would like them to treat you" and "respect your elders", p. 20) and is explicitly described as a form of "moral education" (p. 10).

It should be clear from the research done thus far that character education can be effective in preventing substance use. Furthermore, some practitioners and theorists are beginning to build remediation and therapy models on the hypothesized value of character education in reducing risky behaviors.

Conclusions

We have argued that prevention should be viewed, at least in part, as a general approach to bolster or remedy child and adolescent development, especially those aspects of character that provide resiliency and protection from risks and pressures to engage in undesirable behaviors. We have further demonstrated that such character aspects are found prevalently in both research on prevention effects and in the literature on character education. That is, there is a great overlap between what prevention researchers report as risk and protective factors and what character educators see as the goals of character education. Finally, we have demonstrated direct linkages between character and drug use and, more significantly, have presented research from the Child Development Project that demonstrates the preventive benefits of their stellar character education program, as well as new therapeutic models that purport to do likewise.

It seems clear that character education can be an important means of preventing drug abuse and other undesirable behaviors. In fact, for younger children, it may be the most appropriate means of prevention. This suggests an important conceptual shift from focusing on the behaviors to be reduced or prevented to focusing on the person engaging in those behaviors. Once this shift is made, then the whole person becomes the focus and the developmental causes of the problem come into sharper focus. In other words, one important approach to preventing unhealthy behaviors is to build healthy people. This indeed has long been the focus of character education.

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