

# ***WHAT WORKS IN CHARACTER EDUCATION***

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Despite the rapidly growing interest in and implementation of character education, broadly defined, there is no extensive review of the research base for effective practice. With federal, state, and local governments investing heavily in educational practices intended to foster the development of character in pre-K-12 grade students, it is imperative that theorists, curriculum developers, educators, teachers, and researchers know if character education achieves its goals, and if so what it achieves and how. Toward this end, a review of existing research was conducted to answer these three questions. Thirty-three effective programs were identified and the 64 empirical studies plus 5 meta-analyses and literature reviews of those programs were examined to identify the most common effects of such educational interventions and the most common shared practices of those programs. Character education can work when implemented with fidelity and broadly, and has a very robust impact. Effective character education tends to include: professional development; student interactive pedagogical strategies; an explicit focus on character/ethics; direct training of social and emotional competencies; modeling of character; aligned classroom/behavior management strategies; and community service and/or service learning. Finally, suggestions are offered for future research based on what is and is not currently known about effective practice in character education.

Over the past 2 decades, character education has experienced a renaissance in the United States, as well as in many other countries. It is included in the No Child Left Behind Act, was highlighted in State of the Union addresses by both Presidents William Clinton and George W. Bush, and has been supported by many state legislatures, including implementation of social-emotional educational standards in Illinois. Federal funding for character education implementation and research has increased dramatically over the past 2 decades, and numerous national character education organi-

zations have been established during this period, including the Character Education Partnership and Character Counts. National and regional character education conferences are proliferating, university-based courses in character education have increased, and workshop, curricula, and professional development resources abound.

The explanation for this growth trend is not clear; perhaps it is because of (1) reactions to highly publicized ethics violations in a variety of arenas of public life, (2) data on societal and particular youth deviancy, (3) increased federal

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support for character education, and (4) the bipartisan, ecumenical acceptance of character education as a response to such trends. Regardless of the reasons for this upswing in character education in the United States, one problem is clear. Little is known about the effects, if any, of character education in K-12 schools. Most of what is implemented and/or prescribed is based on intuition, marketing, or chance. Scientific research is unfortunately not currently a primary basis for designing and/or selecting character education implementation strategies.

With this in mind, and in collaboration with the Character Education Partnership ([www.character.org](http://www.character.org)), a review of the existing research on character education was designed and implemented. There were three guiding questions behind this study: (1) Is there empirical evidence that pre-K-12 character education is effective?; (2) If so, what are the effects of pre-K-12 character education?; (3) What are the common characteristics of effective character education initiatives?

### ***DEFINING THE DOMAIN***

Character education is part of a semantic minifield. Terminology is complicated by historical changes, political affiliations, public connotations, and turf battles over established terms (Howard, Berkowitz, & Schaeffer, 2004; for an excellent history of the field, see McClellan, 1999). For the purposes of this review, a definition that circumscribed the domain to be studied was necessary. The strategy was to begin with the end. Character education, as defined here, is intended to promote student development. The aspects of student development of relevance are those that enable and motivate the individual to be a moral agent (i.e., to engage in systematic, intentional prosocial behavior). Such developmental outcomes include moral values (e.g., prosocial attitudes and motives), socio-moral reasoning competencies (e.g., perspective-taking, moral reasoning), knowledge of ethical issues and considerations, moral emotional competencies

(e.g., empathy, sympathy), a prosocial self-system (e.g., moral identity, conscience), relevant behavioral competencies (e.g., ability to disagree respectfully, conflict resolution skills), and a set of characteristics that support the enactment of such prosocial motives and inclinations (e.g., perseverance, courage). In other words, the outcomes of effective character education are a complex set of psychological characteristics that motivate and enable one to function as a moral agent (Berkowitz, 1997).

It was recognized that such outcomes are not the purview merely of those educational initiatives that self-identify as character education. Therefore, a more conceptual, analytical approach was taken to inclusion and exclusion for this review. All educational initiatives that explicitly targeted some aspects of this set of character outcomes or assessed some subset of them as dependent variables in outcome studies were considered for this review.

The logic model for the domain selection strategy was:

- Character is a psychological construct (i.e., the outcome of effective character education is the psychological development of students).
- Character education targets a subset of child development. This subset (character development) is the composite of those psychological characteristics that enable and motivate the child to function as an effective moral agent (i.e., to be socially and personally responsible, ethical and self-managed).
- Character education includes educational initiatives intended to promote such development, and effective character education relies on strategies empirically demonstrated to effectively promote such development.

The result of this logic model was that the review would include both explicitly self-identified character education initiatives and parallel initiatives in related fields. Such fields would include but not be limited to:

social-emotional learning (SEL), moral education (ME), violence prevention (VP), drug and alcohol prevention (DAP), and service learning (SL). Only empirical studies (i.e., experimental and quasi-experimental studies) examining the outcomes of pre-K-12 (or some subset of those grades) school-based initiatives would be included.

## **METHOD**

The goal of this review was to optimally uncover and then review all scientifically sound (see below for selection criteria) pre-K-12 outcome research on educational initiatives that fit our logic model and definitions. In order to accomplish this, a variety of methods were utilized:

- **Expert advisory panel.** Relying on the expected domains to be studied, an expert advisory panel was assembled to serve as both informants on the research literatures from their respective areas of expertise and as reviewers and advisors to the overall project. A panel of five experts was assembled representing the fields of service learning, social-emotional learning, violence prevention, drug and alcohol prevention, and teacher/classroom effects on students. The panelists and their areas of expertise were intended to supplement the expertise in character education of the authors, who were principal and coprincipal investigators of this project. The panelists were paid for their participation through a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The panelists were asked to individually supply lists of studies that fit the study parameters as well as any recent review articles from within their respective fields. They were not given a timeline but all identified studies were conducted within the past 40 years, with the majority in the past 2 decades.
  - **Electronic literature reviews.** Numerous electronic data bases were searched, including ERIC, PsychINFO, HealthSTAR, and the Social Science Index.
  - **Review chapters and articles.** Overall 760 documents were collected, including 67 research reviews.
  - **Direct contacts with identified program developers and program evaluators.** Once lists of character education programs were amassed and nominations from the expert panel were received, direct contact was made with those who either developed the programs or evaluated the programs to solicit outcome evaluation reports.
- In total, 109 research studies and five focused program reviews were identified that fit the criteria for domain definition (see above). The next step was, for each study, to determine (1) if the study met criteria for scientific rigor (see below) and (2) if the study reported significant positive outcomes.
- The initial criteria for scientific rigor were adjusted as studies were reviewed. The final criteria for acceptable research design were:
1. A comparison group was included.
  2. A pre- and postdesign was used, or a method for establishing equivalency of the program and control groups was incorporated.
  3. Statistical tests of significance were reported.
- For an ideal research design, the following additional criteria were included:
1. Random or matched comparison and program groups.
  2. Delayed posttests.
  3. Publication in a peer-reviewed journal.
  4. Assessment of program implementation.
- Of the 109 studies, 73 were deemed to have at least an acceptable scientific design. The rejected studies typically had no comparison

group and/or no baseline assessment. Some were rejected because of sketchy methodological information (typically in unpublished technical reports), or reliance on only descriptive statistics for data analysis.

Next, an assessment was made whether each of those 73 studies demonstrated program effectiveness. In order to do this, a number of decision rules were applied. For each statistical test of a student character outcome (see below and Table 2), points were assigned as follows: (a) two points for significant positive effect; (b) zero points for a non-significant effect; (c) minus three points for an iatrogenic (significant negative) effect. The summary algorithm used was to add all the points for a given study, and then to divide the number of points by the total number of statistical tests. For example, if a study did ten statistical tests and seven were significant (14 points), two were nonsignificant (0 points) and one was iatrogenic (-3 points), the total points for that study would be 11. Eleven divided by the 10 statistical tests would give a score of 1.10. If however there were seven significant and three nonsignificant effects, the score would be 1.40 (14 divided by 10). The cutoff score was .40 for effectiveness. Iatrogenic effects were rare (approximately 2% of all statistical tests, and more than 1/3 of them accounted for by two ineffective programs) but were considered to be serious, as a character education program that actually increases violence or drug use or decreases moral reasoning development should not be recommended, even if it produces other desirable outcomes.

Next, all studies for each program (see Table 1) were combined using the same algorithm to determine program effectiveness. If a program had only one study, then the score for that study determined program effectiveness. If a program had more than one study, then the significant, non-significant, and iatrogenic effects of the multiple studies were combined and the same cutoff score (.40) was used to determine program effectiveness. Thirty-three programs were found to be effective

based on their cumulative 64 studies and the five meta-analyses and literature reviews of two of the programs (Moral Dilemma Discussions; Teaching Students to be Peacemakers).

The 64 studies of the 33 effective programs served as the primary data set for this review. All 64 studies examined the effects of a school-based program. This ranged from a single study (for 15 of the programs) or two studies (6 programs) to multiple studies (10 programs had from 3 to 7 studies, with half of them having 3 studies). The 64 studies were supplemented with two literature reviews and three meta-analyses. Four of them (2 reviews; 2 meta-analyses) examined studies of the effects of moral dilemma discussions (Enright, Lapsley, Harris, & Shawver, 1983; Lind, 2002; Lockwood, 1978; Rest & Thoma, 1986). In all of these cases, there was one independent variable (moral dilemma discussion) and one dependent variable (moral reasoning development). One meta-analysis examined the effects of Teaching Students to Be Peacemakers, a cooperative-learning based program (Johnson & Johnson, 2000a, 2000b). Only these two programs had a large number of studies apiece, and available summary studies.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Does Character Education Work?***

A more appropriate way to phrase this research question is “*can* character education work?” In fact, 88% (64 out of 73) of the scientifically sound studies identified were included in this review because they demonstrated program effectiveness. The list of character education programs that were found to be effective, along with the corresponding research studies for each, is in Table 1.

### ***What Are the Effects of Character Education?***

In order to describe the effects of character education, a categorization of the reported

TABLE 1  
List of Scientifically Supported Programs With Corresponding Research Study Citations

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1. Across Ages (elementary, **middle**\*)
    - a. Taylor, LoSciuto, Fox, Hilbert, & Sonkowsky (1999)
  2. All Stars (**middle**)
    - a. Hansen (1996)
    - b. Harrington, Giles, Hoyle, Feeney, & Yungbluth (2001)
  3. Building Decision Skills with Community Service (**middle**)
    - a. Leming (2001)
  4. Child Development Project (**elementary**)
    - a. Benninga et al. (1991)
    - b. Battistich, Schaps, Watson, Solomon, & Lewis (2000)
    - c. Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis (2000)
    - d. Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson (2004)
  5. Facing History and Ourselves (**middle**, high)
    - a. Schultz, Barr, & Selman (2001)
  6. Great Body Shop (**elementary**)
    - a. The Center for the Evaluation and Research with Children and Adolescents (1999)
  7. I Can Problem Solve (**elementary**)
    - a. Shure & Spivack (1979)
    - b. Shure & Spivack (1980)
    - c. Shure & Spivack (1982)
    - d. Shure & Healy (1993)
  8. Just Communities (**high**)
    - a. Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg (1989)
  9. Learning for Life (**elementary**, middle, high)
    - a. Syndics Research Corporation (1997)
  10. Life Skills Training (elementary, **middle school**)
    - a. Botvin, Dusenbury, Baker, James-Ortiz, & Botvin (1992)
    - b. Botvin, Baker, Dusenbury, Botvin, & Diaz (1995)
    - c. Botvin, Schinke, Epstein, Diaz, & Botvin (1995)
    - d. Botvin, Epstein, Baker, Diaz, & Ifill-Williams (1997)
    - e. Botvin, Griffin, Diaz, & Ifill-Williams (2001)
    - g. Spoth, Redmond, Trudeau, & Shin (2002)
  11. LIFT (Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers) (**elementary**)
    - a. Reid, Eddy, Fetrow, & Stoolmiller (1999)
  12. Lions-Quest (**elementary, middle, high**)
    - a. Quest International (n.d. a)
    - b. Quest International (n.d. b)
    - c. Quest International (n.d. c)
    - d. Eisen, Zellman, Massett, & Murray (2002)
  13. Michigan Model for Comprehensive School Health Education (elementary, **middle**, high)
    - a. Slope, Copeland, Kamp, & Lang (1998)
  14. Moral Dilemma Discussion (**elementary, middle, high**)
    - a. Lockwood (1978)
    - b. Enright et al. (1983)
    - c. Rest & Thoma (1986)
    - d. Lind (2002)
  15. Open Circle Program (Reach Out to Schools)(**elementary**)
    - a. Hennessey & Siegle (1998)
    - b. Taylor, Liang, Tracy, Williams, & Seigle (2002)
  16. PeaceBuilders (**elementary**)
    - a. Krug, Brener, Dahlberg, Ryan, & Powell (1997)
    - b. Flannery et al. (2003)
  17. Peaceful Schools Project (**elementary**)
    - a. Twemlow et al. (2001)
- 

*(Table continues on next page)*

TABLE 1  
Continued

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18. Peacemakers (**elementary, middle**)  
a. Shapiro, Burgoon, Welker, & Clough (2002)
19. Positive Action (**elementary, middle, high**)  
a. Flay (2000)  
b. Flay, Allred, & Ordway (2001)  
c. Flay & Allred (2004)
20. Positive Action Through Holistic Education (PATHE) (**middle, high**)  
a. Gottfredson (1986)
21. Positive Youth Development (**middle**)  
a. Caplan et al. (1992)
22. Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) (**elementary**)  
a. Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma (1995)  
b. Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group (1999)  
c. Kam, Greenberg, & Walls (2003)
23. Raising Healthy Children (**elementary, middle, high**)  
a. Catalano et al. (2002)
24. Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP)(**elementary, middle**)  
a. Aber, Jones, Brown, Chaudry, & Samples (1998)  
b. Aber (2003)
25. Responding in Peaceful & Positive Ways (RIPP)(**middle school**)  
a. Farrell, Meyer, Sullivan, & Kung (2001)  
b. Farrell, Meyer, & White (2003)
26. Roots of Empathy (**elementary, middle**)  
a. Schonert-Reichl, Smith, & Zaidman-Zait (2002)  
b. Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zait, & Hertzman (2003)
27. Seattle Social Development Project (**elementary**)  
a. Hawkins et al. (1992)  
b. O'Donnell, Hawkins, Catalano, Abbott, & Day (1995)  
c. Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill (1999)  
d. Hawkins, Guo, Hill, Battin-Pearson, & Abbott (2001)  
e. Lonczak, Abbott, Hawkins, Kosterman, & Catalano (2002)
28. Second Step (**elementary, middle**)  
a. Orpinas, Parcel, McAlister, & Frankowski (1995)  
b. Grossman et al. (1997)  
c. Van Schoiack-Edstrom, Frey, & Beland (2002)
29. Social Competence Promotion Program for Young Adolescence (**middle**)  
a. Weissberg & Caplan (1998)
30. Social Decision Making & Problem Solving (SDM/PS) (**elementary, middle, high**)  
a. Elias et al. (1986)  
b. Elias, Gara, Schuyler, Branden-Muller, & Sayette (1991)  
c. Gottfredson, Jones, & Gore (2002)
31. Teaching Students to be Peacemakers (**elementary, middle, high**)  
a. Johnson & Johnson (2000a, 2000b)
32. Teen Outreach (**middle, high school**)  
a. Allen, Philliber, & Hoggson (1990)  
b. Allen, Kuperminc, Philliber, & Herre (1994)  
c. Allen, Philliber, Herrling, & Kuperminc (1997)
33. The ESSENTIAL Curriculum (Project ESSENTIAL) (**elementary, middle**)  
a. Teel Institute (1998)
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\*Bold text indicates the level for which we analyzed research.

effects was needed. All outcome variables were listed and the grouped by a team of researchers, who then discussed ambiguities, overlaps, redundancies, and other conflicts. Ultimately a three-level scheme was created (see Table 2). The first level had four categories: risk behavior; prosocial competencies; school-based outcomes; general social-emo-

tional. Each first level category had 6 or 7 second level categories. For example, risk behavior had the following second level categories: knowledge and beliefs about risk; drug use; sexual behavior; protective skills; violence/aggression; general misbehavior. Correspondingly, each of the 26 second level categories had between 1 and 17 third level

TABLE 2  
Variable Outcome Taxonomy

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**Risk Behavior**

*Knowledge & Beliefs Re: Risk*

- Reactions to situations involving drug use
- Knowledge about substance abuse
- Normative beliefs about high-risk behaviors
- Intentions to use substances
- Attitudes toward use
- Attitudes toward guns and violence
- Risk-taking

*Drug Use*

- Frequency of use
- Quantities used
- Polydrug use

*Sexual Behavior*

- Sexual activity

*Protective Skills*

- Refusal skills
- Knowledge of violence-related psychosocial skills

*Violence/Aggression*

- Ridiculing/bullying
- Physical aggression and injury
- Name calling and verbal putdowns
- Threats and verbal intimidation
- Verbal aggression
- Dominance-aggression
- Victimization
- Fighting
- Breaking things on purpose
  - Bringing weapons to school
  - Non-physical aggression
  - Self-destructive behavior

*General Misbehavior*

- Gang activity
- Lying
- Court contacts
- Rude behavior
- Defiance of adult authority
- Stealing
- Vandalism

**Prosocial Competencies**

*Socio-Moral Cognition*

- Ethical decision-making ability
- Ethical understanding
- Understanding multiple perspectives
- Moral reasoning

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(Table continues on next page)

TABLE 2  
Continued

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<i>Personal Morality</i>	
	Sense of justice/fairness
	Other moral values
	Respect
	Honesty
	Ethical sensibility
	Taking responsibility for one's actions
	Respecting the property of others
	Leadership skills
	Following rules
	Self-discipline
<i>Prosocial Behaviors &amp; Attitudes</i>	
	Ethnocentrism
	Sense of social responsibility
	Keeping commitments
	Getting along with others
	Respect and tolerance
	Caring & Concern for others
	Teamwork and cooperation
	Helping others
	Including others
	Inclination to do community service
	Empathy
	Sharing
	Attitudes and knowledge about community service
	Ethical conduct
	Participation in positive extra-curricular activities
	Participation in civic and social actions
	Desire for wealth
<i>Communicative Competency</i>	
	Communication skills
	Attentive listening
<i>Character Knowledge</i>	
	Understanding of character attributes
	Ethical decision making
<i>Relationships</i>	
	Friends, family
	Value intimacy
<i>Citizenship</i>	
	Democratic values
	Desire for influence/power
<b>School-Based Outcomes</b>	
<i>School Behavior</i>	
	School attendance
	Compliance with school rules and expectations
	Detentions, suspensions and expulsions
	Skipping school without permission
	Overall classroom behavior
	Participation in classroom activities
<i>Attachment to School</i>	
	Bonding to school
	Sense of school as community
	Attachment to school
	Feeling of belonging to school community
	Levels of classroom interest and enthusiasm
<i>Attitudes Toward School</i>	
	Sense of responsibility to school
	General school climate is more positive
	Adjustment to new school
	Safety

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TABLE 2  
Continued

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<i>Attitudes Toward Teachers</i>	
	Trust and respect for teachers
	Feelings about whether teachers are trustworthy, supportive, fair and consistent
<i>Academic Goals, Expectations &amp; Motives</i>	
	Motivation to do well in school
	Educational expectations – how far students expect to go
	Task mastery goals
	Performance oriented goals
<i>Academic Achievement</i>	
	Academic achievement including grades, test scores
	Promotion to the next grade
<i>Academic skills</i>	
	Creative learning strategies
	Study skills
	Ability to focus on work/stay on task
<b>General Social-Emotional</b>	
<i>Self-Concept</i>	
	Self-perception
	Self-esteem
	Appreciates his/her schoolwork, work products and activities
	Refers to himself in generally positive terms
<i>Independence and Initiative</i>	
	Undertakes new tasks willingly
	Valuing independence
	Making decisions that affect students
	Makes good choices
	Self-direction and independence in activities
	Initiates new ideas relative to classroom activities and projects
	Asks questions when he/she does not understand
	Makes decisions regarding things that affect him/her
	Acts as a leader in group situations with peers
	Readily expresses opinions
	Assertiveness
<i>Coping</i>	
	Adapts easily to change in procedures
	Copes with failure by dealing with mistakes or failures easily and comfortably
	Takes criticism or corrections in stride without overreacting
	Self-efficacy
	Depression
	Negative expectations for the future
	Coping skills
<i>Problem-Solving Skills</i>	
	Alternative solutions
	Consequential thinking
	Behavioral adjustment
	Conceptualizing cause-and-effect
	Conflict resolution strategies
<i>Emotional Competency</i>	
	Ability to discuss emotional experiences
	Recognizing emotional cues
	Understanding how emotions change
	Stress/anxiety reduction techniques
	Feelings vocabulary
	Understanding simultaneous feelings
	Expressing emotions appropriately
	Impatience
	Emotionality
	Impulsivity
	Shyness
	Hyperactivity
<i>Attitudes, Knowledge, Beliefs re: Elders</i>	
	Knowledge about older people
	Attitudes towards school, elders and the future
	Attitudes towards older people

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categories, with most (73%) between 1 and 7 categories.

For each study examined, each test of an outcome variable was logged into the categorization scheme and recorded as either significantly positive, non-significant, or iatrogenic (negatively significant). The standard convention of significance was utilized; that is,  $p < .05$  for all statistical tests reported. There was unfortunately insufficient evidence to calculate effect sizes in many of the studies and therefore effect sizes were not utilized. In all there were 1,167 statistical tests of outcome variables in the data set. Of these, 50.7% (592) were significantly positive, 47.6% (556) were non-significant, and 1.6% (19) were iatrogenic (significantly negative).

Next, it was decided that the data would be reported for the level two categories as the four level one categories were too broad and there were too many Level three categories for the number of statistical tests in the data set. Table 3 reports the most commonly found significant outcomes of character education.

It needs to be understood that the data in Table 3 are in a sense artifactual. They reflect what researchers chose to study. The fact that sexual behavior is not a commonly found outcome, for example, is due to researchers tend-

ing to assess sexual behavior only when they have to; such as, when it is a targeted outcome goal of the specific intervention under study. The high frequency of sociomoral reasoning on the other hand is an artifact of the inclusion of two literature reviews and two meta-analyses of such studies and the fact that there was a flurry of interest in this method during the 1970s and 1980s. Nonetheless it is informative to examine what have found to be the effects of character education. The most commonly reported effects of character education are sociomoral cognition, prosocial behaviors and attitudes, problem-solving skills, reduced drug use, reduced violence/aggression, school behavior, knowledge and attitudes about risk, emotional competency, academic achievement, attachment to school, and decreased general misbehavior.

Given the artifactual nature of these data, a second way to examine the effects of character education was adopted. Each second level variable was analyzed for the "hit rate" or percentage of tests of that variable that were significantly positive. The results of this analysis are in Table 4.

The variables with the highest hit rate percentages are sexual behavior, character knowledge, sociomoral cognition, problem-solving

TABLE 3  
Most Commonly Found Significant Outcome Effects

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1. Sociomoral cognition ( <b>82</b> significant positive findings out of 111 tested)
2. Prosocial behaviors and attitudes ( <b>71</b> out of 167),
3. Problem-solving skills ( <b>54</b> out of 84),
4. Drug use ( <b>51</b> out of 104),
5. Violence/aggression ( <b>50</b> out of 104),
6. School behavior ( <b>40</b> out of 88),
7. Knowledge/attitudes about risk ( <b>35</b> out of 73),
8. Emotional competency ( <b>32</b> out of 50),
9. Academic achievement ( <b>31</b> out of 52)
10. Attachment to school ( <b>19</b> out of 33),
11. General misbehavior ( <b>19</b> out of 49)
12. Personal morality ( <b>16</b> out of 33)
13. Character knowledge ( <b>13</b> out of 15)

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TABLE 4  
Highest "Hit Rates" for Outcome Variables

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1. Sexual behavior (91%, 10 significant effects, out of 11 tested)
2. Character knowledge (87%, $n = 13$ out of 15)
3. Sociomoral cognition (74%, $n = 82$ out of 111)
4. Problem-solving skills (64%, $n = 54$ out of 84)
5. Emotional competency (64%, $n = 31$ out of 49)
6. Relationships (62%, $n = 8$ out of 13)
7. Attachment to school (61%, $n = 19$ out of 32)
8. Academic achievement (59%, $n = 31$ out of 52)
9. Communicative competency (50%, $n = 6$ out of 12)
10. Attitudes toward teachers (50%, $n = 2$ out of 4)
11. Violence and aggression (48%, $n = 50$ out of 104)
12. Drug use (48%, $n = 51$ out of 104)
13. Personal morality (48%, $n = 16$ out of 33)
14. Knowledge/attitudes about risk (47%, $n = 35$ out of 73)
15. School behavior (45%, $n = 40$ out of 88)
16. Prosocial behaviors and attitudes (43%, $n = 71$ out of 167)

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skills, emotional competency, relationships, attachment to school, academic achievement, and communicative competency. It is worth noting that five of the top 10 frequency outcomes are also in the top 10 for hit rate: sociomoral cognition; problem-solving skills; emotional competency; academic achievement; attachment to school. These variables therefore have been shown to be effectively affected most frequently and with the greatest efficiency (most significant effects per number of tests of significance).

### ***What Are the Common Implementation Strategies of Effective Character Education?***

One of the most central questions for this review is to identify the specific implementation strategies that affect the development of character. This, unfortunately, is a difficult question to answer with these data for two main reasons. First, most of the research reports do not provide adequate implementation detail. It is difficult to ascertain what

exactly comprises the character education program under investigation in a given outcome study. This includes both the content and process of the implementation. Some of the reports are rather skimpy because they are essentially unpublished technical reports. Second, most of the programs studied here were composed of many implementation strategies (the mean was 7.4 strategies per program). Furthermore, it was highly rare for a study to control for and isolate individual implementation strategies. Rather, in nearly all cases, the study was focused on the impact of the composite set of strategies that comprised the program under study. Only three exceptions were noted, with Across Ages (Taylor, Liang, Tracy, Williams, & Seigle, 1999) being studied with and without a mentoring component, All Stars (Harrington et al., 2001) comparing teachers and experts as program deliverers, and the Teen Outreach Program (Allen et al., 1990) assessing the effects of different amounts of student volunteerism.

Therefore, this review examined which strategies were most common across the 33

TABLE 5  
Character Education Program Elements

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**Content Elements**

1. Explicit character education programs (18)
2. Social and emotional curriculum (27)
3. Academic curriculum integration (15)

**Pedagogical Elements**

4. Direct teaching strategies (28)
  5. Interactive teaching/learning strategies (33)
  6. Classroom/behavior management strategies (15)
  7. Schoolwide or institutional organization (14)
  8. Modeling/mentoring (16)
  9. Family/community participation (26)
  10. Community service/service learning (8)
  11. Professional development (33)
- 

\*Number in parentheses indicates the number of programs in which that element was included.

TABLE 6  
Most Common Pedagogical Strategies

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- Professional development for implementation (33 programs)
  - Interactive teaching strategies (33)
  - Direct teaching strategies (28)
  - Family/community participation (26)
  - Modeling/mentoring (16)
- 

programs found to be effective at promoting character development. In order to do this, a categorization of implementation strategies was needed. This was derived empirically from the data set. A team of researchers described the strategies identified for each program, and then, by consensus, they were named and conceptually organized. The categorization scheme is in Table 5.

The most commonly reported strategies were professional development, interactive teaching strategies, direct teaching strategies, family/community participation, modeling/mentoring, classroom/behavior management, schoolwide strategies, community service/service learning (see Table 6).

In addition, a descriptive scheme was created to identify the content focus of the character education programs. The most common focus was social-emotional curricula (27 of 33 programs), most notably social skills and awareness lessons (e.g., communication skills, assertiveness), personal improvement or self-management lessons (e.g., self-control, goal setting, relaxation techniques), and problem solving or decision making.

The next most common focus was on some aspect of morality or ethics or virtue. Eighteen of the programs self-identified as character education programs. Others did not use the term “character” but had an explicit focus on values or ethics. Fourteen programs integrated

character education into the core academic curriculum, with the most common subject areas for integration being language arts and social studies. (For a more complete description of the content and processes of effective character education, see Berkowitz & Bier, 2005).

Of the 64 individual studies, 24 report assessing implementation quantity and/or quality. Of those 24 studies, 16 analyzed the relationship between implementation and student outcome variables. In every one of those 16 studies, a significant positive relationship was reported with higher amounts of implementation and/or higher quality implementation resulting in significantly greater positive student outcomes. Those 16 studies cumulatively related to 10 of the 33 effective programs.

## **DISCUSSION**

It is worth noting that this examination of outcome evaluations of character education programs does not reflect all or even most of character education practice. First, many character education programs have not been studied or have been studied with inadequate research designs. Therefore much of what may be effective practice is not included here. Second, most character education is not implemented with a prepackaged program; in fact, most typically character education is “home grown.” Schools tend to create their own character education programs, rather than adopting pre-existing ones like those reviewed here (for an overlapping but more extensive review of character education programs than offered here, see the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning’s *Safe and Sound*). Only one study has examined the impact of such home grown programs, and for only one outcome variable, academic achievement (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2003). In a study of a random, stratified sample of 120 California elementary schools applying for state recognition for excellence, it was

found that academic achievement scores were significantly correlated with four aspects of character education: parent and teacher modeling and promotion of character; quality opportunities for students to engage in service activities; promotion of a caring community and positive social relationships; ensuring a clean and safe environment.

Third, as noted above, there is little research on the individual implementation strategies that comprise the set of alternatives from which multicomponent programs are constructed. There are two notable exceptions to this however. Nearly 100 studies of moral dilemma discussions have been conducted (see reviews by Enright et al., 1983; Lind, 2002; Lockwood, 1978; Rest & Thoma, 1986). In nearly all cases, the only dependent variable is some measure of moral cognition. When students engage in facilitated peer discussions of moral dilemmas, they tend to show accelerated development of moral reasoning relative to comparison subjects. There have also been numerous studies of cooperative learning; however, as a character education program based largely on cooperative learning was already included in the set of 33 effective programs (*Teaching Students to be Peacemakers*), those data were not used to supplement this review. Nonetheless, it is clear that cooperative learning has a consistent impact on character development and academic achievement.

With these caveats, it is nonetheless clear that character education can effectively promote the development of a wide array of psychological outcomes that can be construed as aspects of character. It appears, not surprisingly, that fidelity of implementation matters. For those 10 programs that assessed fidelity, there was a clear trend for complete and accurate implementation to result in more outcome effectiveness than incomplete or inaccurate implementation. Thus, when implemented with fidelity, character education can and does work.

There is substantial variability in the nature of effective character education. Some programs are whole school reform models (e.g.,

Child Development Project), some are classroom lesson-based approaches (e.g., Learning for Life), some target specific behaviors especially substance use and peer violence (e.g., Life Skills Training), others are built from component sub-programs (e.g., Seattle Social Development Project), and so on. There appears to be substantial robustness in the general approach a particular character education initiative takes.

Character education is also robust in the range of outcomes it impacts. At least some effectiveness was observed for 24 of the 25 Level Two outcome variables (there were only two cases of tests for an impact on citizenship and both were non-significant). Character education can effectively positively impact a range of risk behaviors, a set of prosocial competencies, various school outcomes including academic achievement, and social-emotional competencies. It is well documented that character education can serve as effective primary prevention (Battistich & Hong, in press; Berkowitz, 2000) and can improve school culture (Power et al., 1989). These data also demonstrate that character education also improves learning and academic achievement (cf., Benninga et al., 2003).

While there are not many longitudinal studies of the enduring impact of character education, the few that have been done suggest that the effects of character education last beyond the school years in which they are experienced (CDP ref) even into early adulthood for an elementary school intervention (SSDP ref). One study demonstrated delayed effects of an elementary intervention on middle school academic achievement (Battistich & Hong, in press).

Certain character education strategies are more common in effective programs. It is worth repeating that these observations must be taken with a dose of caution. It is a matter of capitalizing on what happens to be implemented in the 33 programs we have identified as empirically supported. Furthermore, none of the 69 studies examined isolated specific practices in a way that they could be tested for

independent effects. Nonetheless, it was observed that the most common strategies were professional development for the implementers, peer interactive pedagogical strategies (such as class meetings, cross-age initiatives, and cooperative learning), direct teaching about character and ethics, skill training for intra- and interpersonal social/emotional competencies, an explicit agenda for studying and/or promoting character, involving family and community members, providing role models and/or mentors, and integrating character education into the core (and other) academic curriculum.

Finally, nearly all of the programs identified and used an extensive set of implementation strategies, although as noted there is little research on the independent effects of individual strategies. The mean number of different implementation types was 7.4 per program. Effective programs tend to utilize multiple strategies for promoting the development of character in students. Given the complexity of psychological morality and character development, this makes sense. In order to impact a wide range of such psychological outcomes, a varied set of intervention strategies would be necessary. It is unlikely that one strategy would effectively impact social behaviors, moral cognition, emotional development, attitudes toward risky behaviors, and so forth. Conflict resolution, conscience, moral reasoning, empathy, and bullying are unlikely to all have the same etiology and therefore to respond to the same single intervention strategy. Furthermore, when implemented in a complex and multifaceted environment like a school, a single implementation strategy is unlikely to have enough power to be a countervailing force against the multitude of other influences in that environment. Ideally, then character education should be a comprehensive approach to systematically reforming classroom or, preferably, school culture, and an approach that relies on a diverse set of empirically supported implementation strategies. Such a comprehensive approach demands a theoretically and empirically justified peda-

gological and developmental philosophy as its basis and justification. Consequently, the component strategies need to be aligned with both the theoretical model underlying the intervention and the targeted set of outcomes for which the intervention is designed.

### **Research Recommendations**

These conclusions suggest that we know much more empirically than is typically assumed in the literature; however, there is much more that we do not know than what we do know. The following is a list of research priorities based on this review of the existing research literature. The recommendations are grouped into eight categories.

**Basic science research.** Research is needed in the underlying psychological mechanisms of character development. To know how to educate for character, we need to know how character develops. For example, there is a need for studies of the development of the basic components of character, such as altruism, moral values, conscience, honesty, and moral reasoning. Some issues of particular importance to character education are the roles of exposure to literature and fictional heroes, the role of self-esteem, and the impacts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators.

**Epidemiological and survey research.** Little is currently known about national trends and frequencies in character education. There is a need for national surveys of implementation types and frequencies and a consensual classification system for theoretical foundations, outcomes, implementation strategies, training methods, and so forth.

**Assessment research.** Character education research would benefit from improvements in the assessment tools and strategies available to and used by researchers. This would be aided by a comprehensive taxonomy of outcome variables. Also needed is a modular battery of assessment instruments, including a vertically/developmentally articulated set of instruments for each variable. Psychometric studies of many existing instruments are also needed, as

are the development of norms for outcome variables and new measures for understudied variables and populations.

**Implementation research.** There is always a need for process or implementation research along with outcome research. There is also a need for research examining stages of implementation and other processes that impact implementations, such as professional development, school leadership, and mediating variables such as school culture and student bonding to school.

**Research on structural variations.** There are many issues concerning structural variations in character education that are yet to be adequately investigated. What is the nature and impact of home-grown or customized character education? What is the impact of embedding character education in a broader community initiative (Berkowitz, Vincent & McKay, 2001)? Can single implementation strategy initiatives have an impact?

**Isolation of variables.** Research has tended not to look at isolated variables. This is especially true for independent variables (implementation strategies) in general, but is also true for the relationships between specific implementation strategies and specific outcomes. Little is known for instance about what implementation strategies optimally affect altruism or honesty or personal responsibility, for instance.

**Summative evaluations of framework and supplemental programs.** There are two types of widely disseminated programs that have not been evaluated. Framework programs tend to provide a process for implementation (e.g., *Characterplus*) or a conceptual framework such as the CharacterCounts six pillars. Because they are mainly frameworks, they tend to be implemented in very diverse ways, with each site creating its own spin on the framework. Yet these programs are very widely used, and some summative evaluation would be very helpful. Supplemental programs on the other hand are modules or components that can be used alone but are typically part of a larger school or district initiative. Programs

like Project Wisdom or Wise Skills have not been evaluated and are difficult to evaluate as they are not really intended to be the sole cause of character development. Strategies are needed to evaluate the effects of such widely used supplemental programs.

### ***Additional Recommendations***

Often research is done ineffectively. It is recommended that future research rely on the following research design characteristics:

- Evaluation of implementation (process evaluation);
- Psychometrically validated assessment instruments;
- Estimations of effect sizes;
- Replication;
- Longitudinal research (or follow-up studies of prior research);
- A large coordinated longitudinal study;
- Many aligned small studies with common designs, variables, and measures; and
- Studies that compare different programs or control for specific implementation strategies.

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