

CHARACTER ISSUES AND THE FREE/REDUCED LUNCH PROGRAM

Jimmilea Berryhill, DPhil

Society of Scholars Paper Presented at
Oxford Forum at Oxford UK

January 2005

CHARACTER ISSUES AND THE FREE/REDUCED LUNCH PROGRAM

Statement of the Problem

Serious problems in the Arkansas public education system were documented through quantitative studies, national standards test comparisons, and professional assessment reports (Melvenon and Thorn 2001). Test scores were below national standards, incidences of conduct referrals were high, remediation rates for college freshmen reached 57% in 2003, and college drop-outs rose to over 70% the same year. State educators encouraged character education in Arkansas schools and five schools received grants for character education implementation in the 2000-2001 school year (www.aredu.gov).

Character education data, math and literacy scores, and free/reduced lunch percentages were used for comparison in this paper.

Research Questions

Character scores from previous research (Berryhill, 2003) were used to support the effectiveness of character education in Arkansas public elementary schools. The following questions were addressed in this 2004 study.

1. Was there a relationship between character scores in two groups of fourth grade student survey scores and the percentage of free/reduced lunches served to those students?

2. Was there a relationship between literacy and math scores in two groups of fourth grade student survey scores and the percentage of free/reduced lunches served to those students?

3. Was there evidence of character issues involved in the implementation of free/lunch programs?

Literature Review

Supporters of character education in public schools believed school-wide implementation was an effective way to see change in the behavior of students, to raise academic scores, and reduce remediation and college dropout levels (Berryhill, 2003). However, Arkansas school districts in low-income regions demanded more funding for their districts based on the free/reduced lunch program figures.

The free/reduced lunch programs were administered through the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). In 2003, free/reduced lunch program expenditures exceeded over 6 billion dollars annually and included 26 million children daily (Glass, 1995). An estimated 20% of the meals served in 2003 were given to ineligible students (Heartland Institute, 2004). School personnel stated that students threw away much of the food served in school cafeterias. Schools tried to verify income and eligibility, but requiring proof of income may have driven away some needy children (Tarbett, 2003). The controversy over program expenditures and program administration intensified as a nonprofit group of medical doctors and laypersons launched a legal battle claiming that the Federal Dietary Guidelines were set by a board with overwhelming ties to the meat and dairy industries (Kursban, 2004).

The increased level of child obesity in the United States and the rise in Type 2 diabetes in children were attributed to poor diet, junk food, and lack of exercise (Iannelli, 2004). The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) called on parents and schools to replace junk food and soda with healthier drinks and snacks (Pediatrics, 2003), but school contracts with beverage and snack food companies made that difficult (Pediatrics, 2003).

The free/reduced lunch enrollment figures involved more than school lunch distribution. They were also used to distribute \$10.4 billion in Title 1 state grants, literacy and reading grants, vocational/technical education funding, and to determine discounts on technological upgrades. Waivers for other school fees were also determined by the free/reduced lunch enrollment figures (Heartland Institute, 2004). Supporters and dissenters of the free/reduced lunch programs agreed that children required nutrition to learn, however, the effectiveness of federal free/reduced lunch programs to reduce this problem was uncertain (Peoples Weekly, 2004).

Research Methodology

Data for this study were collected from fourth grade students in participating (PAR) schools implementing character education and fourth grade students in demographically similar nonparticipating (NONPAR) schools with no school-wide character education program (Berryhill, 2003). Grade 4 elementary level students were representative of all elementary students, approximately the mid-point of elementary learning. The instrument administered to the students was the Behavioral Characteristics Survey (Bulach, 2000). Survey scores

indicated a significant difference in the observed assessment of peer behavior of elementary students at the fourth grade level in schools implementing character education (PAR) compared with the observed assessment of peer behavior of students in demographically similar schools with no character education program (NONPAR) (Berryhill, 2003).

Character Scores

A total of 168 grade 4 students in participating (PAR) schools, and 155 grade 4 students in nonparticipating (NONPAR) schools responded to the Behavioral Characteristics of Students Survey (Bulach 2000). The t-test for independent groups with a t-score of 5.22 and a p-value of <.001) indicated a statistically significant difference between PAR and NONPAR elementary students (see table 1). The research hypothesis that there was a significant difference in student observed assumptions of peer behavior in PAR and NONPAR students was supported.

Table 1

A comparison of PAR and NONPAR character survey results for elementary students

Group	Mean	SD	t-score	df	p value
PAR	3.5125	0.1759	5.22	30	P<.001
NONPAR	3.1594	0.2065			
N= 374					

Mean character scores for participating (PAR) schools was 3.62 and mean character scores for nonparticipating (NONPAR) schools was 3.27. Mean scores

supported the research statement that in schools implementing character education programs student character scores were significantly higher than in schools having no school-wide character education program (Berryhill, 2003). Mean scores for elementary students in PAR and NONPAR elementary schools reflect a .35 difference. NONPAR student scores were below PAR students on all 16 behavior traits addressed by the Behavioral Characteristics of Students Survey (see table 2).

Table 2

PAR and NONPAR Schools Mean Scores

Character Characteristics	PAR Mean	NONPAR Mean
Respect	3.87	3.52
Honesty	3.58	3.23
Self Control	3.49	3.34
Responsibility	3.26	3.07
Patriotism	3.85	3.38
Tolerance	3.59	3.25
Courtesy	3.53	3.19
Generosity	3.33	3.02
Sportsmanship	3.45	3.14
Humility	3.3	3.03
Integrity	3.49	3.27
Perseverance	3.58	3.38
Cooperate	3.49	3.27
Compassion	3.52	3.12
Kindness	3.58	3.26
Forgiveness	3.29	3.08
Mean	3.62	3.27

Math and Literacy Scores

In addition, math and literacy scores revealed a correlation between character education and academic performance. Schools implementing school-wide character education compared with schools with no character education

implementation indicated that demographically similar schools implementing character education programs throughout the school curriculum had higher literacy and math scores than demographically similar schools having no character education program implementation. Literacy scores revealed 33 points higher average literacy scores and 33 points higher average math scores in participating (PAR) schools when compared with nonparticipating (NONPAR) schools (see table 3).

Table 3
Elementary PAR and NONPAR Grade 4 Math and Literacy Scores

Schools / Means	Group	Literacy	Math
Oaklawn	PAR	77	57
Lakewood	PAR	94	77
Izard	PAR	84	78
Oak Park	NONPAR	48	27
Angie Grant	NONPAR	55	48
PAR Elem Mean.		85	71
NONPAR Elem Mean		52	38
Higher Mean PAR		33	33

Free/Reduced Lunch Programs

The relationship to the free or reduced lunch program was indicated by identifying the percentages of students receiving free or reduced cost meals at each school surveyed. Participating (PAR) school averages of free or reduced lunches served to the student body were 70%. Nonparticipating (NONPAR) schools averages of free or reduced lunches served to the student body were 69%. A 1% difference in percentages of students receiving free/reduced lunches in participating PAR schools and nonparticipating NONPAR schools indicated

that the number of students receiving free/reduced lunches did not effect student character scores or literacy and math scores (see table 4).

Table 4
Elementary PAR and NONPAR Free/Reduced Lunch Percentages

PAR and NONPAR Schools	Free/Reduced Lunch Percentage
PAR Schools	70
NONPAR Schools	69
Difference in Percentage	1

Character Issues Surrounding Federal Free/Reduced Lunches

The question of moral problems surrounding federal free/reduced lunch programs was not answered quantitatively. This question was addressed through qualitative research and personal observation. Federal pressures to feed as many children as possible for both breakfast and lunch may have added to the inconsistencies and inflated numbers of free/lunches reportedly served. Medical professionals supported the program as an enhanced learning tool and education administrators were aware of the benefit of cash reimbursements from each meal served.

Perhaps an even greater incentive to higher numbers of free or reduced cost meals served was the methods used by the federal government to determine low income students and low income schools for other financial projects. Because the free/reduced lunch program determined the disbursement of Title 1 funds and a myriad of other beneficial programs and in consideration of the difficulties in accurately determining needy children, the program appeared to

be doomed to error. Finding a solution to the problem of qualifying students was nearly impossible and demanding schools to do so put administrators and educational personnel in a compromised position.

Implications Concerning the Research Questions

Although students participating in character education programs scored significantly higher on character surveys compared to students with no school-wide program participation, the percentage of free/reduced lunches served were only slightly different, 1% between the two groups. This data seemed to suggest that the economic base of a student group was not a significant factor in the ability of a student to respond positively to character education.

Math and literacy scores were higher among students participating in school-wide character education programs. There was a 1% difference in the percentage of free/reduced lunches served in participating schools (PAR) and nonparticipating schools (NONPAR), therefore math and literacy scores did not appear to be affected by the number of free/reduced lunches received by students involved in the survey groups. This study suggested that when character training and practice were the priority of the public educational system, academics and behavior became partners for success, regardless of the economic status of students.

The federal free/reduced lunch program, however, called for a review of the methods and procedures for the qualification of recipients and the policies of program administration. Although it seemed remote to suggest that food, learning, and character education had an intricate relationship, it was evident that

moral conduct at the administrative level was necessary in order to implement character education, academic success, and good nutrition at the student level. There were implications of financial and nutritional ineffectiveness in school run cafeterias, qualification inequities, administrative excessiveness, and possible misappropriation within the free/reduced lunch program. Implications of the study were that plunging millions of dollars into the free/reduced lunch program with no attention to ethical and moral behavior was an ineffective method for overall student success. Research suggested that the free/reduced lunch program contained serious flaws and that in relation to the billions of dollars spent on the program, implementation policies hampered its effectiveness.

Needed Research

Future research should analyze character scores, math and literacy scores, and free/reduced lunch percentages in schools implementing school-wide character education over a period of 5 or more years compared to demographically similar schools with no character education program for the same period. Further qualitative and quantitative research would compare free/reduced lunch programs with child nutrition programs in other countries. Additional research concerning the actual nutritional benefits to children involved in the free/reduced lunch program could identify the success or failure of the program in aiding the health of children. Further research should be directed toward identifying successful environments where student learning was combined with character education, a healthy worldview philosophy, and the practice of Judeo-Christian principles of conduct.