Character and moral education has a great deal of proponents and critics. A century (and more) of discussion of the issue has led to a great deal of literature. There is plenty to read for those who want some background on the topic.

There are many who insist that the issue is too complex and that attempts to integrate it into the curriculum are hopelessly naïve. Some argue that there is already too much content in schools to fit more in. Public school systems and universities which attempt it sometimes face the accusation that they are indoctrinating students or feeding them dangerous propaganda. A common argument is that these matters belong more in the family and church than in a school setting. Inevitably, critics bring up the argument about whose ethics and morals should be taught.

Of course, character education has many boosters. Big names like William Bennett and James Kilpatrick have contributed their prestige to many such efforts. But even those who favor it often disagree sharply about how it should be done. A good example of such disagreements is the argument about whether such efforts should be overt or more subtle, or exactly which “virtues” should be encouraged. It is likely that the discussion will continue indefinitely.
How to Lie with Statistics and other Mathematics

Available at: http://members.aol.com/cygnusgrp/stats.html

This web page in an excellent introduction to the many ways in which statistics and other mathematical ideas and procedures can be used in an effort to deceive.

A partial list of these ideas:

- Descriptive statistics versus Inferential statistics
- Proportion
- Probability
- Sample Size
- Randomness
- Reliability
- Independence
- Absolute vs. Relative Change
- Standard Deviation
- Coefficient of Correlation

This web page also has links to other web sites, as well as articles which describe the phenomenon further. An excellent reference for prospective teachers, scientists, and anyone who works with numbers in their dealings with others.
An Ethical Issue in Statistics

By Tomas Kovarik, Mathematics

Raritan Valley Community College (New Jersey)

Available at: http://rvcc2.raritanval.edu/~scieng/tmmsci.html

Kovarik shows that when using statistics, there are some rather obvious ways to behave unethically. But when conducting experiments, especially those that will only be glanced at by others, and not thoroughly inspected, there are some very subtle ways to make an argument that fits your preconceived notions, especially if the data do not point dramatically in one direction or the other. One particular experiment involved confidence intervals, the same idea used to present poll information.
I’m not sure who runs this web site, but it is dedicated to the utilitarian principles of John Stuart Mill, a 19th century English philosopher and economist. The principle argument made is that the discussion of ethical values can almost always (if you are brave and honest enough) be reduced to mathematical principles, and then, naturally, to mathematical calculations.

Examples:

- If a certain ethical decision will cause both harm and good, we can calculate the extent, duration and intensity of suffering versus good, and then make a decision based on mathematical models.

- The utility (or lack of utility) of a certain policy of a government, school, or other institution can be weighed by assigning values to each part of the foreseeable consequences, and then calculating whether or not to implement the policy.

- The probability of a proposed intervention succeeding can and should be calculated if possible, and then policymakers can make a decision based on discussion with their constituents. An example might be recent U.S. invasions of Haiti, Grenada, and Somalia.

- The threshold of acceptance of the public to certain policies and scales of magnitude of consequences can be used to “calculate” the correct decision.

An interesting site for those who see some ethical decisions (such as public policy) as something that can be quantified and therefore calculated.
The Mathematical Miseducation of America's Youth

Michael T. Battista

Kappan Magazine, February 1998

Available at: http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kbat9902.htm

Battista argues that the traditional method of mathematics education is stunningly ineffective, and that teachers and administrators are either oblivious to this fact, or are desperately trying to cover it up. He argues that the Back to Basics movement and the Standardized Testing mania are simply efforts designed to create a pretense that learning is actually place, when things are really getting worse.

Battista gives several chilling examples of students, who despite being successful students in traditional classrooms, are shown to have an almost complete lack of even the most elementary mathematical ideas and skills. Battista points out that although they can spout memorized procedures, such procedures are completely useless to the students in that they do not understand how the procedures apply to meaningful real world situations. He goes on to point out that conventional assessment methods create the impression that these students actually have a good grasp of the subject, despite the ability of Battista to demonstrate in just a few minutes that the students know almost nothing of the subject.

He argues that although current reform efforts are not perfect, they are based on solid research about how students actually learn. The efforts of mathematics education researchers of the past 20 years are finally beginning to pay off, but recalcitrant teachers, administrators and even mathematicians are fighting reform tooth and nail. And their rhetoric, although not at all persuasive, is kept so simple and single minded that the public all too often sides with the anti-reformers. (e.g. Standards) It also is pointed out that since the vast majority of parents went through the traditional method of mathematics education, they are often easily persuaded that this is what their own children should have. This is despite the all too common admission of these same parents that they detest mathematics and they never did understand it.
The late Ken Sirotnik of the University of Washington (he died in January 2004) was one of the most eloquent and outspoken critics of the high stakes testing movement sweeping our public schools. In his posthumous essay collection, he and other contributors survey the evidence that continues to mount about teacher and principal demoralization and attrition over frustration about the effects of mandated testing for high-stakes accountability. He claims that such achievements as the “Texas miracle” have been completely debunked, and argues that the current high stakes testing mania is really just another manifestation of a cyclical movement that has appeared repeatedly throughout the last century of American public education. Here is one of his more compelling quotations:

“Perhaps the saddest part of all is that there is really no solid evidence that these kind of heavy-handed, test-based, accountability policies really work in meaningful and enduring ways. First of all, if they did, we would have improved public education long ago or at least stopped hearing about how bad our schools are. Simple logic suggests that given all the efforts since the early 1970s with minimum competency approaches, coupled with more recent efforts ostensibly focused on world class standards, we would have heard about substantial improvements by now.”

The reliance on such tests, he and other contributors assert, has actually undermined public education by encouraging teachers to teach to the test to make their schools look successful. This book contains a harsh rebuke to those who maintain that the current testing environment is good for our public schools. It is an excellent read for someone who is looking for evidence when confronted by “Standardistos.”

(I have chapter 1 in electronic form if you would like to see it. Ken emailed it to me as a draft.)
How Not to Teach Values
A Critical Look at Character Education

Alfie Kohn


In this paper, Kohn argues that character education is often seen as a “collection of exhortations and extrinsic inducements designed to make people work harder and do what they're told.” Even when other values are also promoted, such as caring or fairness, the preferred method of instruction is tantamount to indoctrination. In other words, the point is to drill students in specific behaviors rather than to engage them in deep, critical reflection about certain ways of being. He points to research which claims that persons who are frequently rewarded or given positive reinforcement for caring, sharing, and helping are less likely than other people to keep doing those things. (Granted, this research was done on young children, but don’t we always imply that our students are still maturing?) He also argues that although character education curricula often stress the importance of things like "respect," "responsibility," and "citizenship," these are slippery terms, frequently used as euphemisms for uncritical deference to authority, which is certainly not our goal (is it?)

He criticizes those who promote “direct” character education, while these same people are quite articulate about the bankruptcy of this model when it comes to teaching academic subjects. Knowing that the "transmission" model fails to facilitate intellectual development, why would they uncritically accept the very same model to promote ethical development? (e.g., Bill Bennett, William Kilpatrick and others)

Kohn also argues that when character education is construed as the process of inculcating habits - which is to say, unreflective actions - then it scarcely deserves to be called education at all. He quotes Alan Lockwood as saying such that is simply a naïve attempt to get "mindless conformity to externally imposed standards of conduct."

He also questions the premise that "good conduct is not our natural first choice," rejecting the argument of Biblical literalists, who sometimes argue (to Kohn’s great consternation) that the best you can hope for is "the development of good habits." [How does this issue fit into our Christian identity and/or mission? Does our adherence to the Reformed Christian tradition mean that we assume that students have an innate tendency to sinfulness, so that we are trying to “fix” the students? Or is that really the point? Are we trying to help students “overcome” their (and our own) innate tendencies? ]
Mistakes in Teaching Ethics

James H. Toner

Published Aerospace Power Journal - Summer 1998

Available at: http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj98/sum98/toner.html

A military man, Mr. Toner first makes the argument that all too often we do not give our students enough credit. We falsely believe that we have to start from scratch, and thereby waste valuable time neglecting to see that our students can start thinking on a higher plane than we believe. On the other hand, we also make the mistake of believing that we can improve the character of the vast majority of students, and thereby waste enormous amounts of energy on some intransigent persons that could be better spent elsewhere.

Another mistake is to think that our students must see us “torn apart” by every little ethical puzzle, and that we feel a need to struggle unnecessarily with trivial matters, and our students come to see our routine as comical farce. A quote from Toner:

“Not every word and not every action are deeply troubling moral quandaries.”

Toner also argues that we sometimes make the mistake of thinking that curricula make teachers. This is nonsense. Says Toner:

“A major problem with ethics education is that it cannot be crammed into neat compartments and nice-sounding, desired learning outcomes. I wholly agree that there is a moral literature with which people ought to be familiar, and I completely agree that knowledge of certain religious, philosophical, historical, and literary sources can help us all find our way through the ethical jungle. But there is no magic bullet—no always-certain ethical compass. We must teach moral reasoning, not just core values or ethical checklists.”

A great article by someone who obviously has been through the process several times.
This conversation between two teachers at the West Virginia University, one a teacher of law, was recorded and then transcribed in the mid 1990s. The names Rodgers and Belden are pseudonyms. Rodgers is skeptical of character education, claiming that most of it is “neither conducive to the development of good character or to further ethical development.” Belden agrees that much of it is not working, but argues that this is not a reason to give up trying. Rodgers is also highly critical of the “alleged muddle” in non-academic America. Here is a fascinating quote:

“I am not unduly cynical about academics and intellectuals, but there's no denying that there's money in muddle. There's money in values and applied ethics teaching. There is money to be made in a world in which we assume we don't know what values and ethics are. If you can convince people they're in a muddle. You can make money by helping them get clear about what we tell them they are confused about. Yes, ordinary people are sometimes in muddles. We all get in bad shape from time to time. But there is more muddle in departments of philosophy and religion in American universities than on most street corners.”

Belden counters that it is important to give students an opportunity to talk about ethical issues, because it will cause at least some to think more about the subject. This conversation is a fascinating give-and-take with the first half of the discussion revolving around whether or not character education is even necessary, and if it is necessary, is it effective? The second half discusses issues in legal education, but still is an excellent read for anyone thinking about character education. Rodgers argues that although it is often assumed that it is students who are cynical of character education, the teachers can take advantage of it in some unusual ways: Here is another quote from Rodgers:

“Many approaches to teaching ethics let the teacher off the hook by allowing the teacher to avoid taking responsible for his or her own point of view. It's a way to avoid taking personal responsibility and I'm afraid that some teachers find that appealing.”

Belden concluded with:

“I agree with you… our old homilies have not gotten us the world we want… But I'll continue teaching ethics, knowing that it is thought by some (including you), as a fool's errand to do so.”
This article was written by James R. Elkins, a Law Professor at West Virginia University. He is addressing the problem of whether or not ethics can be taught in the law school classroom. The article was written as a response to an article by Thomas Eisele, another law professor. Both somewhat agree that ethics education is essential in legal education, but they differ in their approach. Eisele would argue that those who say that we can improve student ethics are often overstating the case. Elkins sums up Eisele’s article by saying that Eisele:

“concludes that we cannot create the kind of reality in the classroom that makes ethics teaching and learning possible.”

Elkins disagrees with Eisele’s premise. He especially disagrees with the Elkin’s conclusion that students are "unlikely to make the kind of discoveries about themselves" that are normally associated with moral progress. He favors more opportunities for students to ponder ethical dilemmas on their own and with their peers, rather than a direct approach. He feels that since there are so many possible situations that attorneys and judges may find themselves in, moral principles are more important than trying to get students to react certain ways in specific situations. There are just too many situations to cover.

Since we on the committee have been kicking around some definitions of ethics, I appreciated Elkins’ definition:

“Ethics demands, not that we be good, but that we be concerned about the good, not that our moral teaching succeed, but that we not let our failures blind us to our hopes.”
Teaching the Virtues

Originally published in IMPRIMIS, the monthly journal of Hillsdale College, February 1992

Available at: http://forerunner.com/forerunner/X0116_Teaching_the_Virtues.html

By Christina Hoff Sommers
Associate Professor of Philosophy, Clark University

Sommers is an unapologetic proponent of direct moral education. She dismisses the argument that it can be a form of brainwashing. She calls it “pernicious confusion.” She argues that while brainwashing is diminishing someone's capacity for reasoned judgment, it is misleading to say that helping children to develop habits of truth telling or fair play threatens their ability to make reasoned choices. She argues that good moral habits enhance one's capacity for rational judgments.

She decries the paralyzing fear of indoctrinating children that prevents any meaningful character education. She criticizes those who focus on social injustice, while neglecting personal ethics. Corrupt politicians, the oppression of women, corruption in big business, the environmental record of multinational corporations and so on are important. But all too often these issues crowd out instruction on personal ethics.

A quote:

“When high school students study ethics at all, it is usually in the form of pondering such dilemmas or in the form of debates on social issues: abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment and the like. Directive moral education is out of favor.”

(The next article in the bibliography is a response to Sommers.)
Can Virtue Be Taught?  
(And, If So, Should It Be Taught?)

Available at: http://www.fdl.uwc.edu/faculty/rrigteri/Sommers.htm

Roger Rigterink is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin – Fond du Lac. He is responding to Christina Hoff Sommers, the author of the previous article in this bibliography. Sommers believes in character education, but doubts that ethics courses as currently taught improve student moral behavior. She advocates that we revamp our ethics courses to focus on the virtues. She contends that this restructuring is necessary in order to reinforce student commitment to a set of reputable moral standards.

Did you ever hear of the experiment in which 100 wallets with cash in them were deliberately left on American and Japanese streets? 97 of the wallets in Japan were returned (intact) to authorities, whereas in America only 8 were. Sommers points to the Japanese model of values clarification which helps explain this.

Rigterink agrees with the basic assumption about the Japanese schools. For example, he notes that Japanese students practice acts of sharing, neatness and orderliness, respect for others, loyalty, etc. This has allowed the Japanese to instill the basic values of their society within their school system. But while Sommers is suggesting that American school systems attempt to duplicate this feat, Rigterink argues that our cultures are too different to make their system practical for us. Rigterink agrees that the model is tempting, but still argues it is impractical. As an example, American education decontextualizes most subjects and teaches them separately, whereas in Japan, this instruction does not happen during the course of a philosophy class or any other single class; it happens throughout the entire day. To think that we could change our educational model to make the Japanese model of character education possible is naïve. Tempting, but naïve. Take the example of teaching mathematics and science courses separately. If American education cannot even figure out that these courses should obviously be integrated, how naïve to think that the much more complex idea of integrating ethics could be instituted.

Rigterink criticizes Sommers for denying the complexity of the issue. He concludes with the following: "Recommending that the virtues be taught is easy. But, to recommend that they be taught in the right circumstances, in the right manner, from the right motives, to the right extent, with the right ends in mind, requires considerable practical wisdom. While teaching the virtues makes for a nice political slogan, the how and when presents some difficult challenges for which there are no facile answers."

An excellent article for those thinking about how to integrate ethics throughout the curriculum, as we are no doubt thinking about.
Plato and Socrates--Can Virtue Be Taught?

This article was written by James R. Elkins, a Law Professor at West Virginia University.

Available at: http://www.wvu.edu/~lawfac/jelkins/fragments/platovirtue.html

Once, Socrates was asked "Can you tell me, Socrates--can virtue be taught? Or if not, does it come by practice? Or does it come neither by practice nor by teaching, but do people get it by nature, or in some other way?"

Socrates famously declared that he did not "know the least little thing about virtue.” But was Socrates simply playing coy by trying to get people to say that he really was teaching ethics, because he realized that others would be skeptical of anyone claiming that they could do it? In other words, did he really want to talk about ethics, but knew he had a better chance if someone else brought it up?
Dewey's Conception of "Virtue" and its Educational Implications

Suzanne Rice
University of Kansas

Available at: http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/96_docs/rice.html

Rice argues that we seem to have forgotten that Dewey urged us to consider the educational potential of all our institutions, not just our schools. Meaning that some students, despite our best efforts, can not and will not develop virtues if laboring under unfavorable circumstances. Preaching about the hero who, despite all odds, overcame injustice and succeeded is not necessarily a bad idea. But it may lead some students to think that they must be superhuman or else they will never overcome. Rice reminds us of Dewey’s philosophy:

“The school constitutes only a part of children's environment, and these other environments in which they participate will also bear on the development of character. Children live most of their lives outside of school among friends and family members engaging in a wide variety of activities, and the quality of these relations and activities will promote or hinder the development of different virtues.”

A good article attempting to bring some of John Dewey’s ideas of character education into the current debate.
The Kappan magazine of June 1975 was a special issue that features twelve articles on moral education, some quite lengthy. Rather than comment on all, I will list the titles and authors, and if you want to read more, I can lend you the magazine. I could not find any of the articles online. I think these articles are an excellent reminder that even articles thirty years old can have great relevance today.

**Moral Education: Where Sages Fear to Tread**
David Purpel and Kevin Ryan

**Moral Education’s Muddled Mandate: Comments on a Survey of Phi Delta Kappans**
Kevin Ryan and Michael Thompson

**The Survival of the Wisest**
Jonas Salk (Yes, THE Jonas Salk)

**The Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Moral Education**
Lawrence Kohlberg, Director of Harvard’s Center for Moral Education

**A Reply to Kohlberg**
Richard Peters

**Values Clarification: It Can Start Gently and Grow Deep**
Sidney Simon and Polly deSherbinin

**Clarifying Values Clarification: A Critique**
John S. Stewart

**Cognitive Moral Education**
Michael Scriven

**A Comment on Cognitive Moral Education**
Brian Crittenden

**Moral Education in a Canadian Setting**
Edmund Sullivan and Clive Beck

**Moral Education: Aims and Methods in China**
William F. Connell

**The Moral Choices Before Us: Two Theologians Comment**
Harold Shane