Implementing Character Education and Behavior Improvement in Moroccan Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Character education has recently become an important area of concern and research among researchers and stakeholders in the field of education worldwide. The emergence of character education as an area of research, theory, and policymaking has been motivated by a generally noted increase of violence and misbehavior among students in educational institutions, which negatively affects the school environment and effectiveness as well as students’ performance, achievement and success. It has also been driven by the increasing awareness of the fundamental role and mission of education and educational institutions in instilling in learners the values and character traits of citizenship. In this context, the objective of this research is to investigate the impact of implementing character education and the improvement of students’ behavior in Moroccan secondary schools. To collect data, the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview were used to elicit information from teachers and students on their opinions and perceptions of the impact of implementing character education programs and activities on students’ behavior improvement. The most important findings of this study confirm that character education does not constitute a mainstream practice in the classroom and its institutional context. In this respect, this article presents some suggestions to integrate effective character education programs in policy making, teachers training, and students’ life in the classroom and Moroccan school contexts.

Keywords: Behavior Improvement, Character Education, Character Traits, Citizenship, Moroccan Secondary Schools, Positive Behavior

I. INTRODUCTION

Character education is as old as history, it is an area of research that resulted from numerous studies in the 60’s; from moral development research by Kohlberg, Erikson and Lickona to other studies which their main concern was looking for causes behind students’ negative behavior and violence in schools. As "a growing discipline with the deliberate attempt to optimize students' ethical behavior" (Agboola & Tsai, 2012), Character education is interrelated with moral behavior. A student with a good character must have the ability to know the good, desire the good and certainly act it out. In other words, the student should behave in a way that is coherent with his moral judgment. Recently, Moroccan researchers, educators, practitioners and policy makers have become interested in character education issues and have shown unprecedented concern with the integration of this later in the Moroccan educational system. In September 2017, the Moroccan council of education, training and scientific research launched a report about the importance of values education as one of the most important basics of human life in its individual and social dimensions. It described values education as one of the major levers of training and qualification of human capital and its ongoing development. It also stressed the fact that having a successful implementation of values education in Moroccan schools is the responsibility of schools, families, media and many other institutions that are operating in the sectors of education, culture and mentoring. The present section deals with the principles and implications of character education and its impact on Moroccan students behavior improvement.

II. PRINCIPLES OF CHARACTER EDUCATION

Character education is based on three key defining principles and components: knowing, wanting and doing the good. These principles refer to awareness and acknowledgement of good behavior, thinking critically and ethically about one’s actions, and adopting good character traits in one’s behavior such as respect, caring, trustworthiness, responsibility, tolerance, fairness, compassion and many other values. These components also refer to moral knowing that is moral knowledge, moral feeling that is the moral sense, and moral action that is the moral conduct. In similar line of thought, (Dubbin & Olshtain, 1986) point out that education has a big significance to support human to learn about life. They argue that the mission of education is to enable students think critically about their thoughts, beliefs and actions,
which enables them to start reflecting about themselves and try to develop and improve their character. In this sense, character education is a process that incorporates knowledge, feeling and finally action.

Character education is the way to follow in order to adjust the student’s behavior and improve it. For example, Schwartz (2008) argues that character education is a movement that encourages schools to create an environment that fosters ethical, responsible and caring young people. This implies that the environment or the atmosphere where the learning process takes place is very important and has to be safe and healthy in order to help students’ foster their character and learn from the positive behaviors’ they see around them. Effective character education aims to help students gain knowledge as well and essential life skills and values that would enable them have positive and strong character traits.

To this end, stakeholders in the field of education (policymakers, researchers, educators, teachers, students, principals, and parents) have to coordinate their efforts to set up and implement innovative policies, research agendas, strategies, and programs in order to implement character education. Similarly, practitioners are called on to equip students with knowledge and provide them with the necessary social skills to use in their everyday life. Another important aspect in the implementation of character education is implementing the targeted traits through instructional classrooms activities. This implies that character education is not merely a matter of content, but rather a methodological matter.

Generally, schools attempt to provide students with a variety of academic subjects as well as skills that aim at helping them develop both their academic achievement and personal character. An effective tool to achieve these goals is implementing character education. Character education is as old as history; it is the process of "Character education is a growing discipline with the deliberate attempt to optimize students' ethical behavior." (Agboola & Tsai, 2012). Thus, it is important to note that character education is also referred to through various terms like moral reasoning, moral, virtues or values education, religious education, and sometimes civic education. In the same context, (McClellan, 1999) claimed that the principle aim of establishing schools is to inculcate moral values in children. Similarly, (Lickona, 1989) asserted that, “down through history, in various countries, education has had two great goals: to help young people become smart and to help them become good” (p.6).

That is to say, the main aim behind education is to help students improve their character and moral thinking, then, of course, their academic achievement. In this regard, (McBrien & Brandt, 1997) stated, “The goal is to raise children to become morally responsible and self-disciplined citizens. Problem solving, decision-making, and conflict resolution are important parts of developing moral character. Through role playing and discussions, students can see that their decisions affect other people and things” (p. 17).

Character education is a competent powerful instrument in the critical way of child and teenager building, always in which schools should play a main role (Berkowitz, 2012). It is an area of research that resulted from numerous studies in the 60’s, from moral development research by Kohlberg and Erikson to other studies which their main concern was looking for causes behind students’ dishonesty and violence in schools. In the 1960’s and 1970’s, there was a big shift in moral education when other approaches emerged such as value clarification, moral dilemma discussions, and decision-making processes that replaced the traditional emphasis on learning right from wrong and acting right (Field, 1996).

However, there was a failure in these programs in differentiating between students’ personal preferences and moral values. Hence, one of the most important aims of schools is to develop children’s character, intellectually and morally through values- based atmosphere in order to be good moral members in their communities. Consequently, the best way to teach character education is via incorporating its traits throughout the curriculum. The presence of good character traits within the lessons, textbooks and classroom activities counts as a palpable source or basis for students to relate to in the process of learning about the principles of character education; it will help them find something to rely on and go back to whenever they need to adjust or reflect upon their thoughts and behaviors.

In addition to this, teachers play an important role in the process of implementing an efficient program of character education since they are asked to be good role models as well as to provide students with a set of core values and morals but still, parents are supposed to take part of the process too. Accordingly, parents have to cooperate with schools and be involved in the process of implementing good character traits, because every child learns first of all from his parents and most of the time takes them as role models so parents have to behave in a way that enhances their children’s good character because both character education and good parenting call for adults who behave in ways that promote the positive development of youth (Berkowitz & Bustamante, 2013).

Back in history, public schools in America adopted the Bible as their one and only source for moral instruction. Then, different opinions emerged over which Bible to adopt in educating children morals. Consequently, character education emerged, more specifically, in the Massachusetts colony where various groups from Europe settled. At that time, it was known as moral education, a new book showed up that is the McGuffey Reader, this later introduced children to numerous morals such as kindness, patriotism, hard work and many others. In brief, moral education took part of public education until the 1960s through stories such as the McGuffey book, teacher modeling, and discipline.

According to (Covey, 1989), there is a shifting of paradigms in America, from a concern for a person’s personality to a concern for a person’s character. Education is a tool that enables people to develop on all levels through different periods of their life time to become better versions of themselves. Related to this, (McCabe & Trevino, 1993) examined the causes behind cheating in American universities and the findings of their research resulted in additional one that focuses on character development at the secondary school level (Lathrop, Foss, & Foss, 2005). Afterwards, an increase in nationally developed character education programs raised in the 80’s such as the program.
of Character Education Partnership (Lickona, 1996b). By the end of the 19th century, several states of America were demanding that character education programs should take part in the curriculum, generally with the purpose of teaching respect, honesty, and civic responsibility (DeRoche & Williams, 2001). Besides Lickona’s Character Education Partnership, other programs were used on the national level, namely (Cunningham, 2007); (DeRoche & Williams, 2001). Today, there are several programs of character education with numerous character traits to implement and adopt. People are now talking about the importance of character and personal integrity (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999). So, education is not only a process of transmitting mere academic knowledge that exists in the textbooks or the curricula, but also a process of instilling ethics, values and good behaviors in students as the main purpose of education should be building good citizens that are characterized by a healthy and positive behavior.

In the past, education had two objectives, one was to educate people intellectually and the other was to teach them to be morally good. The founding fathers of the United States (Ryan & Lickona, 1992) trusted the idea that character education would help in establishing democracy because students, who are considered future citizens, will develop democratic virtues such as respect for the rights of individuals, respect for the laws, volunteer in community service, and of course they will develop a concern for the common good of the whole country.

Nevertheless, the integration of a character education program into any school subject, like the subject of teaching English as a foreign language, efficiently needs a good strategy to follow. Language has a primordial role in the development of the intellectual, social, and emotional side of any student. Furthermore, English language classes equip learners with the ability to communicate in their daily lives in reliance with the global needs. Moreover, they enable students to develop their communication competence, and become highly aware about choosing the right time to say an utterance, what to say and how to say it.

In the same line of thought, integrating character education into language learning gives teachers another vision of their pedagogical work, the process of implementing should be planned as a school project. Integrating values in the various aspects of the curriculum, pedagogy and activities. Nevertheless, teachers, separately have the charge to establish the most proper form of character education can be implemented into their classroom activity and the appropriate lesson plan they can follow to successfully deliver the aimed character to their students.

III. CHARACTER EDUCATION IN MOROCCO

In the Moroccan context, “madrasas” that were founded in the 13th century, were meant for older children who were brilliant in "Msid" they were venerable universities where young men memorized the Quran and were taught diverse subjects, namely, the Islamic law or “chariaa”, Arabic literature, logic, history and mathematics. Some of these madrasas are Bou Inania in Fes, Ben Youssef in Marrakech and Abu-al Hassan in Sale, the three religious schools were used to accommodate students of al-Qarawiyyin University, which is considered by UNESCO the oldest continuously operating degree-granting university in the world.

In fact, all these schooling institutions were offering religious education programs, to ensure gratifying Islamic values and morals in the Moroccan society. During the colonial period (1912 – 1956), the French introduced an alternative model of schooling into the Moroccan context, primarily designed to educate personnel to serve in the French colonial administration (Boyle, 2004). However, the popularity of Quranic schools has not declined because of the absence of moral education in modern public schools. It wasn’t until the 20th century that madrasas lost their prestige in Morocco, and other modern universities gained favor.

Today, the degradation of morality and the spread of negative behaviors are distorting the socio moral values among young people, it has reached students from different school levels; namely elementary schools, junior schools, secondary schools, and even higher education institutions. For this reason, a huge focus should be given to implementing character education programs in all levels as a key point that must be embedded in every student, so as “to counter the Tsunami of this global culture negating Moroccan identity traits and distorting the socio-moral values” (Mansouri, 2011).

In September 2017, the Moroccan council of education, training and scientific research launched a report about the importance of values education as one of the foundations of human life in its individual and social dimensions. It described values education as “one of the major levers of training and qualification of human capital and its ongoing development”. It also stressed the fact that having a successful implementation of values education in Moroccan schools is the responsibility of schools, families, media and many other institutions that are operating in the sectors of education, culture and mentoring.

Some may argue that Morocco does not need an implementation of character education due to the fact that the religion of Islam covers all aspects of the human life including morality, manners and good behavior. However, values or character education is seen as a necessity for current generations of young people who should have a solid foundation of values and ethics especially in the light of globalization and the effect of media and new technologies on their character and behavior. In this context, researchers, educators, practitioners, policy makers, and policy documents have recently become interested in character education issues and have shown unprecedented concern with the integration of character education in the Moroccan educational policy, programs, and practice.

IV. THE RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The research topic of this study has been concerned with character education and behavior improvement in Moroccan secondary schools. The research objective is to investigate and understand the impact of implementing character education on the improvement of students’ behavior in Moroccan secondary schools. The research topic and objective understudy hold that the design and implementation of effective character education programs can boost students’ behavior, learning, and success as well
as their development as effective and responsible citizens.

This thesis primarily aims at investigating the relationship between implementing a character education program and student’s behavior improvement. Therefore, the research questions that guide the study are:

- How does the implementation of a character education program impact students’ behavior?
- How do learning and practicing values at school affect students’ behavior?
- How does the use of the curriculum as a tool to teach character traits influence student’s behavior?
- How does the modeling of good character traits by teachers impact the behavior of students?

To answer the above questions, the researcher hypothesized the following:

H 1: The implementation of character education in Moroccan high schools’ results in students’ behavior improvement.

H 1 a: Learning and practicing values at school drives students to improve their behavior.

H 1 b: Using the curriculum as a tool to teach character traits reinforces students understanding and willingness to improve their behavior.

H 1 c: Through modeling positive character traits, teachers inspire their students improve their behavior.

The rationale for selecting this specific topic is that the results can be useful in spreading awareness at the school environment also they can facilitate in the process of planning, implementing and developing students’ moral and character development at schools. In addition to understanding the challenges that teachers face in teaching character education, it will also help in overcoming them, allowing character education to take place easily and effectively, and more importantly it will contribute in changing students’ negative behavior.

Several studies worldwide were conducted to investigate the process of character education and character development from different perspectives. However, in the case of Morocco, it is without any doubt there are many studies conducted in different areas related to education, still, the researcher didn’t find enough resources concerning character education apart few articles. Therefore, there is a gap in the field of character education in Morocco that has to be given interest.

V. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

To collect data relevant to the objective of this study, the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview were used to elicit information from teachers and students on their opinions and perceptions of the impact of implementing character education programs and activities on students’ behavior improvement. To this end, the semi-structured interview was used to collect data from forty teachers and the questionnaire was administered to four hundred and twenty students to elicit data on their perspectives on character education and behavior improvement. This study adopts a quantitative-qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. In this respect, both (SPSS) and (AMOS) programs were used to analyze the quantitative data, while the (NVIVO) software was used to analyze the qualitative data collected through the interview.

The data was collected from teachers and students from different secondary schools in different regions in Morocco, namely Agadir, Casablanca, Fes, and Marrakech, Assila and Kliaa. The city of Fes was selected for it is the second largest cities in Morocco and its population has different regional and geographical backgrounds. The city of Agadir was selected for practical reasons. It is also one of the largest cities in Morocco and considered as the centre of the southern provinces of the Moroccan Kingdom. Its population has different ethnic, linguistic, regional, geographical, and socio-cultural backgrounds. Casablanca was selected, for it is the economic capital and the largest city of the country, where economic, social and political activities are more centralized and where different job opportunities are more or less available.

Therefore, students would certainly have different socio-educational backgrounds and perhaps have different reasons and motivations for learning the language from students in Assila or Kliaa, which are small cities, located in the north and the south of Morocco, respectively, and where students come from different socio-educational backgrounds. Marrakech is one of the largest and busiest cities in Morocco. It is also the center of tourism activities in Morocco and considered as a globalized Moroccan city. This sample of Moroccan cities, schools, teachers and students has helped to reflect the diversity characterizing the Moroccan society.

In this research, before starting to collect the data, a pilot study was conducted firstly during which the participants were asked about the clarity of all items in the questionnaires. Then, forty students from Agadir, Casablanca and Assilah were given the questionnaire to participate in the pilot study in order to indicate the validity of the questionnaire and to see if some questions are not necessary to include. Some revisions were needed to be done before coming up with the final versions of the questionnaires and of course before administering them to the whole number of participants.

The participants of this study were selected from different Moroccan public high schools in order to get a broad and at the same time a deep image about students’ behavior nationwide. Concerning students, they were all invited to fill in the questionnaire that aims at investigating the presence of character education in Moroccan schools and its impact on students’ behavior improvement, so 440 students, from common core, first year and second year of the baccalaureate from the schools already mentioned. In addition to this, an interview was done with teachers because interviews enable them to express themselves freely and to provide the researcher with the required data. So, forty teachers from different high schools and regions of Morocco were contacted before via emails as well as telephone calls and asked for their willingness to do the interview. After collecting the data, analysis was required for both the quantitative and the qualitative one.
VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results of the Questionnaire

This section reveals the quantitative data that the researcher collected from the questionnaires. In order to investigate the impact that the implementation of character education has on students’ behavior improvement, the researcher decided to address students from different public high schools in Morocco via a questionnaire in order to perceive their understanding of character education and also to measure the impact this latter has on the development of their moral character. This questionnaire was administered to students from six different Moroccan high schools. However, we were only able to collect 424 reliable and complete observations, after eliminating questionnaires with missing responses and those considered to be with no return. Thus, we obtained a response rate which is satisfactory.

The researcher had surprising results from the students’ answers. To start with, the majority of students (91.3%) said that school is a place where they study, or a place where they broaden their knowledge instead of a place where they develop their character or learn values; this, in fact, may imply that students do not grasp the meaning and importance of character education, for them school is a place where they can only develop academically.

Moreover, both male and female students agreed upon the idea that when learning and practicing values at school increases by 1%, students’ misbehavior increases by 23%, which is very surprising. This result may be explained in several ways; it is possible to relate this result with the ineffective implementation of character education in these schools. According to their responses, students ignore the meaning and importance of character education, so they were not integrated in the implementation process, they were not given a say in the situation, and as it is known, teenagers rebel against anything that they feel imposed on them.

Another result which is interesting concerns the number of males in a school and its relation with the improvement of behavior. From the results, interestingly, when the number of male students increases by 1%, students’ behavior improvement decreases by 40%. So, we can say that as much as male students we have in a school, behavior improvement decreases, maybe because male students tend to misbehave more than female ones. From my humble teaching experience, I can say that most of misbehavior issues I personally witnessed in my classroom was from male students rather that female ones.

On the other hand, for female students, findings showed that the increase of 1% in the number of female students in a school result in the increase of students’ behavior improvement at 40%, which is the opposite to male students’ results. In my opinion, we can explain this relation by the fact that most of the time female students tend to behave well and are the ones interested in developing their personalities and character traits, also females care more about others’ feelings and are more sensitive while interacting with others.

Furthermore, results concerning the covariances existing between variables showed that the teacher is the core of the character learning process. Both learning/practicing values at school and the presence of character education in textbooks’ success depends on the role of teachers in modeling good character traits, as the increase in their role modeling goes in parallel with the increase in students’ learning and practicing values at school as well as grasping the meaning of character traits present in textbooks.

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<th>TABLE I: ALL VARIABLES AND THEIR MEASUREMENT SCALES</th>
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<td>Variables</td>
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<td>Including character traits in textbooks</td>
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<td>Teachers acting as role models</td>
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<td>Learning and practicing values at school</td>
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<td>Student’s behavior improvement</td>
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<td>Student’s misbehavior</td>
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*** Significant at 1% level

This emphasizes the important role that teachers play, when teachers are good role models for their students, they encourage them to adopt good character traits and make them grasp the meaning of them. I personally believe that students observe the behavior of their teachers and sometimes imitate it, also adopt some of their teachers’ thoughts, beliefs and morals.

Another significant covariance is the one between the presence of character education in textbooks and the process of learning and practicing values at school. I think it is logic, because if we have a good implementation of character education in textbooks, students will learn appropriately those traits and adopt them whenever possible.

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<th>TABLE II: THE EXPLANATORY VARIABLES COVARIANCES</th>
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<td>Explanatory Variables</td>
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<td>Character education in Textbooks --&gt; Learning and Practicing Values at School</td>
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<td>Teachers acting as Role Models --&gt; Learning and Practicing Values at School</td>
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<td>Character education in Textbooks --&gt; Teachers acting as Role Models</td>
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*** Significant at 1% level
VII. RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS

Unlike the quantitative results, the qualitative findings that concern teachers’ interviews were different. Teachers agreed upon the necessity of implementing character education in Moroccan schools in order to improve students’ behavior. The majority of them said that teaching values and good character traits in schools is even more important than teaching academic content.

Moreover, most teachers said that they do integrate values while teaching in order to help their students have good manners and create a healthy classroom environment where learning takes place. However, they all talked about the textbooks as outdated and not adapted for teaching character as they contain only few units that stress the importance of values like citizenship and tolerance. Nevertheless, teachers gave examples of negative behavior they witnessed in the school environment and agreed that with a proper implementation of character education, the behavior of students may improve and this of course through employing various strategies such as: modeling good character traits, creating school clubs, encouraging group work, engaging students in service learning and more importantly engaging them in school life. In brief, teachers agree upon the idea that character education is not properly implemented in our schools, for this reason, we cannot witness its positive impact.

VIII. IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The results obtained from this study suggest that many measures should be taken in order to improve the quality of Moroccan Education and establish learner-centeredness in the educational system. In the context of Moroccan public high schools, teachers lack sufficient training and supervision on this matter, they ignore how to deal with character education and what is exactly asked from them. Therefore, providing trainings on character education is a must, teachers have to grasp the meaning of character first, then the traits they have to model and instill in their students, also different strategies that will help them fulfill this process successfully.

Related to this, it is necessary for teachers be trained in order to recognize their roles in the implementation process and to be aware of what is expected from them as teachers. Another important detail here, is that Morocco is a very rich country in terms of culture, in Morocco, there are numerous subcultures, so, depending on the region where a teacher’s work, he/she has to be conscious of their students’ culture and values. Thus, attending workshops to be well qualified culturally and socially is primordial to teach students character education.

Furthermore, teachers should be well trained to cope up with the whole process of the character education program implementation. In addition to this, they also should grasp the instance of the program that is being implemented within their schools as well as recognize the materials and resources that are available for them. In brief, providing professional development for teachers about the program of character education is the most effective way to ensure that teachers are properly trained and consistent in their practice.

Another implication is the lack of understanding of the meaning of character education. Some teachers believe that they do not have enough time to care for their students’ character or about their behavior improvement. They believe that teaching character is an extra task to the curriculum they teach. So, for them teaching character education is just an extra work that needs more time and effort. Another result of the lack of understanding of the meaning of character education is that we have different ways and strategies of teaching it, depending on individual points of views of teachers, which is very confusing and problematic.

Another important implication is that lesson plans are not promoting morals and character traits. For instance, teachers of all school subjects should design lesson plans that aim to improve and foster the character of their students. Moreover, lesson plans should be used as a key tool to teach good character traits by including them into the teaching of different subjects and not only subjects that relate to the Islamic religion like Islamic education.

In this context, school clubs and extra-curricular activities should have a large contribution in this process. It is without any doubt that these activities are very efficient in instilling good character traits, boosting students’ self-confidence and scaffolding them in the process of forging their own character. Teachers have to create opportunities for students, through the use of activities, to be responsible toward others at the school, to act as role models and to care about others around them.

In the same line of thought, students should have a say in issues that are related to their school life. While instilling good character traits, it is important to make students practice decision making, as mentioned in the literature review, decision making is an essential character trait that students have to foster to be able to encounter different life situations. For this reason, teachers and schools’ principals have to provide their students with opportunities where they can have their say and take decisions that are related to their school environment.

IX. CONCLUSION

To this end, the implementation of “character education … stands at the very center of schooling; it is not conducted as an ancillary or even parallel sequence with academic instruction...” (Davidson et al., 2008, p.84). As the father of progressive education Francis W.Parker said “ the end and aim of all education is the development of character”. That is why, it is a huge responsibility to contribute in shaping future generations who are not only equipped with academic knowledge but, more importantly, equipped with values, life skills and good character traits. Therefore, teachers, parents, school personnel and all community stakeholders should show a full engagement in the process of modeling and instilling good character traits into Moroccan students.
REFERENCES


