



Improving social competence through character education

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ABSTRACT

Character education is supposed to meet early adolescents' need (i.e., eighth and ninth graders) for strengthening social competence. Moreover, adolescents' engagement in character education is integral to their learning from the education. The engagement and deficit in social competence are therefore plausible conditions for the effectiveness of character education in promoting social competence. Based on a quasi-experimental design, this study focuses on the prediction of social competence of 920 ninth graders in secondary schools of Hong Kong, China. To reduce bias from the selection process of the study and the character education program, the study adjusts for the propensity of enrolling in the program throughout the analysis. The results of the analysis show the contribution of the character education program to social competence. Moreover, engagement in the program and prior lower social competence are the adolescent's characteristics that are responsible for the contribution.

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Despite the availability of some relevant studies (Berkowitz & Bier, 2008; Miller, Kraus, & Veltkamp, 2005), it is a concern to understand conditions for character education to raise young people's social competence (Leming, 2008). As part of healthy development, students need to increase their social competence (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). Some studies have established the contribution of character education to elementary pupils' social competence (Miller et al., 2005). Nevertheless, the contribution would still require empirical substantiation and generalization because previous research has not been uniformly rigorous and supportive (Was, Woltz, & Drew, 2006). To fulfill the requirement, the present study aims to examine the effectiveness and related conditions of a character education program for junior secondary students in Hong Kong, China, using a field quasi-experimental design. The conditions investigated are the students' engagement in the program and prior social competence. Accordingly, the study primarily predicts Grade 9 students' social competence with their participation and engagement in the character education program in Grade 8. Whereas participation refers to attending the program, engagement refers to putting efforts to join learning activities of the program, as reported by the student. Specifically, the activities comprise the fulfillment of assignments in and outside class, including reflection, discussion, and active learning, as required according to the sources for the development of the program (Kirschenbaum, 1995; Xie, 1994) and similar references (Nucci, 2006; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989).

Students' social competence broadly refers to their ability to maintain favorable interpersonal relationships through cooperation, responsiveness, assuming social responsibility, and behaving in friendly, warm, and other positive ways (Barry & Wigfield, 2002; Gjerde & Shimizu, 1995; Green & Rechis, 2006). Such competence matches the third stage of moral development, which emphasizes the sustenance of interpersonal accord, friendship, affiliation, and intimacy among early adolescents in terms of cognitive-developmental theory (Kohlberg, 1987). Strengthening social competence is therefore an appropriate goal of character education for junior high school students (Berkowitz & Bier, 2008).

The current study is relevant because of the importance of the development of students' social competence, particularly through character education. Notably, social competence is a basis for a spectrum of favorable developmental outcomes, including self-esteem, social well-being, friendship quality, sexual responsibility, acceptance by peers, and work competence (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006; Engels, Finkenauer, Dekovic, & Meeus, 2001; Liang, Tracy, Kenny, & Brogan, 2008; Mpofu, 1997; Pettit et al., 2006; Thomas & Dimitrov, 2007). Social competence itself is a valuable development outcome representing positive, social, and moral development (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonozak, & Hawkins, 2004). Apart from benefiting the individual, social competence sustains social harmony, social integration, and avoidance and resolution of social conflict (Benson, 2003). As such, social competence is an integral developmental element throughout childhood (Engels et al., 2001). To supplement or complement the developmental effort at home, character education in school is pertinent because of the grouping of students, teachers, and other personnel together in the classroom. This grouping would provide opportunities for the learning and practice of social competence. Promoting students'

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social competence is therefore a designated goal and a demonstrated merit of character education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2008; Miller et al., 2005). Moreover, character education tends to be crucial for its preventive, remedial, and developmental functions, which altogether safeguard the well-being of students and their acquaintances (Berkowitz & Bier, 2008; Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005).

Character education refers to the formal, regular lessons provided in school that adhere to a relevant curriculum to promote students' moral character (Berkowitz & Bier, 2008; Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005). Moral character refers to the synthesis of moral judgment, moral reasoning, moral identity, moral personality, moral sensitivity, moral emotion, and moral action, and it typically emphasizes the embodiment of virtues such as social responsibility (Blasi, 2005; Hart, Atkins, & Donnelly, 2006). As such, character education stresses the development of students' moral character as a whole, which is more than cognitive development in moral reasoning. Character education therefore prizes the development of students' emotions and values in a morally and socially competent way.

As character education involves a broad array of school lessons, specifying the exact program concerning the study is necessary. This program of character education is tailor-made for Grade 8 and Grade 9 students in Hong Kong, based on some Chinese and overseas experience (Kirschenbaum, 1995; Xie, 1994). The program has been operating since 1998. At that time, schools in Hong Kong could choose to adopt character education, and 11 schools elected to participate in the character education program examined in this study. Moreover, three schools were interested in obtaining survey data about their students and therefore joined the study as comparison schools. The program relied on formal classroom teaching based on a curriculum, and thus was not an attachment to any other lessons. The curriculum consists of four units, covering self-understanding and emotional management for Grade 8 students and interpersonal relationship and value. Each of the units has six sessions, including those specifically concerning character, true friendship, and various virtues including integrity and self-control. Particularly, the session of character advocates the virtues of politeness, forgiveness, saying sorry, being punctual, praising others, lending possessions to others, and keeping secrets for others. For another, the session of true friendship advocates the virtues of sharing joy and worry with, accepting, appreciating, taking care of, and sacrificing for friends. The sessions involve lectures, games, small group discussion, whole-class discussion, video viewing, and self-reflection. In addition, the program holds a camp outside school for a day during each year. Schoolteachers, in collaboration with other program personnel, are primarily responsible for the delivery and implementation of the character education program. Meanwhile, students are required to attend the program sessions and activities, and complete assignments about self-reflection and others. The program, lasting for four months and consisting of 16 h with 1 h per week, is available in the first term to Grades 8 and 9 students.

The effectiveness of such a character education program is uncertain in view of the criticism raised by researchers and educators against existing character education (Power et al., 1989; Romanowski, 2003; Skaggs & Bodenhern, 2006; Williams, 2000). Such criticism tends to arise in view of the students' resistance to or noncompliance with character education. Consequently, the effectiveness of character education tends to be limited, short lived, and biased in one way or another. The lack of effectiveness suggests that character education is only a waste of time (Williams, 2000). To prevent this problem, the students' input or lack of resistance in terms of engagement in character education is a concern.

1. Students' conditions for the effectiveness of character education

The principal prediction is that enrolling and thus attending the character education program would contribute to the students' social competence, controlling for social competence one year before. Further, apart from enrolling in the program, making effort or engagement in the program would contribute additionally to social competence.

First, the contribution of the character education program would be contingent on the students' engagement in the program. This hypothesis springs from theory and research on the participants' receptiveness to the program as a determinant of the contribution of the program (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003). Accordingly, the participants' input in terms of effort in the participation is the important output targeted by the program, which in turn is a necessary condition for the outcome created by the program (Axford, Little, Morpeth, & Weyts, 2005). Such effort or engagement has proven crucial for the effectiveness of character education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2008). The importance of engagement in school or coursework is similarly relevant to academic achievement (Johnson, McGue, & Iacono, 2007).

Second, the character education program would contribute more to those students with lower social competence before. This hypothesis stems from the theory informed by targeting and need fulfillment. Targeting embodies a principle or practice for a program to reach people in need of it (Sonenstein, 1997; Weisz et al., 2005). Hence, the program would seek to include only eligible participants having a certain need, deficit, or risk (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Need fulfillment theory posits that fulfilling participants' need is the key to the effectiveness of participation in the program (Browne, Gafni, Roberts, Byrne, & Majumdar, 2004; Gagnon & Leone, 2001). The origin of the theory resides in the child's attachment to his/her parents, which is the earliest instance of need fulfillment (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000). Accordingly, the child's need for care is the necessary condition for the effectiveness of parental care in fostering the child's growth and attachment. This need condition is obvious in such daily life applications as eating in the case of hunger, drinking in the case of thirsty, and using medicine in the case of illness. Conversely, overeating, overdrinking, and overuse of medicine would be unhelpful or even counterproductive. Similarly, character education is more likely effective in raising social competence for those students with prior lower social competence. More specifically, earlier social competence would dampen the effectiveness of character education due to the students' engagement in education.

The following hypotheses recapitulate the discussion above:

Hypothesis 1. Social competence is higher after attending character education.

Hypothesis 2. Social competence is higher after attending character education, particularly when prior social competence is lower.

Hypothesis 3. Social competence is higher after engaging more in character education.

These hypotheses importantly refer to the net main and interaction effects involving enrollment and engagement in the character education program and prior social competence by holding all other factors constant. This means controlling for background factors including gender, age, birthplace, duration of residence in Hong Kong, living with parents, religious faith, parental education, parental occupation, family income, acquiescence (i.e., tendency of high rating), and the tendency (i.e., hazard

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