

# A Special Theme Section: Action Research and Character Education

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Character education is considered one of the nation's oldest educational initiatives, and while it never really left the educational scene completely, it has traveled in and out of educational vogue throughout the century (Leming, 1997). In the 1990's character education returned to the educational landscape as perhaps the fastest-growing educational movement today. As an eclectic synthesis of previous moral education paradigms, comprehensive character education as advocated by the Character Education Partnership combines cognitive, affective, and behavioral moral education approaches to create a holistic approach for educating the complete moral person (Character Education Partnership, 1996; 1995). With the resurgent interest in character education there is, not surprisingly, renewed interest in evaluation issues related to the field.

While many consider program evaluation to be limited to a summative role, it also has a formative role in the program planning and development. Patton (1986) argues that, "program evaluation is the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs for use by specific people to reduce uncertainties, improve effectiveness, and make decisions with regard to what those programs are doing and affecting" (Patton, 1986, p. 14). This definition significantly expands the notion of evaluation to more than something done to judge the merit or worth of a program after the fact. Further, this definition specifically addresses some of the past weaknesses visible in the types of evaluation conducted in the field of moral education.

In general, comprehensive character education programs are characterized by custom-crafted approaches formulated around basic theoretical guidelines and tailored to meet the specific social and developmental needs of the population being served. The custom crafting of moral education programs is not exclusive to character education; it was also a prominent feature in Kohlberg's Just Community approach where common principles were modified to meet the specifics of each school (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). As with the Eleven Principles of the CEP, the general principles of the Just Community approach describe an intervention best described as equal parts of content and process. Specifically, in the development of his moral education theories, Kohlberg advocated an action research approach (Nucci, 1988; Power et al., 1989) that include the cyclical intertwining of theory and practice. A theory is developed, observations are made, and the theory is tested and revised, then tested, again and again ad infinitum.

The action research paradigm offers a compelling theoretical framework for the field of character education for at least three reasons: First, collaborative action research by its very nature involves practitioners and researchers working together in a common endeavor—a critical need of character education. In this regard, collaborative action research is pragmatic, and useful (Patton, 1986, 1988). Second, action research operates in a manner that is steeped in both summative and formative traditions. That is, it gathers outcome-data based on a theory, but this data is part of an ongoing reformulation of the theory and subsequent reconfiguring of the intervention. In this area, action research connects to and builds upon Chen and Rossi's articulation of theory driven evaluation (Chen, 1990; Chen & Rossi, 1983) where evaluation findings contribute to theoretical reformulation. Finally, action research encourages triangulation of data sources and data types (Calhoun, 1993). In addition to strengthening the validity of the study, the triangulation process integrates both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Action research builds nicely upon recent innovations in mixed method evaluation (e.g., Greene & Caracelli, 1997), and increases the likelihood of actually capturing the vast array of potential changes. It provides an approach theoretically aligned with character education; that includes a method for formative, as well as summative evaluation of a program. The collaborative action research framework describes a structure for collaboration between researchers and practitioners; however, it also provides a structure for linking research methodologies.

Action research is not simply something done to character education, or even necessarily for character education; rather, it is something that should be done as part of character education. As demonstrated by the work of Lawrence Kohlberg and his colleagues in the Just Community Schools, action research is something that reflective moral educators would do even if there were no name for it. For example, the Child Development Project, perhaps the most advanced, well researched, modern character education approach, highlights six recommendations for character education staff development. The recommendations include: "create a community where everyone is a learner, use a constructivist approach to staff development, use cooperative learning strategies, promote autonomy, and promote belonging" (Schaps, Watson, &

Lewis, 1996, p. 45). Action research fulfills each of these criteria. Of critical importance, action research allows practitioners and researchers to live the values as a professional community that they are attempting to instill in their school communities. Action research does not rule out the need for rigorous longitudinal research in the field of character education; however, action research increases the likelihood that rigorous longitudinal research would find positive outcomes. In sum, action research is not simply research *on* educators; it is research *by* educators, and *for* educators.

In the selections that follow action research and character education are viewed from a variety of perspectives. The selections include theoretical writings on the importance of action research for schools and teachers, examples of collaborative action research between university researchers and individual schools; examples of teacher-based classroom action research; examples of action research as formative evaluation, and discussions of staff development and the specific needs and challenges of integrating action research into schools.

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