

Concept Mapping and Character Education: New Directions in Character Education Planning and Evaluation

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This article describes the use of concept mapping to create a conceptual framework for planning a comprehensive character education program in a Central New York elementary school. Comprehensive character education attempts to create custom-built programs based on general character education principles and the particular needs of individual schools. A focus group of 18 school representatives, including teachers, parents, the building principal, and a school board member, brainstormed numerous specific program initiatives (N=103), individually sorted these into categories, and rated them for relative importance. A map was created using multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis, interpreted, and presented to the full staff. The final map identified 5 key areas of focus for comprehensive character education and the relative priority of specific planning activities within each of the five areas. Ultimately, concept mapping created a blueprint for short and long term planning with an accompanying evaluation schema. The potential implications for concept mapping as a planning and evaluation methodology in character education are considered.

Introduction

Fueled by public concern for the country's moral literacy and by the outbreak of school violence, character education has become one of the fastest growing movements in the field of education. To date, with the support of U.S. Department of Education Secretary Richard Riley, 21 states have received grants totaling approximately \$20 million; up to 10 more states will receive funding in 1999, and numerous additional states have applied for funding as well (Partnership, 1999). In the summer of 1998 the U.S. Department of Education released, *Early Warning, Timely Response*, a document recommending character education/citizenship education as resilience building steps for preventing school violence (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998). In addition, in his recent book on youth violence, Garbarino (1999) advocates character education as a strategy for preventing school violence. This ground swell of support for character education has made it one of the fastest growing educational movements today. As more schools begin character education initiatives, evaluation becomes the critical element in building and sustaining the support of educators, funding agencies, and the general public.

Historically, evaluation has represented the Achilles heel of moral education (Leming, 1997). After nearly a century of debate, there is still significant debate regarding character

education theory and evaluation. Character education critics (e.g., Kohn, 1997; Lockwood, 1993) quickly note the historical inability of character educators to demonstrate the relative success of previous moral education endeavors. Lockwood argues that there has been little, if any success in demonstrating a "systematic relationship between values and behavior" (Lockwood, 1993, p. 73). The classic research of Hartshorne and May (Hartshorne & May, 1928-1930) is frequently hailed as the hallmark study beginning the tenuous, yet historically consistent, pattern of null effects in character education assessment. However, subsequent reanalysis of the Hartshorne and May research suggests that many of the original findings actually support the efficacy of teaching character (Burton, 1976; Rushton, 1980; Rushton, 1981; Vitz, 1990). According to Vitz (1990) the Rushton reanalysis in particular demonstrates that, "Hartshorne and May's results have been consistently misunderstood in the psychological literature" (p. 717). In addition, Leming (1997) notes that a relatively minuscule amount of character education research has focused on issues of program effectiveness, and that there is an historical gap between quantitative research results and pedagogical practices.

The *Character Education Partnership* (CEP), the leading nonprofit, nonpartisan organization promoting comprehensive character education, advocates general

principles, rather than specific pre-packaged curricula. In the *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education* (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 1995) the CEP provides a blueprint for creating character education programs. The *Eleven Principles* are as follows:

1. Character education promotes core ethical values as the basis of good character.
2. 'Character' must be comprehensively defined to include thinking, feeling, and behavior.
3. Effective character education requires an intentional, proactive, and comprehensive approach that promotes the core values in all phases of school life.
4. The school must be a caring community.
5. To develop character, students need opportunities for moral action.
6. Effective character education includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners and helps them succeed.
7. Character education should strive to develop students' intrinsic motivation.
8. The school staff must become a learning and moral community in which all share responsibility for character education and attempt to adhere to the same core values that guide the education of the students.
9. Character education requires moral leadership from both staff and students.
10. The school must recruit parents and community members as full partners in the character-building effort.
11. Evaluation of character education should assess the character of the school, the school staff's functioning as character educators, and the extent to which students manifest good character.

As a blueprint, the *Eleven Principles* provide a prescriptive guide for schools. Note that these principles do not establish the specific practices that schools will engage in; rather, the principles establish 11 critical areas that all schools must address if they are interested in establishing comprehensive character education. The *Eleven Principles* begin with a simple, yet critical statement that reads:

There is no single script for effective character education, but there are some important basic principles. The following eleven principles serve as a criteria that schools and other groups can use to plan a character education effort and to evaluate available character education programs, books, and curriculum resources.

This statement is important because it suggests that character education is not prescriptive, but descriptive. Character education does not legislate a rigid programmatic formula; it is a dynamic process governed by developmental principles. There are pre-packaged character education curricula available. However, neither the fancy packaging nor the polished presentations of the material, automatically indicate that these programs represent comprehensive character education. Specifically, pre-packaged programs do not absolve schools of their responsibilities in the character

education process.

The custom crafting of moral education programs was also visible in Kohlberg's Just Community approach. The Just Community approach operated under the same general principles, yet each specific school program manifested something different—different rules of participation, different students, and different problems (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). In addition, these general principles required each school to partake in an action research process. That is, in the development of his moral education theories, Kohlberg advocated an action research approach (c.f., Nucci, 1988; Power, 1988). This approach to moral education enables the cyclical intertwining of theory, practice, and critical reflection. A theory is developed, practiced, tested, and reformulated in an unending cyclical process. The implications of this process are twofold: First, theory and practice must share a dialogue not a monologue. Second, character education is not something that you ever master completely—you must engage in a continuous cycle of planning, implementation, and evaluation.

The *Character Education Partnership* advocates a similar action research process for developing character education programs. Each school must follow a common process guided by general principles. In this process schools attempt to address certain key issues, as well as the problem areas specific to their school. Character education cannot function as a one-size-fits-all straightjacket. So too, schools cannot simply create anything they want and call it character education. The *Eleven Principles* represents the wisdom of previous moral education paradigms; it synthesizes the essential aspects of moral education content and process. The principles themselves are simply stated, yet the nature of the topic makes each principle worthy of deep consideration, application, and revision. Ultimately, the difficulty in attempting to assess character education outcomes is deeply rooted in a lack of formative evaluation devoted to clearly defining character education constructs.

A rigorous evaluative planning process surfaces as one of the critically important elements in the construction of custom-built character education programs. Historically character education evaluation has simply focused on summative outcomes, seeking to answer the question "Does character education work?" However, this all-important, yet elusive question, begs several questions of prior importance, such as "What does 'character education' mean in our school?" "How do we know what critical areas we should address, and in what order?" Character education theory will benefit greatly from advances in formative evaluation that seek to define the problem, and then measure the degree and quality of implementation. This type of evaluation does not rule out the need for rigorous outcome evaluation on a battery of student and school community outcomes. On the contrary, it increases the likelihood that schools will actually detect program outcomes. Rigorous formative evaluation helps define the constructs, aids short term and long term planning, and provides clear paths for outcome evaluation.

Concept mapping (Trochim, 1989a; Trochim, 1989b;

Trochim, 1989c) is a methodology particularly well-suited for comprehensive character education planning since it enables schools collectively to brainstorm, categorize, and prioritize their specific character education needs. According to Trochim (1994), concept mapping provides a process for group discussion of the topic (brainstorming), for organizing and prioritizing (unstructured sorting, and rating of the brainstormed statements), and several multivariate statistical analyses (multidimensional scaling and hierarchical cluster analysis). Essentially, concept mapping is a rigorous formative methodology for building the custom-made character education programs advocated by the *Character Education Partnership*. Specifically, concept mapping addresses the particular character education planning needs as described by character education researchers (e.g., Vessels, 1998). It provides character education programs clear constructs of focus, a process for involving collective creation, and numerous planning devices. Ultimately, the rigorous planning, monitoring, and implementation should help reduce contextual noise, increase the strength of program impact, and ultimately, increase the likelihood of positive outcome evaluation.

Method

Participants

Participants were staff members at Grimshaw Elementary School in LaFayette, New York. Grimshaw is a rural K-6 elementary school of roughly 515 students and 65 staff. They began planning their character education effort in the summer of 1998 at a week-long summer institute on character education at the State University of New York, College at Cortland. As a core-group of four teachers and one counselor gathered information and began to plan their school's character education initiative, it became clear that they needed to involve colleagues and the larger school community. They needed assistance gathering input data, establishing consensus, and organizing their planning effort. The five-member core group assembled a larger, more representative, 18-member focus group of teachers, parents, the building principal, and a board member to participate in the concept mapping process. All participants were female. Their experience with the school ranged from 1-28 years. One limitation of this loosely constructed representative group was the absence of males.

Session 1: Brainstorming the concept. In the literature Trochim describes the concept mapping process in great depth (Trochim, 1989a; Trochim, 1989b; Trochim, 1989c). The process as used in this study was conducted in two sessions on successive Monday evenings during May 1999. Each session lasted roughly two hours. The first was conducted in the school library; a portable IBM computer was used, along with an overhead projector so that participants were able to view their brainstormed statements. The author facilitated the focus-group discussions, and a second facilitator entered the statements into the *Concept*

System computer software. In the first session, participants brainstormed the topic of character education using structured brainstorming (Osborn, 1948, cited in Trochim, 1994). The group was guided by the focus prompt: "One specific thing this school should do to promote character development is . . .". The prompt helps create focused, succinct, and positive statements on the topic while limiting aimless rambling and "ain't it awful speeches." It is critical for maintaining productive and civil dialogue, especially given the perception of character education as potentially controversial.

Participants were asked to generate statements on character education that accurately completed the focus prompt. Everyone was encouraged to participate and no statements were dismissed or criticized, except for the purposes of clarification and discussion. The topics included a general discussion of character education and specific discussion of responses to the prompt. After 10 or 15 minutes of open, interactive discussion, the group was then able to generate several specific statements. After a general discussion of the current cafeteria experience, the group was able to generate numerous prompt statements about manners, respect, and other elements related to the cafeteria experience and the promotion of character. The group brainstormed 95 statements in approximately 2 hours.

Following the initial brainstorming session, the author printed the statements and copied them for distribution to the full staff. Along with an accompanying letter explaining the goal and the process, all faculty and staff received the 95 brainstormed statements and were subsequently asked to add any additional statements to the list. This part of the process was designed to maximize participation and buy-in by the staff. The staff was given three days to offer additions, corrections, or other suggestions. Although only 8 suggestions were recommended, this step represented a vital part of the democratic process. All staff were either directly involved in the process, or they were indirectly able to contribute their input.

Session 2: Sorting and Rating. The following Monday the focus group gathered in the cafeteria for the structuring stage of the process. This stage included three distinct activities: participants provided demographic information, they sorted the brainstormed statements (Now numbering 103 following recommended additions by faculty and staff) into categories, and they rated each statement for relative importance. Each person received a packet containing a deck of sort cards with one brainstormed statement per card (each statement was assigned a number 1-103). Participants were instructed to group the 103 statement cards into piles in a way that made sense to them. They were told to not: (1) create N piles (e.g., 103 piles with one item in each), (2) create one pile containing all 103 items, or (3) create a miscellaneous pile (e.g., a pile grouped together simply because they did not fit elsewhere).

After sorting the statements, each participant completed the rating task. For this task 103 brainstormed statements were assembled in questionnaire form and each participant

was asked to rate each statement on a 5-point Likert-type response scale in terms of how important this particular statement was in their overall character education effort, (1 = relatively unimportant, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = moderately important, 4 = very important, and 5 = extremely important). The goal was to rate each statement in terms of relative importance as compared to the other statements.

Participants also completed a questionnaire of basic demographic information that included gender, group role, and years of professional experience. This task completed the second session. Most participants were able to complete the task in a moderate amount of time (approximately 75 minutes). The first completed the three tasks in approximately 40 minutes, and one was unable to complete the task in the two hour time period and asked to complete the task at home. Three additional members who were unable to attend the second session were given packets to complete at home. In general, the data received from these individuals seemed to have more potential problems (for example, missing statements, haphazard group construction, etc.).

Data analysis. The data analysis process followed the concept mapping analysis outlined by Trochim, Cook, and Setze (1994). The interpretation of the results was performed in an additional group session and follows a format outlined by Trochim (1989c). However, the staff at Grimshaw preferred to have the author analyze and interpret the data, including determining the numbers of clusters, as well as the cluster labels. These decisions were presented, discussed, and ultimately approved by the building principal and school counselor.

The analysis process began by taking the maximum number of clusters (20) determined by the cluster analysis software, and the accompanying statements for this solution. Clusters are groups of thematically related statements. For example, one cluster included statements such as: "encourage empathy, teach compassion, teach the ability to forgive, foster an understanding of true friendship, teach about happiness and joy, encourage sharing, teach thankfulness." Another cluster included statements such as: "promote honesty, promote truthfulness, promote reliability, promote loyalty, promote integrity, promote kindness, promote commitment." Working from the 20-cluster solution, the author began the process of negotiating combinations of clusters down to the fewest number of logically combined clusters. Essentially this process involved reading the statements for each cluster and then working cluster-by-cluster to combine similar clusters and creating a descriptive label for each cluster. A 5-cluster solution was ultimately chosen. The author presented the final maps and tables to the building principal and the school counselor (who acted as the primary contact person for the group) for clarification and approval prior to presenting the data to the whole school staff.

Results

Table 1 presents the statements and their relative importance rating from Cluster #1, *Create a Caring Community*. Within the overall cluster, there are subgroups of statements related to different aspects of creating a caring community. For example, statement 77 (share resources with parents for developing core values) and statement 83 (continue providing information for parents) are getting at the distinct role of parents in the creation of a caring community. Whereas, statement 1 (create a community where everyone is encouraged to learn and grow from their mistakes) and statement 53 (create a community where students are accepted and encouraged) are also contributing to the same overall concept, yet are specifically related to students.

Table 2 displays statements from the Cluster #5, *Core Values*. Within this cluster statements 75 (promote truthfulness), statement 60 (promote honesty), and statement 31 (promote trustworthiness) are related to the theme of honesty. Within this same cluster statement 52 (promote kindness), statement 99 (teach compassion), and statement 50 (encourage empathy) conceptually describe the theme of empathy.

The final cluster ratings are shown in Table 3. The cluster ratings aggregate individual items within a cluster in order to calculate the relative importance of the clusters themselves. We now have defined "character education" in terms of five conceptual categories of importance for this particular school. Within each we have prioritized the specific items. Now, for planning purposes it is helpful to prioritize these categories for relative importance as compared to each other. It is important to note that the cluster ratings are relative; that is, despite the relatively low rating of the cluster, *Create a Caring Community*, one could argue that concentrating on the four other areas logically contributes to the creation of a caring community. This offers an explanation of why *Creating a Caring Community* might logically be rated lowest in relative importance, since by working on the four other areas ultimately should indirectly lead towards the creation of a caring community.

Discussion

There are numerous possible interpretations of the data provided by the concept mapping process. For example, Cluster #4 (*Empathy and Respect*) and Cluster #5 (*Core Values*) are related in so far as they discuss the core values that Grimshaw seeks to promote in its character education effort. These would include honesty, empathy, and respect, to name a few. If these core values tell the "what" of character education, the clusters on the flanks (*Positive Group Interactions and Integration of Character Education*) tell the "how." That is, they indicate that character education must integrate throughout all aspects of the school and must inform the group interactions of the students. Although the

Table 1
Cluster #1: Create a Caring Community

Statement #	Brainstormed Statement	Average Rating
53)	creating a community where students are accepted and encouraged	4.56
24)	involve parents	4.44
15)	promote self-control in the hallways, on the bus, and in the cafeteria	4.22
2)	show how good behavior is frequently its own reward, even without extrinsic rewards from the teacher	4.17
77)	share resources with parents for developing core values	4.11
1)	create a community where everyone is encouraged to learn and grow from their mistakes	4.00
28)	to celebrate positive change in individuals who may have a history of behavior problems	4.00
74)	to promote positive community amongst students on the school buses	4.00
83)	to continue providing information for parents	4.00
26)	promoting the school as a community	3.94
9)	publicly recognize thoughts, feelings, or actions that are appreciated	3.83
13)	to understand the home-school connection and the importance of communication	3.78
70)	creating positive press about our students and school to promote a sense of community	3.78
8)	provide a forum where students can share their opinions about experiences they don't like in an appropriate and respectful way	3.72
95)	using the "Green Sheet Newsletter" to communicate with the community about our character education effort	3.67
69)	to gradually establish and reinforce positive cafeteria behaviors towards the eventual sharing of new and different cafeteria activities and privileges	3.50
90)	involving students in developing (and enforcing when appropriate) the rules for the cafeteria	3.44
6)	involve other citizens and groups in the LaFayette community to help in the schools	3.39
20)	using the "Green Sheet Newsletter" to publicly acknowledge the positive character actions of students	3.39
76)	establishing a club to encourage positive actions and/or community service	3.06
21)	using journal writing as a way of promoting moral reflection	3.00
33)	to have community building activities in smaller groups across grades (perhaps by bus groups)	2.94
Overall Average Rating For Cluster:		3.77

Table 2
Cluster #5: Core Values

Statement #	Brainstormed Statement	Average Rating
11)	promote the Golden Rule (Do unto others as you would have them do unto you)	4.67
23)	to promote responsibility	4.61
61)	teaching core values in an understandable way to students who may not have received a clear understanding of these terms in their home	4.61
75)	to promote truthfulness	4.61
60)	to promote honesty	4.56
31)	to promote trustworthiness	4.50
52)	promote kindness	4.50
96)	teach about dealing with anger and disappointment	4.50
99)	teach compassion	4.50
103)	teach thankfulness	4.50
56)	to promote a feeling of self-worth and pride (for students, parents, and teachers)	4.44
38)	promote citizenship	4.39
39)	to promote self-motivation	4.39
45)	to promote cooperation	4.39
91)	to promote self-control	4.39
50)	encourage empathy	4.33
98)	promote integrity	4.33
102)	teach patience	4.22
88)	promote commitment	4.12
48)	promote sportsmanship	4.11
42)	teaching the ability to forgive	4.06
101)	promote reliability	4.00
82)	to develop in students a deeper understanding of their emotions and the connecting actions	3.94
84)	foster an understanding of true friendship	3.72
100)	teach about happiness and joy	3.67
7)	encourage sharing	3.61
79)	promote emotional awareness	3.61
93)	to promote loyalty	3.59
43)	promote the ability to delay gratification	3.44
Overall Average Rating For Cluster:		4.22

Table 3
Final Cluster Ratings

Cluster Number	Cluster Label	Relative Rating
Cluster 1:	Create a Caring Community	3.77 to 3.86
Cluster 2:	Integration of Character Education	3.86 to 3.95
Cluster 3:	Positive Group Interactions	3.95 to 4.04
Cluster 4:	Empathy and Respect for Others	4.04 to 4.13
Cluster 5:	Core Values	4.13 to 4.22

Create a Caring Community seems of least relative importance, one could argue that this area represents the final product of the other four areas. As the school focuses on promoting core values, integrates character education throughout the curriculum, and promotes positive peer group interactions, the school will become a caring community.

The map is simple enough to seem manageable, yet it is not simplistic. Within each of the five areas, the school has specific objectives prescribed by the relative rating of the individual statements in each cluster. Cluster #1 (see Table 1) tells the planners what the most important objectives are within this area. It says that creating a community where students are accepted and encouraged (Statement 53) is the most important objective at the outset. However, in the future it will be important that this sense of community is experienced in the bus community as well (Statement 33). This provides short and long term objectives to focus their character education planning around. For both of the areas represented by these statements, teachers, parents, and staff will custom build program initiatives. They will examine existing programs that they already do well, refine practices they could do better, and add additional elements missing from their school experience. In the future, they will also have a specific area to evaluate, since they have defined the construct and their related actions.

Within the *Core Values* and *Empathy and Respect* clusters, the map provides additional planning support to meet the challenges highlighted by character education critics (Kohn, 1997). Specifically, schools implementing character education struggle to keep character education from becoming what Jackson (1993) refers to as "bumper-sticker morality." (Jackson et al., 1993, p. 9). Table 2 shows the relative rating of individual statements for the cluster, Core Values. The map groups together the complex nuances surrounding each particular core value. For example, surrounding the core value honesty are qualities inexorably linked to honesty, such as reliability, loyalty, integrity, kindness, and commitment. Connecting these related qualities prevents the core values from becoming oversimplified. Each of the surrounding qualities reveals a nuance

of honesty that would otherwise be concealed in a unidimensional investigation of honesty.

A pattern match was performed based on the demographic and rating data gathered in the second session. The pattern match aligns the ratings of parents and teachers for comparison to demonstrate the relative congruence between the views of various school constituencies. In this case, parents and teachers are closely aligned as indicated by a (.72) correlation.

The map provided by this process connects in significant and interesting ways to character education theory. First, it provides a specific blueprint of the entire general theory, and addresses nearly every specific objective outlined by the Character Education Partnership's theoretical principles of character education (Lickona et al., 1995). For example, the final map: (1) defines the core values, (2) outlines cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of character, (3) outlines specific ways for integrating the core values throughout all phases of school life, (4) discusses the role and importance of creating a caring community, (5) describes specific opportunities for moral action, (6) discusses the role of staff in modeling the same core values, (7) discusses specific ways of involving parents and the wider community, and finally, (8) provides clear constructs for evaluation.

The map also connects to other significant areas of research in the field of character education. The Child Development Project (CDP), considered by many as perhaps the definitive character education research pilot, has demonstrated that a sense of the school as a caring community is a leading predictor of a number of positive character qualities, including:

Greater liking for school, greater enjoyment of class, greater empathy towards others' feelings, greater concern for others, greater enjoyment of helping others learn, stronger motivation to be kind and helpful to others, more sophisticated conflict resolution skills, more frequent acts of altruistic behavior, higher general self-esteem, higher academic self esteem, stronger feelings of social

competence, less feeling of loneliness in school, less use of tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana, fewer delinquent acts, less victimization (p. 43).

The school could develop a questionnaire from the individual statement rating sheets. Specific measures might be developed to evaluate the individual clusters or items of particular importance within each cluster. Further, given the historical difficulty of documenting character change, mixed methods could be developed to assess a particular cluster or item. For example, in addition to surveys, in-depth interviews might be conducted with various stakeholders, as well as naturalistic observations of the school setting. Regardless, the myriad assessment options are predicated on the detailed description of what the school means to accomplish with character education. This type of planning provides numerous, logically defensible research questions besides the simplistic question previously asked by character education evaluators, namely, "Does character education work?" Concept mapping provides valuable data for structuring the cyclical action research process. It assists in creating theory, monitoring practice, evaluating implementation, and managing subsequent reformulation of theory. It begins and sustains a continuous planning and evaluation process in the character education cycle.

Trochim (1989a) asks the question: "Is concept mapping soft science or hard art?" This question is worthy of consideration here as well. The data gathered in this process is somewhat limited by an exclusively female focus group. Some might also question the quality of the data given that four sorting and rating data sets were performed without qualified supervision. However, these are relatively minor threats to the overall quality of the data given that the school's original planning process consisted of arbitrarily picking the core values and the specific areas of focus with little or no organized reflection by the stakeholders. This project provides evidence supporting the efficacy of concept mapping as a valuable evaluation tool for conceptualizing character education programs, for gaining consensus and prioritizing elusive constructs, and for planning and managing character education initiatives and evaluation of them.

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