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Internalization of Character Traits by Those Who Teach Character Counts!

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Introduction

Increased character education is one alternative available to help what many see as the mayhem of moral decline in America. Research suggests a correlation between the teaching of character education of youth and its positive ethical results throughout the United States. While these findings demonstrate positive changes experienced by youth audiences, no research to date has been conducted on the effects that teaching Character Counts! has on those teaching the program. The research project reported here examined Character Counts! Program's impact on Cooperative Extension and on the personal and societal lives of Extension educators and assistants.

In a recent survey of 20,829 high school and middle school students conducted by the Josephson Institute of Ethics (1997) found the following.

- 47% of all high school students said they had stolen something from a store in the past year.
- 70% of the high school students confessed to cheating at least once in the past year.
- 91% said they were "satisfied with my own ethics and character."
- 97% said "it is important for me to be a person with good character!"

These statistics are not restricted to the young. According to a recent survey of the Josephson Institute of Ethics (1997), one in five American workers admitted they had lied to a superior in the last year. In fact, roughly 25% said they had lied to a subordinate or a customer. One in three admitted that when competitive pressures hit at work, they had resorted to cheating or lying to make things easier. The honesty quotient does not improve on the home front. Twenty-five percent of adult children said they had lied to their own parent in the past 12 months. One-third said they had lied to their spouse, while one in four said they had lied to their own children (Josephson, 1997).

These findings suggest that we can no longer rely on families to be the only, or even the primary, force in shaping the character of children. In the 1995 Survey on the Advancement of Teaching sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation, 70% of the U.S. parents questioned agreed that the family has the primary responsibility for developing values in children (Boyer, 1995). While U.S. families may believe character education should occur at home, given the crime, violence, and deception statistics, it is evident that this "in home" approach needs support from other entities.

Character Counts! & Some Outcomes

In 1992, the Josephson Institute of Ethics called together more than 30 educational leaders representing state school boards, teachers' unions, universities, ethnic centers, youth organizations, and religious groups. The diverse group agreed that a common language of values, used pervasively and consistently throughout a community, would be the most effective means of reaching young people. They found unanimous consensus in six essential ethical values (now known as the "Six Pillars of Character") that could be taught by public and private institutions without risk of socioeconomic, ethnic, political, gender or religious offense. These pillars are:

- Trustworthiness,
- Respect,
- Responsibility,
- Fairness,
- Caring, and
- Citizenship.

Preliminary studies of the effectiveness of Character Counts! programming on young people have shown significant, positive behavior change. A recent survey of Nebraska educators demonstrated that Character Counts! made a difference in the lives of students. Of those who responded:

- 85% reported an overall positive difference in the children they teach,
- 73% reported students using the language of the six pillars (trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship), and
- 75% reported changing their own behavior as a result of teaching Character Counts!.

Behaviors most frequently seen as changed due to using Character Counts! included:

- Helping each other: 61% reported increased frequency.
- Blaming others: 55% reported decreased frequency.
- Being truthful: 50% reported increased frequency. (Nebraska State 4-H Department, 1999).

Internalization of Character Traits by Those Who Teach

While these findings demonstrate positive changes experienced by youth audiences, to date, no research has been conducted on the effects of teaching Character Counts! on those implementing the program. Many feel that one's character is permanently formed during childhood. However, character education is a lifelong process (Sprinthall & Sprinthall, 1997). While one experiences real world situations, internal psychological processes are expanded, thus leading to the internalization of taught concepts. Internalization can be defined as the incorporation of values or patterns of culture within the self as conscious or subconscious guiding principles through learning or socialization (Krippendorff, 1995). According to a University of Michigan study,

(Constructing knowledge) suggests that individuals create their own new understandings, based upon the interactions of what they already know and believe, and the phenomena or ideas with which they come into contact (Richardson, 1999, p. 146).

This implies that the internalization of concepts is a direct result of learning based on interactions and experiences. In the same sense, teaching Character Counts! (direct experience) leads to the internalization of ethical principles found directly in character education. Internalized ethical principles result in increased moral behavior (Rest, 1997). Hence, one would assume that those teaching Character Counts! would be more likely to use the ethical principles and exhibit positive behaviors as a direct result of teaching character education.

Problem Statement and Objectives

The research project reported here asked, in essence, if the act of teaching character education programs such as Character Counts! is an element in internalizing taught ethical values? Specifically, the research examined:

- Character Counts! impact on Cooperative Extension.
- Character Counts! impact on personal life of Extension educators and assistants.
- Character Counts! impact on the societal lives of Extension educators and assistants.

Population/Sample

Because Character Counts! is a statewide character education program, all Extension educators and assistants within the state of Nebraska were given the opportunity to participate in this survey, thus creating the study population. Because not all Extension educators and assistants taught Character Counts!, not all of the expected population responded to the survey. Based on the nature of this study, the sample consisted of those educators involved with Character Counts!. Thus, a control group was not formulated, creating a limitation to this study.

Instrument

The instrument was designed to address the study question and was composed of four sections.

- Section one dealt with general demographic and background information pertaining to Character Counts! involvement and programming, and employment within Cooperative Extension.
- Section two was comprised of questions addressing the effects of Character Counts! education within Cooperative Extension.
- Section three addressed the impact of Character Counts! education within everyday life.
- Section four was composed of questions pertaining to Character Counts! impact on the societal lives of Extension educators and assistants.

In sections two through four, participants were asked to respond to each question by rating their level of agreement on a 1-5 scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). Participants were also asked to describe a major positive change in their lives that may be attributed to teaching Character Counts!.

Informed Consent and Distribution

The informed consent form and survey were posted on the Internet. All Extension educators and assistants were notified of the study via e-mail on January 14, 2000. This e-mail contained a link directing participants to the survey site. The first page of the survey site consisted of the informed consent form. Thus, participants were not able to complete the survey without first reading and agreeing to the conditions of the study set forth in the informed consent form. The second page consisted of the actual survey. By completing the survey, participants gave their consent to participate in this study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences-Personal Computer (SPSS-PC) version. Means, frequencies, and standard deviations for all relevant items were run, with significance set at the .05 level. ANOVA comparisons were made to determine any relationships between categorical, job position and gender respondents.

Findings

The educators involved in this study were either Extension educators or Extension assistants. Of the 53 respondents, 18 were employed as Extension assistants and 31 as Extension educators. Four respondents were employed in other positions within Cooperative Extension. Forty-two (79.2%) were female, and 11 (20.8%) were male.

Objective One: Examine Character Counts! Impact on Cooperative Extension

Survey results indicated that 89% (47 respondents) agreed or strongly agreed that they were more sensitive to ethical dilemmas within Cooperative Extension, in general, and within a given county/Educational Programming Unit (EPU). In addition, 83% (44 respondents) agreed or strongly agreed that they were more sensitive to ethical dilemmas within a particular Extension office. This suggests a relationship between teaching Character Counts! and increasing sensitivity levels to ethical dilemmas faced in all facets of Cooperative Extension.

In addition, 91% (48 respondents) agreed or strongly agreed that they were more likely to stress the importance of Character Counts! with Cooperative Extension colleagues across the state, while 93% (49 respondents) agreed or strongly agreed that they were more likely to stress the importance of Character Counts! in Cooperative Extension programs as a result of teaching Character Counts!. In addition, 77% (41 respondents) of the sample agreed or strongly agreed that they were more likely to stress the importance of Character Counts! within their particular office.

Table 1 reports these findings in tabular form.

Table 1
Character Counts! Impact on Cooperative Extension

Attitudinal State- ment n=53	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree	M	SD
Since teaching Character Counts!:	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>		
I am more sensitive to ethical dilemmas within Cooperative Extension in general.	1 (1.9%)	2 (3.8%)	3 (5.7%)	34 (64.2%)	13 (24.5%)	4.06	0.79
I am more sensitive to ethical dilemmas within my County/EPU.	1 (1.9%)	1 (1.9%)	4 (7.5%)	35 (66%)	12 (22.6%)	4.06	0.74
I am more sensitive to ethical dilemmas within my office.	1 (1.9)	4 (7.5%)	4 (7.5%)	30 (56.6%)	14 (26.4%)	3.98	0.91
I am more likely to stress the importance of Character Counts! with Cooperative Ex- tension colleagues across the state.	0 (0%)	3 (5.7%)	2 (3.8%)	37 (69.8%)	11 (20.8%)	4.06	0.69
I am more likely to stress the importance of Character Counts! in Cooperative Exten- sion programs.	0 (0%)	1 (1.9%)	3 (5.7%)	32 (60.4%)	17 (32.1%)	4.23	0.64
I am more likely to stress the importance of Character Counts! within my office.	0 (0%)	3 (5.7%)	9 (17.0%)	33 (62.3%)	8 (15.1%)	3.87	0.73

Objective Two: Character Counts! Impact on Personal Life

When analyzing Character Counts! impact on the personal lives of Extension staff surveyed, 77% (41 respondents) of the 53 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were more aware of ethical dilemmas within their own personal lives as a result of teaching Character Counts!. One respondent stated, "(Character Counts!) has really changed the way I think about raising my children. I look differently at how my actions affect their behavior." In addition, 85% (45 respondents) agreed or strongly agreed that they were more likely to advocate ethical decision making in their circles of friends and families as a result of teaching Character Counts!. According to one respondent, "In addition to helping me be a person of better character, I try to help others learn how to do that as well."

According to survey results, 72% (38 respondents) agreed or strongly agreed to being more likely to read character education books and articles, while 70% (37 respondents) agreed or strongly agreed to being more likely to participate in character development seminars/training.

A statistically significant difference (.01) was found when comparing Character Counts! impact on personal life and gender of Extension educators and assistants. The female respondents were more likely to read character education books and articles than males. In addition, females were more likely to participate in character development seminars/training than male respondents.

Table 2 reports these findings in tabular form.

Table 2
Character Counts! Impact on Personal Life

Attitudinal Statement n=53	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree	M	SD
Since teaching Character Counts!:	1	2	3	4	5		
I am more aware of ethical dilemmas within my personal life.	1 (1.9%)	3 (5.7%)	8 (15.1%)	27 (50.9%)	14 (26.4%)	3.94	0.91
I am more likely to advocate ethical decision making in my circle of friends and family.*	1 (1.9%)	2 (3.8%)	4 (7.5%)	31 (58.5%)	14 (26.4%)	3.98	0.99
I am more likely to read character education books and articles.	1 (1.9%)	4 (7.5%)	10 (18.9%)	28 (52.8%)	10 (18.9%)	3.79	0.91
I am more likely to participate in character development seminars/training.	1 (1.9%)	3 (5.7%)	12 (22.6%)	28 (52.8%)	9 (17.0%)	3.77	0.87

*Not all respondents answered this survey question (n=52).

Objective Three: Character Counts! Impact on Society

Survey results demonstrated that 83% (41 respondents) of the 53 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were more likely to take a stand in local ethical situations as a result of teaching Character Counts!. When considering statewide issues, 68% (36 respondents) of the 53 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were more likely to take a stand in statewide ethical situations after teaching Character Counts!. When analyzing global issues, 42% (22 respondents) of the 53 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were more likely to take a stand in global ethical situations as a result of teaching Character Counts!. Based on survey respondent comments, ethical situations were defined as recycling, gun violence, resource conservation, and domestic abuse.

A statistically significant difference (.01) was found when comparing Character Counts! impact on society and position of Extension educators and assistants. Extension assistants were more likely to take a stand in local, statewide, and global ethical situations.

A statistically significant difference (.01) was also found when comparing Character Counts! impact on society and gender of Extension educators and assistants. Females were more likely to take a stand in statewide and global ethical situations.

Table 3 reports these findings in tabular form.

Table 3
Character Counts! Impact on Society

Attitudinal Statement n=53	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree	M	SD
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>		
Since teaching Character Counts!:							
I am more likely to take a stand in global, ethical situations.	1 (1.9%)	6 (11.3%)	24 (45.3%)	18 (34.0%)	4 (7.5%)	3.34	0.85
I am more likely to take a stand in statewide, ethical situations.	1 (1.9%)	5 (9.4%)	11 (20.8%)	32 (60.4%)	4 (7.5%)	3.62	0.84
I am more likely to take a stand in local, ethical situations.	0 (0%)	4 (7.5%)	5 (9.4%)	35 (66.0%)	9 (17.0%)	3.92	0.76

Conclusions and Recommendations

When examining Character Counts! impact on Cooperative Extension, it can be concluded that Character Counts! had a major impact on Cooperative Extension personnel. Relationships were found between teaching Character Counts! and increasing the sensitivity levels to ethical dilemmas faced in all facets of Cooperative Extension in this study. These results served as major indicators of the effects of Character Counts! on those who teach the program, suggesting the internalization of taught, ethical principles.

One may feel more sensitive towards ethical issues in Cooperative Extension as a result of teaching Character Counts!. However, will one feel more likely to stress the importance of Character Counts! within Cooperative Extension? A link was detected between teaching Character Counts! principles and implementing them into various aspects of

Cooperative Extension programming, suggesting the internalization of these ethical principles. These respondents suggested an increased amount of Character Counts! awareness within Cooperative Extension, thus increasing the amount of Character Counts! exposure and direct experience available to Extension educators and assistants within various facets of their professional lives.

When examining Character Counts! impact on the personal lives of Extension educators and assistants, it can be concluded that Character Counts! had a major impact on the personal lives of the respondents. These results suggest that Extension educators and assistants are more likely to advocate ethical decision making in their personal lives and among friends and family. Extension educators and assistants have internalized a great many of the principles they teach via the Character Counts! program.

Results indicate Extension staff internalized Character Counts! principles following the actual teaching of the program. This internalization was manifested in their personal lives to a much greater extent than their professional lives. This incongruity suggests that the gap might be related to a lack of understanding of ways to integrate Character Counts! into local programming. Therefore, Nebraska Cooperative Extension staff are encouraged to develop and share strategies for local Character Counts! program integration. Possible methods of sharing Character Counts! strategies among Cooperative Extension staff include developing list serves, phone bridges, Web sites, and discussion groups for those already implementing and those interested in implementing Character Counts! principles into various programmatic areas.

Teaching Character Counts! also led to personal character development; Extension staff were more apt to consider themselves role models as a result of teaching Character Counts!. One respondent stated, "As a result of teaching Character Counts!, I have become much more aware of the need for character education and the critical need for adults to be good role models for youth. As such, I try much harder to be that kind of role model."

These results demonstrate an increase in the likelihood of professional and personal development as a result of teaching Character Counts!, thus strengthening the processes of internalization of Character Counts! principles. The general continuing education movement of Cooperative Extension also influenced the results of this study objective.

In addition, these results demonstrate an increase in the likelihood of female professional and personal development as a result of teaching Character Counts!. When comparing Character Counts! impact on society and gender of Extension staff participating in this survey, responses also demonstrate an increased likelihood of females taking a stand in statewide and global ethical situations. These results suggest that females are more likely to utilize Character Counts! principles in a grander scheme of events, thus demonstrating a stronger female internalization of Character Counts! philosophy. Based on the relational nature of character education and the socialization of females to be highly relational, survey results exhibit a significantly higher rate of internalization of Character Counts! principles among female respondents.

When comparing the impact of Character Counts! on society, it can be concluded that Character Counts! had an impact on the societal lives of Extension staff participating in this study. However, as the societal context broadened, Character Counts! impact on the societal lives of survey participants declined. As the society level shifted from local to statewide to global, survey results display a decline in the willingness to take a stand in ethical situations. However, overall, these results still suggest an increased application of Character Counts! principles in real-world, ethical situations.

In the majority of Character Counts! instruction efforts, Cooperative Extension served as the nucleus to all surrounding individuals and communities. To increase these local Character Counts! efforts, Cooperative Extension personnel should locate the character education catalysts in their communities to expand the Character Counts! implementation efforts. If this is done, these catalysts will increase the amount of public exposure of Character Counts!, thus shifting the overall local impact to a much wider spectrum of audiences.

When comparing Character Counts! impact on societal life and job position of Extension educators and assistants, results exhibited the increased likelihood of Extension assistants to take a stand in local, statewide, and global ethical situations. It can be concluded that Extension assistants were more likely to internalize Character Counts! principles by applying these values to real-life situations. With the continued evolutions of information sources available to the general public, it can also be concluded that this increased availability of information is a catalyst for the increased awareness of local, statewide, and global occurrences, thus affecting study results.

Overall, Character Counts! educators have not regularly conducted the necessary programmatic evaluations of the effectiveness of Character Counts! on the teachers and students of Character Counts!. Cooperative Extension personnel are encouraged to regularly evaluate the progress of Character Counts! educators and students in attempts to provide a solid background on the effectiveness of Character Counts! on both the teachers and students of the program. This results analysis will provide the necessary research framework for Character Counts!.

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