A COMPARISON OF CHARACTER TRAITS FOR JROTC STUDENTS VERSUS NON-JROTC STUDENTS

Cletus R. Bulach, Associate Professor
College of Education
State University of West Georgia
Carrollton, GA 30118
770-836-4435
770-836-4646 FAX
mailto:cbulach@westga.edu
www.westga.edu/~cbulach (homepage)

Colonel Nicholas J. Burke
JROTC Instructor
Mays High School
3450 Mays Dr. SW
Atlanta, GA 30311
404-505-6517


A COMPARISON OF CHARACTER TRAITS FOR JROTC STUDENTS VERSUS NON-JROTC STUDENTS

ABSTRACT

The behavior of 277 JROTC students on selected character traits was compared to the behavior of 200 non-JROTC students. The behavior of JROTC students was more positive on all 16 character traits measured by the survey. The authors concluded that a good character education curriculum can change character traits. Another factor believed to play a role was because all students volunteer for the program and are willing to accept the guidance of instructors and upper-class students.
Introduction

The issue of what to teach in schools is largely dependent on the predominant educational philosophy of the decision makers in a school district. Sergiovanni and Starratt (1998) described six different philosophies that can shape the curriculum of a school system. Traditionally, the curriculum has been shaped by an emphasis on basic competencies in prescribed skills and understanding. More recently, there has been an added emphasis on preparing students to function as responsible citizens. With the breakdown of the family, more and more students are entering schools without proper role models to shape their behavior and character. Consequently, character education has become a nationwide movement with many school systems implementing character education programs (Milson, 2000).

There is very little data, however, that evaluates the effectiveness of these programs. One exception would be some support that Junior Reserve Officer Training Corp. (JROTC) programs can train high school students to model behaviors associated with many of the character traits being taught in character education programs. Character Educator (2001), a publication of the Character Education Partnership, featured an article that described how the JROTC program instills character in students. Teaching core values and developing character are an integral part of the JROTC program.

Similar claims are made by others. According to Farmer, (2000), JROTC Cadets are committed to upholding the values which made this nation great (p. 46). He goes on to describe that the instructors infuse students with the democratic values they need for life. Lutz and Bartlett (1995) stated that proponents claim that it instills discipline and changes the behavior of unruly teenagers so they can be productive citizens. This opinion was supported by Bartlett and Lutz (1998) who stated that JROTC is no longer job training for the military, but a life skills’ curriculum that is particularly effective with at-risk students. Further, Reiger and DeMoulin (2000) concluded that JROTC programs help develop democratic maturity in students. Their conclusion was based on their research with 75 JROTC students in one high school and 74 students in a non-JROTC school.

Koki (1997), in writing about their JROTC program, described a whole person approach that fosters an appreciation of ethical values and principles. He claimed that students are instilled with discipline, motivation, pride, and a sense of integrity, trust, and belonging. The instructors have high expectations and stress the building of character and citizenship. What Koki described is similar to descriptions of JROTC programs by and Farmer (2000) and Robyn and Hanser (1995). According to them, courses of study focus on citizenship, leadership, responsibility, values, and discipline. Based on the above, it could be assumed that character traits can be taught.

Except for the research of Rieger and Demoulin, there seems to be very little other research or proof/data that character traits can be taught in JROTC programs or in any other program. This seems odd considering that there are 1420 JROTC units with 243,000 cadets nationwide. Certainly, if character can be taught, this ought to be accomplished by a JROTC program. Theoretically, this should occur because students who are enrolled in a JROTC program are being trained to be good citizens. Emphasis is placed on responsibility, dependability, honesty, and other character traits that are very similar to those found in many character education curriculums. Further, students who are in these programs have volunteered to be part of them. Consequently, they are willing to embrace the ideas and behaviors that are being taught. If character traits can be taught, these students should exhibit superior behavior on these character traits than other students in the same high school who are not enrolled in JROTC.
The impact of character education curriculums in the past has been measured by decreases in
office referrals for discipline infractions, and this is only one aspect of character. What has been
missing is a suitable instrument for measuring student behavior associated with a number of character
traits. An instrument or survey has been developed that consists of 96 items associated with the
following 16 character traits: respect for self, others and property, honesty, self
control/discipline,integrity/fairness, kindness, responsibility/dependability/accountability,
perseverance/diligence/motivation, cooperation, compassion/empathy, courtesy/politeness,
forgiveness, patriotism/ citizenship, tolerance of diversity, humility, generosity/charity, and
sportsmanship. Students respond to each of the items based on how they see or hear students
performing on these behaviors. The reliability coefficient of the instrument is +.96 (Bulach, 2000;
Bulach and Butler, in press).

This author became aware of a JROTC program that was described as exemplary while
watching a TV news broadcast about that program. Students in this program were described as superior
in demeanor and behavior to the rest of the student body. A greater percentage of graduates of the
program go on to post secondary education. During the past ten years 30 graduates have gone on to
West Point Academy. In one year, five students from that program were accepted at West Point
Academy. This was the first time in the history of West Point Academy that this many students from
one high school had been admitted. Believing this to be the ideal situation to find out if character traits
can be taught, the principal of this school was visited and asked permission to conduct an investigation.
Permission was granted to see if students who were enrolled in their high school JROTC program
differ significantly on behaviors associated with 16 character traits when compared to students who
were not enrolled in a JROTC program.

The survey was administered to 277 JROTC students in grades 9-12 and to 200 students who
were not in JROTC. The location was a high school in the Atlanta City School District in Atlanta,
Georgia. The students were predominantly Afro-American with about 5% of the population being
other races.

The JROTC program at this high school is similar to programs described earlier in this manuscript.
It is a cooperative effort between the Army and the Atlanta Public Schools. The program is designed to
provide students the opportunity for total character and core value development. It is a four-year system
where students meet with their instructor on a daily basis for a 90 minute block of time. Monday through
Thursday is devoted to classroom instruction. One of those days is uniform day and is devoted to drill and
ceremony instruction. Cadets wear the complete uniform and undergo an inspection that is conducted by
senior cadets (student officers). Merits and demerits are issued based on fit, neatness, and appearance.

The program prepares students for responsible future leadership roles, while making them
aware of individual rights, responsibilities, and privileges as American citizens. The JROTC
instructors serve as role models for the cadets. The students’ teachers are four retired army personnel.
There is a Colonel, a Sergeant Major, a First Sergeant and a Master Sergeant. Character traits such as
discipline and responsibility are demonstrated as well as taught. Modeling of key character traits by
instructors and senior cadets is a key feature of the program.

In comparing the results of the survey, there were marked differences between the two groups
on all 16 character traits. JROTC students tended to agree with positive behaviors and disagree with
negative behaviors while the non-JROTC students' responses tended to disagree with positive
behaviors and agree with negative behaviors. For example, a behavior for the character trait
“persistence/diligence” is “students give up when they fail or do not succeed.” JROTC students tend to
disagree with this while other students tend to agree. On the behavior “Students think about and plan their work” JROTC students tended to agree that this happened and the other students tended to disagree.

A comparison of JROTC scores with non-JROTC scores on the individual behaviors for each character trait revealed that JROTC scores were superior on 94 out of 96 behaviors. The two behaviors where their scores were not as good as the non-JROTC students were the following:

♦ students think that sexual activity is okay; and
♦ students let other students tell them what to do.

On the sexual activity behavior, JROTC students had a less positive response indicating that they sometimes thought it was okay compared to the other students who had more disagree responses to this statement. On the other behavior JROTC students also indicated that sometimes this was okay while the other students had more disagree responses. Why they have a less positive score on thoughts about sexual activity is not understood. As for higher scores on being told what to do, that is easy to understand, as every squad has a student leader and they are often being told what to do by that leader.

The behaviors where the positive response in favor of the JROTC students was greatest are as follows: Students (Note: a positive response on a negative behavior is a disagree response)

♦ use tobacco;
♦ use drugs and alcohol;
♦ take things that do not belong to them;
♦ control themselves when they need to;
♦ do what the teachers ask them to do;
♦ fight with each other;
♦ are positive about the need for rules and laws;
♦ call each other names;
♦ talk back to teachers and other adults; and
♦ will cheat to win.
♦ are positive about themselves;
♦ believe that keeping your body clean is important;
♦ accept students who have a different religion;
♦ accept students who are from a different race; and
♦ quit trying if they know they are going to lose.

The evidence is very consistent that the curriculum of the JROTC program is capable of changing the behavior of students in that program in a positive direction. While the changes in the other behaviors are also more positive for the JROTC students, the changes on the above behaviors were the most dramatic.

One factor that could play a major role in the positive change in behavior for JROTC students is because all students volunteer to join the program. They join because they want to be part of something. All students cannot be athletes, cheerleaders, or in the band, but all students can be part of the JROTC program. On Uniform Day, everyone looks the same, and there is a certain amount of bonding that takes place. Uniform Day helps to foster teamwork as they help each other get ready for inspection. There is a certain amount of peer pressure to look your best in uniform that helps each cadet and the entire program.
Another factor that could account for the behavior of the JROTC students is the building block approach of the curriculum. It is a four-year program and upper-class students have a role to play on lower-class students. It is desired that they serve as role models along with instructors. For example, the first leadership experience that cadets receive is the use of “personal time management.” Their initial exposure to this begins with the concept that if a cadet is late to class, immediate corrective measures will be taken. Classroom teachers, students, and JROTC instructors are impact players in enforcing rules. Everyone is involved to ensure that students do the right thing in their classroom or other areas of responsibility. As students move up in grade level, their rank and areas of responsibility also increase. By the time they reach the 12th grade, they are the leaders of the program. The seniors are charged with being the role models and teaching character traits to the underclass cadets. The instructors become their mentors or advisors.

The change in emphasis for character education programs in the regular school setting versus the JROTC setting is very different. Character education programs in the regular setting tend to be knowledge or cognitively based while the JROTC curriculum tends to be behavior based. In the normal school setting, there tends to be a character word of the week or month and everyone devotes some time during the day to studying about that word. They may read stories or listen to songs that are examples of that word. For example, if the word were “dependable” they might listen to the song “Lean on me” by Al Jarreau or be asked to think of three words that describe tolerance and share them. In the JROTC program, they might study what the word means, but the major emphasis would be watching for behaviors that indicate dependability. If they are not in formation, in class on time, do not bring their homework, etc. they receive demerits. Further, peer pressure from upperclassmen reinforces desired behaviors. According to Williams (2000), the desired behavior must be modeled by everyone if the character education program is going to be effective, and this does occur in this JROTC program.

The issue of whether character traits can be changed is no longer a question. The JROTC students in this study came from the same community and population as the other students and their conduct on the behaviors associated with 16 character traits was superior. The JROTC program does improve the behaviors associated with the 16 character traits. Consequently, it can be concluded that character can be taught. The instrument does discriminate between those students who exhibit behaviors associated with these 16 character traits and those students who do not exhibit these behaviors.

**Conclusions**

This investigation provides clear support that the JROTC curriculum has a positive effect on student behavior. Further, it adds to the knowledge base on character education. It sends a clear signal to school officials, that a more intense effort must be made if they want to positively impact behaviors associated with character traits. A character education curriculum that is cognitive based and taught for 15-20 minutes a day, in isolation of the rest of the curriculum, will not change student behavior. Everyone on the faculty must be involved and the character trait of the day/week must be modeled by everyone and infused throughout the curriculum. The focus must be on behavior and not on the character word of the week/month. Last, but not least, peer pressure to conform, as occurs with the JROTC curriculum, must take place. Currently, peer pressure tends to cause students to do harmful things. This is a powerful force that can and should be used positively.
References


. (Spring, 2001). Army’s Junior ROTC program builds character and high-calibre capability. CEP Character Educator, 9(2), 1 & 6-7.


