

Character Education in Primary Schools and the New Implementation Education Method of Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in the Czech Republic

Michaela Pachelová

Abstract

This article examines character education, which has been assessed as essential for the emotional and social development of children. Character education is included in the curriculum as early as preschool, and it should optimally continue in primary school. Furthermore, the importance of a correct choice of methods and guided reflections is also included. The article also discusses previous experiences with character education and the recommendations provided by the Czech School Inspectorate.

Keywords

Character education; primary schools; support; social-emotional learning; method Positive behavioural interventions and supports (PBIS)

Introduction

In his work *Didactica magna*, Comenius (Komenský 1948) considers the formation of the pupil's character as one of the most important tasks of education. Pedagogy has progressed since the times of John Amos Comenius and has a rich selection of methods for monitoring the development of the pupil's cognitive skills. But how are the didactics in forming the moral-volitional characteristics? What is the status of character education in elementary schools? Schools contribute to our children's socialization, which is irreplaceable in the formation of other interpersonal relationships. The conditions of socialization are related to the educational programme, which schools often leave to the intuition of the class teacher. Schools create their own regulations but focus on sanctions rather than incentives for good behaviour, cooperation, and democratic principles. It is only when problems arise that boundaries and rules are enforced and sanctions such as reduced behaviour grades are applied. This is first at the class level and, if the rules are not respected, then at the level of the entire school. Some teachers believe that such education belongs exclusively to the family domain. However, Professor Hábl (2022, 41) warns that society will not thrive without individuals of character. Society should therefore take care of both the moral character of the pupils and the character of the educator.

Character is one of those overarching concepts that is the subject of disciplines from to theology, psychology, neuropsychology, sociology. Thomas Lickona defines character education as “the deliberate effort to develop virtues that are good for the individual and good for society” (Damon et al. 2023).

The psychologist Robert McGrath has proposed that character education is less focused on social skill acquisition and more on constructing a moral identity within a life narrative (Benninga and Berkowitz 2023). I think that every teacher is part of building a moral identity within a life story. For me, character education is an irreplaceable concept that includes social and emotional learning, moral reasoning and cognitive development, life skills education, health education, violence prevention, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and conflict resolution, all being necessary for our schools.

1. Start as Soon as Possible

It turns out that the support of colleagues, school management, and the general public is an important addition to the active, conscious work of teachers. This investment is only returned to society after a certain period of gathering experience and connecting values with real behaviour in life situations. Even though the results of the systematic work are not immediately apparent, it brings a lasting benefit. A common understanding of a certain value focus makes the school less dependent on external circumstances, such as coronavirus restrictions, multicultural cooperation, and the need for a respectful approach. Elements of prosocial behaviour are also a prerequisite for the creation and maintenance of a culture of reciprocity and cooperation.

When should character education start in schools? Svobodová (2007, 112) recommends including character education as early as pre-school and ensuring the continuity of teaching. Basic habits are educated early in families, making the cooperation between the teacher and the family a key strategy for the development of prosocial communication among pupils of younger school age. At the primary level, character education should already have its clearly defined place.

Character education is based on direct peer experience. Pupils gain empirical experience with socialization and community formation through social play (Klusák 1993, 63). Pupils have to communicate, show their relationships with other people, react, and evaluate good or bad manners throughout the day. They should be able to form an opinion not only about school events. The teacher’s task is to motivate the students to shape interpersonal relationships, primarily by their own example. Children perceive and copy the teacher. They then learn very quickly by imitation and are good at distinguishing between truth and lies, sincerity and pretence.

2. Character Education Requires a Systematic Choice of Teaching Methods and Moral Reflection

Since Maria Theresa's times, Czech education has traditionally predominantly relied on face-to-face teaching. This method has many advantages, and it has its indisputable place, but it should be supplemented with other teaching methods. Experts warn that the absence of joint activities carried out in a favourable emotional climate can have an adverse effect on the child's development (Čáp and Mareš 2007).

Pupils learn best in the context of caring and safe relationships with their peers and teachers (Klem and Connell 2004). Pupils' control over their own behaviour can be only established in an environment of safety, with a calm mind and daily self-reflection (Nytrová and Pikalková 2007, 56). On the path of educating through self-reflection and peer support, some enlightened schools have already found tools for student self-acceptance, peer cooperation and gradual socialization of students. Social-emotional learning with a focus on creating a positive climate in the classroom was also reflected in the improvement of students' academic results in the final phase.

A class will learn to naturally create rules of moral behaviour that prevent negative manifestations of selfishness, irresponsibility, cowardice and recklessness (Piaget and Inhelder 2014). Preparing such a safe environment and providing reflective support is an important task for teachers. It is often left to the teacher to set educational goals and gradually include activities for the socialization of pupils in the school environment.

Vacek (2009, 8) emphasizes the need to shape pupils' morality systematically and in an interesting and attractive way for children. This kind of teaching therefore requires motivated and prepared teachers who have gone through experiential activities themselves, have become aware of their effects, and purposefully include them in innovations suitable for the given group.

3. Character Education Experience

Eva Oberle et al. (2016, 14) consider social and emotional learning to be an essential part of education that should be implemented in everyday practice in the classroom and in schools. According to her, learning goes beyond the classroom, and it is necessary to implement a systemic approach within the entire school.

According to the research of the American university professor Joseph Durlak et al. (2016), the teacher is of fundamental importance for the implementation of social and emotional learning. Based on the understanding of the learning objectives, the teacher participates in the achievement of the quality implementation of the behaviour programme.

The situation in which the class collective is faced with the problems of undesirable manifestations of an individual's behaviour is, in and of itself, a teaching situation in which students learn prosocial behaviour. It depends on the teacher whether they are aware of these connections.

The British psychologist Elias (2019) published a reflection on social-emotional learning, where he expressed his belief that the development of social competences, which influenced

the basis of human interaction in schools, is no fad. He believes the consequences of the lack of education management experts means that schools must invest in teacher training to learn the best practices for developing student skills. He is convinced of the need for continuous support for the implementation of social-emotional learning in schools.

We also observe a growing interest in character education in foreign literature (Aidman and Price 2018; Borgen et al. 2021; Durlak et al. 2016; Price 2018; Seligman 2011). Aidman and Price (2018) published a study claiming that respectful communication and developing the ability to cooperate with other students is a key challenge for 21st century schools. The results of their study show the primary role of the teacher, who creatively plans character education, continuously evaluates it, and has the support of the school management.

4. Czech School Inspectorate Recommendation

In December 2021, the Czech School Inspectorate (2021, 6) published the research *Common Features of Education in Successful Primary Schools*. The thematic report points to significant differences between Czech schools. It looks for shared features and characteristics of schools achieving excellent results. The conclusions of the thematic report show that successful schools are characterized by an organizational culture that supports and reproduces open cooperation and support of school actors: teacher-pupil, pupil-pupil, teamwork, as well as shared vision and values.

Within the framework of the Partnership for Education 2030+, the term well-being is defined as a state in which we can fully develop our physical, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual potential in a supportive and stimulating environment and live a full and satisfied life together with others.

In one of the secondary analyses of the Czech School Inspectorate, it was pointed out that pupils' well-being is also characterized by a strong sense of belonging to the school and the absence of inappropriate behaviour among pupils. It is also positively related to their educational outcomes. Pupils' growth mindset is characterized by pupils' interest in their personal growth and the perception of learning as something that has meaning (CSI 2021, 5). The CSI (2021) recommends that school management support the formation of broad cooperation in the collective of teachers and pupils. Both teachers and students should be actively involved in decision-making and seeking a broad agreement on the school's activities, including proposing and implementing significant changes and innovations. Furthermore, the CSI (2021) recommends using various forms and tools for the development of cooperation, such as exchanging experiences and providing feedback through formal and informal communication; assigning and solving team tasks; and appreciation of successful examples of cooperation. Another recommendation is to constantly strive to build trust between the school, teachers, pupils, and their legal representatives. Furthermore, it is recommended to create an open and transparent environment in which the given promises are fulfilled, or the reasons for their non-fulfilment are explained. Any manifestations of inappropriate behaviour are recommended to be dealt with in their early phase (CSI 2021). It turns out that the dialogic

dimension of education and the discussion method prepares the pupil to express opinions on the given topic. In an interview, the student clarifies his position and listens to others. These habits also correspond with other disciplines, e.g., with the discipline of education for democracy.

The 2030+ strategy puts emphasis on the development of personal and social competences across the RVP ZV curriculum (Fryč et al. 2020, 11). Pupils' social competences should be developed cross-sectionally and reflect the topics of psychosomatics, mental changes, mental development, and mental and social health. The aim is to ensure the development of social sensitivity, interpersonal perception and empathy. They should also provide the means to develop the ability of self-discovery, allowing for reflection and regulation of one's own mental states. Pupils should be able to better express their own feelings, apply appropriate methods of communication and be aware of stereotypes and prejudices. The ability of pupils to respond appropriately to difficult situations and the ability to apply healthy ways of managing stress should be improved (Fryč et al. 2020, 30).

5. The Education Method of Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

One of the possibilities of introducing character education is Positive behavioural interventions and supports (PBIS) is a schoolwide systems approach aimed at establishing positive student culture and individualized behaviour supports necessary to create a safe and effective learning environment for all students (Sugai & Horner 2009, 224).

PBIS is an evidence-based framework with multiple randomized control trials and real-world implementation effectiveness studies supporting the program's impact on reducing problem behaviours, reducing in and out of school suspension rates, enhancing school climate, and even improving academic performances (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf 2010). When positive behaviour interventions and supports is implemented correctly and with fidelity, negative student behaviours decrease because of the PBIS preventative framework (Otterloo 2021, 23). PBIS is implemented in schools in the USA, in Europe and around the world. It is backed by thirty years of research and development (Ross et al. 2009, 749). The goal of the project in the Czech Republic is to incorporate the principles of PBIS into the educational content of universities preparing future teachers and within the further education of teaching staff. The project is implemented in cooperation with experts from the USA and the Netherlands. More information can be found at <https://www.societyforall.cz/pbis>.

With the PBIS implementation framework, schools can respond flexibly to pupils needs and behaviours within three tiers of behavioural support (Kubíčková, Felcmanová 2021, 50). The student works on three target behaviours. He works on those skills, and if at the end of the day he achieves those behaviours as assessed on his report card, then the student gains a reward. In the first year, tier I. is implemented in the introduction of non-specific prevention aimed at supporting expected behaviour and the basic principles of a trauma-respecting approach to all pupils. In the second year, tier II. gradually introduces a level of support intended primarily for pupils with recurring mild difficulties in the area of behaviour and psychological well-being. These are several interventions that effectively use teachers' time in order to reduce the

proportion of pupils requiring individualized multidisciplinary support. In the third year, tier III. is implemented. This requires coordinated multidisciplinary collaboration and provides individualized support for students with complex behavioural and mental health needs (Kubičková, Felcmanová 2021). As part of the school plan there is the use of the Social-Emotional Learning component in the school curriculum. As far as consequences go it advises using solutions that serve two main purposes; keeping everyone safe and preventing the situation from happening again. PBIS uses Check In-Check Out (CICO) strategies to improve student behaviour in the classroom through motivation. Nurturing positive behaviour among elementary students can also be a challenging and difficult task. Teachers that set out to complete this task require a lot of careful effort and dedication to implement effective methodologies that support every child. It takes more than energy, time, and commitment to support students with behaviours (Marshall 2018).

Conclusion

Children enter the school with a diversity of attitudes and behaviour patterns that are the outcome of the environment of their family. School is a place where attitudes and behaviour patterns of tender minds are shaped according to the needs of society. The school teacher is the agent of the society in relation to other role performers in education to pursue this task. For that he and other role performers should be in the possession of desirable values (Durkheim 1973). Questions are being raised as to how Czech schools will implement personalized education. How will teachers focus on the goals of ethical education and what teaching methods will they choose? How are teachers prepared for the new era? Are the public and parents sufficiently interested in character education? Experiences with remote learning point to new educational needs in the field of emotional intelligence, empathy, consensus, and cooperation.

Are teachers open to new approaches that lead to collaboration and subsequent self-reflection? Teachers need the support of school management to devote themselves to character education with the current workload, with the growing content of the curriculum. Schools should provide an important place for activities developing cooperation, democratic agreements and education for respect and decency. The PBIS is only one of the ways how to implement a school value system.

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Mgr. Michaela Pachelová, Ph. D.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7750-9364>

Charles University, Faculty of Education

Department of Pre-primary and Primary Education

Magdalény Rettigové 4, 116 39 Praha 1, Czech Republic

michaela.pachelova@pedf.cuni.cz