

**The Effects of Pro-active
Character Education on the
Management of Student
Behaviour**

**Perceptions of Year 4-8
Teachers
in a Full Primary School**



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□ ABSTRACT

*“To educate a person in mind and not in morals is
to educate a menace to society.”*

(Roosevelt as cited by Lickona 1991 p.3)

For the past five years the staff, students and community at the writer’s school have been actively involved in a project known as the Cornerstone Values approach to building character. While this effort has been in consultation, training, resourcing, implementation and review, little has been done to evaluate how teachers perceive the connection between behaviour management in the school and this character education project. The conservation and restoration of desirable behaviours in the school was a key motivating factor in the establishment of the project. The writer has therefore taken the opportunity to investigate what Year 4-8 teachers in the school perceive the effects of a pro-active character education approach on the management of student behaviour to be.

For the purpose of this investigation a semi-structured interview was conducted with six teachers the writer’s school. Their responses revealed that:

1. the most common inappropriate classroom and playground behaviours are due to a lack of one of the eight Cornerstone Values
2. punishments used reinforce one or more of the Cornerstone Values and are viewed as generally effective
3. character education is regarded as essential to maintaining current levels of behaviour
4. an understanding of each Cornerstone Value is regarded as important to appropriate classroom and playground behaviour
5. there is a need to retain behaviour management as a professional development priority to ensure ongoing consistency and ownership.

For the staff at the writer’s school these findings reinforce an informal and previously unsubstantiated perception that character education and in particular the Cornerstone Values approach to building character, is significant in determining successful relationships and therefore the positive culture of the school.

□ INTRODUCTION

*“We’re heading towards a blackboard jungle, with worse to come as
these children become adults with no moral compass, no boundaries,
no discipline and no future.”*

(Dunne as cited by Stewart, 2004, p.1)

The recent release of New Zealand primary school stand-down and exclusion figures has prompted once again, comment and discussion as to how our education system is coping with managing difficult student behaviour.

Citing Ministry of Education figures sought under question time in Parliament, the New Zealand media describes a significant increase in the number of suspensions and stand-downs and the reason for them, in the period 2000 – 2003. For primary schools, these include:

- 31% increase in suspensions and stand-downs
- 25% increase in alcohol consumption
- 40% increase in physical assaults on staff

- 33% increase in physical assaults on other students
- 21% increase in sexual misconduct
- 59% increase in theft

(Stewart, 2004)

The current Government is quick to point out that during the same period, school rolls have increased, stand-downs have become a much more used strategy, some reasons for stand-downs and suspensions have been reduced and the majority of New Zealand schools report no stand-downs or suspensions. However, despite various claims made by interpreting this data, 23,656 New Zealand students were still removed from their school temporarily or permanently in 2003 and interrupted their right to an education.

The Ministry of Education's (2004) view that *"the use of stand-downs and suspensions is seen as a last resort when other options have not proved to be successful"* (p.1), indicates that for 23,656 students perhaps the options schools are taking are not working.

American psychologist Thomas Lickona (1991) insists that too much time is spent in schools dealing with behavioural outcomes instead of investing more effort in laying foundations for school-wide ethical behaviour he describes as character education. Pursuing the objectives of both the restoration and conservation of 'doing the right', schools, he claims, must first provide connection between 'knowing the right' and 'desiring the right' (frequently referred to as a behavioural connection between the head, heart and hand).

Responding to the recent rise in stand-down and suspension figures, MP and United Future Education spokesperson Bernie Ogilvy, suggests the *"need for parents and schools to instil values in children . . . each school needs to have some sort of character education programme in place"* (Brooker, 2004, p.1).

In this report the writer will use the context of a U4 decile 8 full primary school in a provincial town where he is the principal, to investigate teacher's perceptions of what effects a pro-active character education approach has had on the management of student behaviour.

Literature Review

Determining the relationship between character education and behavioural outcomes is chosen as a theme that relates to this investigation and provides a context for the books, articles and research selected to review. This theme will background the discussion of findings contained in this report.

The Relationship between Character Education and Behavioural Outcomes

A number of writers and researchers such as Lickona (1991), Heenan (2002) and Brookes and Goble (1997) have felt it important to trace the history of teaching ethics, morals, values, virtues and character in schools. Their common discovery can be summarised by what Stephen Covey (1989) also claims, after conducting an extensive review of American thought, over the 200 years prior to writing his book *'The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People'*.

In attempting to find out *"what a free and democratic people considered to be the keys to successful living"*, Covey found that *"almost all the literature in the first 150 years or so focussed on what could be called the 'Character Ethic' as the foundation of success"* (p.18). During this period it would have been very unlikely claims Covey, that success in

business or in the community could happen without good character. In the last 50 years however, style, asserts Covey has replaced substance and image has often been at odds with reality in portraying a person's real character.

It was also about 50 years ago that traditional views of a school's role in the development of good character began to change in New Zealand (Henderson, 2002). Values education was popularised firstly in the early 1960s with a values clarification movement and then moral dilemma discussion strategies that many American, Canadian, British, Australian and New Zealand teachers used during the 1970s (Heenan, 2002 and Brown, Bereznicki and Zbar, 2004).

The recent comprehensive Australian Values Education Study (Brown, Bereznicki and Zbar, 2003) provides an example of a definition that captures this movement's emphasis on cognitive development, without any necessary judgement or behavioural implications as an "*explicit conscious attempt to teach **about** values*" (writer's emphasis) (p.2).

Character education, an American term that has become widely used since the late 1980s, by contrast, according to Milson (2000), is "*the long term process of helping young people develop good character . . . and acting upon core ethical values*" (p.2). Lickona (1991) is also insistent that character education must consist of "*operative values – values in action*" (p.51).

A number of writers such as Aspin (2003) and Henderson (2002) and researchers such as Leming (1993) and Christenson (as cited by Brooks and Goble, 1997) claim that much in values education has failed because of the lack of any intended and actual behavioural outcomes. Brown, Bereznicki and Zbar's Values Education Study (2003) cites the work of Titus (1994) in their literature review. Titus suggests that "*the common features of schools that seem to have a positive impact on the development of student values include **participation**, encouragement to **behave responsibly**, provision of an orderly school environment and clear **rules that are fairly enforced***" (writer's emphasis) (p.9).

One of the findings of Neilson's (2002) New Zealand research was that perceived, positive behavioural outcomes in schools teaching character education were evident. His interviews with teachers, principals, board of trustee members and parents reveal a perception amongst the participants in his study "*that the character education strategy has set a standard of behaviour within the school*" (p.37). Neilson (2002) and Henderson (2002) suggest that Heenan's Cornerstone Values approach to building character is a good example of meaningful character education that schools should consider.

One of the most influential writers on behavioural theory was B.F. Skinner (Modgil, 1987). Of particular relevance to this report are Skinner's analysis of behavioural outcomes that are determined by modelling, shaping and reinforcing. Skinner's descriptions of operant behaviour and the types, roles and effects of reinforcement are well documented (Collins, 2004).

For the purposes of this study, character education is defined as any explicit and/or implicit school based activity that promotes student understanding, desire and performance of core ethical values. Based on this literature review the writer will investigate what the effects of a pro-active character education approach on the management of student behaviour are, recording, analysing and discussing the perceptions of six Year 4-8 teachers in a full primary school.

□ METHODOLOGY

Subjects

Six Year 4-8 teachers from the writer's school were chosen to take part in this investigation because of their involvement in behavioural issues. These teachers have been at the school for at least three years, all actively involved in character education and represent a cross section of experience and gender. All participating teachers and the acting principal gave their permission for the interviews to be carried out during November 2004 and were informed of their right to remain anonymous and withdraw at any time.

Design

Questions posed to teachers centred around five themes:

- The nature of undesirable behaviour in the school
- The type and frequency of punishments issued
- The perceived effectiveness of punishments issued
- The perceived importance of character education on appropriate behaviour
- The perceived need for continued professional development in the area of character education, Cornerstone Values and/or behaviour management.

The discovery of any links between problem behaviour and the perceived importance of character education is intended by an analysis of the quantitative and qualitative responses given. It was intended that the design of the interview questions would enable the collection of meaningful data to allow trends to be revealed and tentative conclusions reached.

Data Analysis

It is intended that the answers given during each teacher interview will reveal examples, opinions and practices that will be totalled where possible and significance attached to any majorities and representative comments.

Limitations

It is acknowledged that this research relies heavily on a small sample of semi-structured interviews that gauge teacher perceptions within one school setting. While this only allows for tentative conclusions to be reached and generalisations made, the writer suggests that the professional judgement of this group of teachers provides a valid addition to the body of existing knowledge in this field.

□ RESULTS

Responses to ten interview questions from six teachers are detailed below as numbers in brackets and comments quoted.

1. Describe the most common undesirable behaviour(s) that you deal with in the classroom.

Responses:

Talking out of turn (4)

Not telling the whole story (1)

Annoying other children (1)

Not following instruction (4)

Table 1 : The most common undesirable behaviours in the classroom

TEACHER	A	B	C	D	E	F	TOTAL
Talking out of turn	3	3	3	3	3		4
Annoying other children						3	1
Not telling the whole story			3				1
Not following instructions					3		1

Playground Duty

Responses:

Petty hurting (3)

Running inside (2)

Joining in games (2)

Table 2 : The most common undesirable behaviours while on duty

TEACHER	A	B	C	D	E	F	TOTAL
Petty hurting				3	3	3	3
Running Inside	3	3					2
Joining in games			3		3	3	3

2. In a typical week how many times do you issue a punishment for inappropriate behaviour?

Responses:

1 – 5 (6)

3. Is this punishment usually written, withdrawal or communicated with home?

Responses:

Written (6)

Just withdrawal (5)

Communicated with home (4)

4. What do you use for a written punishment?

Responses:

Code of Conduct (appendix 2) (5) Think Sheet (appendix 3) (4)

Apology letter (2) Class work (3)

Table 3 : Written punishments used

TEACHER	A	B	C	D	E	F	TOTAL
Code of Conduct	3	3		3	3	3	5
Apology letter				3		3	2
Think Sheet		3	3	3		3	4
Classroom work	3		3			3	3

5. How important do you think an understanding of each Cornerstone Value is to appropriate behaviour in classrooms and the playground?

Responses:

Important (6)

6. Have you observed an improvement in the behaviour of students who have received these written punishments this year?

Responses:

Yes (5)

No (1)

Comments:

“Depending on children”

“Short term only”

7. Do you think behaviour in the school would be, or get worse without character education?

Responses:

Yes (6)

Comments:

“Because it is foundational”
“Children can say they don’t know”
“Definitely”

8. Is there anything else that you would like parents, BOT, principal or senior staff to provide in order for you to deal with inappropriate behaviour?

Comments:

“Courses are always welcome”
“Opportunity to implement more consistency”
“Policy review to be followed up with action”
“Specific behaviours need a whole school approach”

9. Is there any need for greater staff discussion / professional development in the area of character education / Cornerstone Values / behaviour management?

Responses:

Yes (6)

Comments:

“Always a need for a refresher”
“There is a need to keep up the momentum throughout the term”
“A stronger link needs to be forged between what is taught and what is observed”
“Greater consistency needs to be clarified and implemented”

10. What general comments do you have regarding the improvement in behaviour you would like to see?

Comments:

“Respect” (3)
“More parental involvement”
“Boys issues’ need addressing”
“Greater consistency’

□ DISCUSSION

“The teachers appropriate management practices enable them to focus on learning rather than behaviour.”

(Education Review Office Report on the writer's school, 2003, p.5)

The results of the teacher interviews are discussed as they relate to the themes of a character education philosophy and the Cornerstone Values approach to building character.

A CHARACTER EDUCATION PHILOSOPHY

Background

At the writer's school an overt, robust and agreed character education philosophy has been developed over five years. The essence of this philosophy rests upon the staff actively modelling, teaching and reinforcing eight core values (appendix 4) that have been researched, resourced and reviewed.

This philosophy connects moral understanding with behavioural outcomes. Reinforcement of a lesson taught on 'respect' for example, happens daily as teachers seek a classroom culture characterised by children who are encouraged to demonstrate this value with people and property. The success of this example was recently nominated by an Education Review Office team visiting the school that reported, *“student learning is strongly supported by the explicit and purposeful teaching of values, both as a separate curriculum area and integrated into other learning areas. The principal and teachers consistently model a culture of mutual respect and the identified values are reinforced through the behavioural expectations of teachers. These values are evident in the positive relationship between staff and students . . .* (Education Review Office, 2003, pp2 & 3).

Related Teacher Interview Findings

1. While the nominated behaviour problems in the school can be viewed as frustrating, they remain minor. Some teachers struggled to answer this question and when they did, admitted what they had nominated was not a huge issue. Conserving desirable behaviour has been a model (as opposed to restoration) that the school has identified as being appropriate by being specific and pro-active in implementing character education even when problems don't appear to be significant. Interestingly, talking out of turn and running inside were identified by American high school teachers as the second and fourth greatest threats to the educational process in 1940. In recent years they have been replaced by drug abuse and suicide (Kilpatrick, 1992).
2. There is a low frequency of punishments issued in the school and those that are issued for behaviour (as opposed to failure to hand in homework) use a character education related 'Code of Conduct', 'Think Sheet' or apology letter. These punishments are designed to encourage children to consider the effects of their actions on others and not repeat undesirable behaviour.
3. There was unanimous agreement that behaviour in the school would be, or get worse, if character education was not in place. Although no control group has been in existence, one teacher compared the culture of the school to another she had taught in, others simply recalled how often reference can be made to the eight core values reminding children of the right thing to do.

Such unanimous agreement signals a perception from this group of teachers that the connection between what is modelled, taught and reinforced, and what behaviours are observed is strong.

4. While the writer would claim that character education has philosophical and classroom implementation consistency in the school, a number of teachers suggest greater consistency in dealing with specific behaviours would be beneficial. Ongoing behaviour management policy implementation, professional development and a greater emphasis on respect were also suggested improvements.

Links to the Literature Review

Character education with its emphasis of 'values in action' (Lickona, 1991, p.51) is well understood at the writer's school. Teachers interviewed reinforce the view of Titus cited in Brown, Bereznicki and Zbar's Values Education Study (2003) that a successful character education philosophy must include participation, responsible behaviour and clear rules that are enforced.

Neilson (2002) also concludes that the connection between character education and the management of student behaviour is strong. One of the important aspects of Skinner's behavioural theory is the connection between stimuli in the environment and behaviours (Collins, 2004). The responses given in the teacher interviews suggest an environment where desirable character traits are reinforced to restore or conserve appropriate behaviour exist as a school culture in which character education has become embedded.

Implications

Teachers' views as expressed during the interview, support the continuation of character education. While this reflects common foundational understandings in the school allowing teachers to return when necessary to definitions, examples and explanations to deal with inappropriate behaviour, more consistency with specific behaviours is worth pursuing the writer believes.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CORNERSTONE VALUES

Background

The Cornerstone Values approach to building character was introduced at the writer's school five years ago to restore and conserve desirable behaviours. Twenty implementation strategies (appendix 5) have been developed that include age appropriate conceptual tools and class activities that can be used school-wide. Teaching the eight agreed Cornerstone Values by definition, explanation, example and reinforcement occur over a two-year cycle, focusing on one value per term.

A mini school-wide unit is planned during the first staff meeting of each term with the expectation that by the end of the third week the unit will have been taught and a classroom display is in place in every teaching space. It was hoped that the deliberate and specific introduction of respect, kindness, honesty, consideration, responsibility, compassion, obedience and duty into the school's culture would influence all relationships.

Related Teacher Interview Findings

1. A teacher once commented to the writer that all inappropriate behaviour could be traced back to one or more of the eight Cornerstone Values. This is certainly true for the behaviours nominated as most commonly occurring in response to question 1 of the teacher interview. These cited behaviours are outcomes of a lack of respect, kindness, consideration, honesty and responsibility.

2. Responses in the interviews reveal that the more serious of these behaviours are often dealt with by issuing a written punishment that is related to Cornerstone Values. Specific mention of these character traits can be found in the Code of Conduct (appendix 2) and Think Sheet (appendix 3). The writer observes that in comparing the use of punishments, one teacher uses four different written punishments, one uses only one, while four use two or three. (Table 3). A staff discussion might reveal reasons for these preferences worth considering by everyone.
3. Teacher perceptions are that there are improvements in the behaviour of those receiving these punishments although two admitted success was dependent upon individual circumstances such as child concerned and the timing of the punishment.
4. All teachers interviewed regarded an understanding of each Cornerstone Value as important to appropriate behaviour in classrooms and the playground. This unanimous view supports the significance of the conceptual framework that the Cornerstone Values approach provides to the school's behaviour management philosophy and implementation.

Links to Literature Review

Within the theory Skinner (Collins, 2004) uses to explain how behaviours are adopted or changed, the term 'operant conditioning' is used. This concerns the outcomes of any given behaviour. For example, if children experience operant conditioning in the form of respect being modelled and reinforced as something that has positive outcomes, this behaviour is more likely to be repeated.

Henderson's (2002) overview of the delivery of values education in New Zealand schools selects Cornerstone Values as the most robust, workable and meaningful approach that he suggests, "*Board of Trustees and principals should give strong consideration to . . .*" (p85).

The implementation of the Cornerstone Values approach to building character is an excellent example of Brown, Bereznicki and Zbar's (2003) research that concludes effective character education "*articulates and makes explicit the values of the school and the community in which it is based and applies these consistently in the practice of the school; occurs in partnership with students, staff, families and the school community as part of a whole-school approach to educating students and strengthening their resilience*" (p.12).

Implications

A continuation of the delivery of the Cornerstone Values approach to building character is supported by teachers' interview responses. Significant classroom and playground culture implications are apparent when character traits such as respect, honesty and kindness are proactively promoted and reinforced as the foundation of behaviour management within a school. Some visitors to the school, parents, and pupils themselves have expressed quiet amazement and appreciation at a state school who can confidently articulate what values it stands for, has agreed upon and actively implements to make a difference to teaching and learning.

Conclusions

A parent recently rang the writer to describe how his daughter was influencing his behaviour. For a number of years this father had gained free entry to the annual A & P show by wearing a white coat and carrying a clipboard. When honesty was focused on as the 'value of the term' in the writer's school, the man's daughter announced to her father that this practice was not going to happen in future. When asked for the reason, the eight year old girl simply told her father that it was not honest.

It was psychologist Fred Skinner's belief that *"the environment is full of stimuli for people to respond to"* (Collins, 2004, p5) and in the writer's school that environment is one where the modelling, shaping and reinforcing of eight core values occurs daily in classrooms, the playground and even in some homes.

The perception of the group of teachers in this investigation is that character education is an appropriate and meaningful behaviour management philosophy and that understanding each value is important to displaying appropriate behaviour in the school.

It is the writer's belief that appropriate student behaviours can be restored and conserved using the Cornerstone Values approach. In light of the behaviour problems some New Zealand schools face, further investigations into the effectiveness of the delivery of Cornerstone Values in a variety of settings may add wider recognition to what seems to be significant in the writer's school.

□ EVALUATION

"Character determines behaviour just as behaviour demonstrates character."

(Trinity Forum as cited by Heenan, 2002, p.2)

The management of student behaviour is an important and ongoing issue in every school. Regardless of the need to collect student behaviour information and teacher perceptions for this investigation report, the writer believes there to be real benefits in formally recording, analysing and sharing the strengths and weaknesses in such a vital area of school culture.

The writer deems the semi-structured interview design used for this investigation to have been an appropriate methodology. Teachers eagerly responded to the open ended questions and quickly answered the closed questions that provide valid information for analysis.

The weakness in the design the writer suggests may have been too many closed questions. Some teachers indicated a willingness to give greater detail and explain why they felt something was or was not working. Following each closed question with "Why?" may have provided a deeper insight into the basis of problems and their answers.

Questions 8, 9 and 10 yielded similar answers and this time could have been spent gathering more detail about the delivery and reinforcement of one of the values.

Although the tentative conclusions are only evidenced within one schools' experience, representative of a small sample of teachers and the result of a limited investigation, the writer believes this report may provide a useful starting point for comparative research with a range of school types to be undertaken.

One of the lessons learnt from the horrific school shootings at Columbine High School in 1999 was that schools must not over-emphasise academic achievement at the expense of building good character in future generations of children (Greenfield and Juvonen, 1999).

It is the writer's belief that the methodology used in this report was appropriate in confirming the perception that managing student behaviour is inextricably linked to character education and that school culture will always be determined by the quality of relationships.

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□ APPENDICES

1. Teacher Survey
2. Code of Conduct
3. Think Sheet
4. Cornerstone Values Words and Definitions
5. 20 Character Education Implementation Strategies