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Character Education and Students' Moral Development

by

Elizabeth O. Allis

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A thesis submitted to the
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Character Education and Students' Moral Development

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Table of Contents

Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
Chapter II: Literature Review.....	8
History of Character Education.....	8
Implementation of Character Education in Public Schools.....	11
Benefits of Character Education for Students and their Parents.....	16
Character Education and Good Citizenship.....	20
Chapter III: Method.....	24
Chapter IV: Results.....	28
Chapter V: Conclusions and Recommendations.....	34
References.....	39
Appendices.....	42
Appendix A – Unit Plan for Character Trait Study.....	42
Appendix B – Pre and Post Student Survey.....	43
Appendix C – Student Interview Questions.....	45
Appendix D – Anecdotal Observation Record Sheet.....	46

List of Tables

Table 1: Comparison of Character Trait Demonstrations per Week.....28

Table 2: Comparison of Student Responsibility Survey Results – Positive.....30

Table 3: Comparison of Student Tolerance Survey Results – Positive Statements....31

Table 4: Comparison of Student Tolerance Survey Results – Negative Statements...32

Chapter I

Introduction

Character development plays a vital role in today's educational system. Considerations about "how?" and "when?" to implement character education are topics of conversation among teachers at all levels. This debate over the best way to nurture students' moral development is not new to education. Philosophers and educators have grappled with various approaches for centuries and, in fact, no universal definition for character education can be given (Pearson & Nicholson, 2000). The dilemma over *implementing character education stretches back to teaching morality in the colonies and the later common school movement in American education. According to Davis (2006), in the history of American educational systems, students' moral formation has transformed from a strict teaching of sectarian religious beliefs to the broader concept of teaching values and character in public education.*

Schools have historically been expected to play a significant role in the development of a student's character. However, shifts in the attitudes of American society have made this task of educators much more challenging to undertake. The diversity of public opinion regarding what and whose values should be taught in schools remains an obstacle, but there is an emerging common belief among the public that something must be done to promote students' moral development. In accordance with this opinion, many school districts have moved to develop some form of character education program in recent years, although there is still a considerable amount of discussion over the best strategies and approaches for

teachers, counselors and administrators (Pearson & Nicholson, 2000). Even though many school communities do believe that there is an ethical necessity for character development in their students at school, in the era of rising standards, teachers find it difficult to fit moral education into their strict curriculum requirements.

After the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, school districts have found the teaching of content skills to be paramount (Howard, 2005). Therefore, the status of moral education has continued to diminish. Howard (2005) refers to a frightening example of skills based teaching with a lack of moral development as he discussed the educational background of Theodore Kaczynski, the “Unabomber”. Kaczynski was a Harvard graduate who demonstrated academic brilliance throughout his formal education. His class work would have passed the high standards of current educational reform. If judged on his academic prowess alone, Kaczynski could be hailed a success story; however, his severe lack of moral development left him an ultimate failure.

Moral education approaches in today’s schools have tremendous variation. Heenan (2005) remarked that “Effective character education is not an addition to an already crowded curriculum, but rather, it uses the existing curriculum, the school culture and the relationships within the school to define and model good character” (p.1). Character education happens through both the direct and indirect methods of teachers. Direct instruction occurs with the use of formal character education curriculum, including textbooks and other educational materials, but this formal curriculum alone is not sufficient (Yuksel, 2005). Students must also learn indirectly

through the moral environment and atmosphere of their surroundings in school, discussing real-life examples and daily experiences.

Problem statement

It is imperative that students actively participate in character development activities as part of their educational experience at school. In my classroom, students come to school at a loss for solid moral values and I feel that it is my responsibility, as their teacher, to fill in those gaps. It is in the best interest of my students for their future success that they leave school with a solid foundation in moral development, as well as academic proficiency in the core areas. If educators want to foster high levels of success in their students, they must include deliberate character education activities in their regular curriculum. The purpose of this study is to develop a program that successfully integrates character education into students' daily routine in the classroom.

Significance of the problem

If schools do not strive to reach the moral needs of their students, the ethical quality of future American society is bound to decline. Home environments are not providing adequate moral development for school-aged children. At school we are faced with a strong push to make our students better readers, better thinkers, but what about better people? With a focus so strong on not "leaving behind" students in the areas of reading, math, social studies or science, our nation seems to be forgetting the importance of teaching children how to be good people. As Howard (2005) so skillfully described with his chilling example of the "Unabomber", society cannot afford to let students pass through our schools on the success of their academic

content alone. We must be diligent in our efforts to teach students about the value and importance of good character. It will be students who successfully integrate their character with their academic prestige that truly make for a better tomorrow.

Teachers are hard-pressed to find time during the school day when character education can be incorporated into students' learning. Rigorous academic standards, even at the primary level, make it difficult to find the time to teach students about moral development. With such time constraints as a burden, teachers need to look toward the hidden curriculum of schools to find the most powerful tools for teaching about character. Hidden curriculum relates to the social relationships of students and can often be the most effective tool in the moral development of students (Yuksel, 2005). Howard (2005) further asserts that "Hidden curriculum includes the quality of the interactions and relationships, classroom management, and methods of school governance" (p.44). Teachers can use examples from students' daily social lives as the foundation for a character education program in their classroom. The hidden curriculum is where teachers will find a wealth of examples which students can relate to regarding their own character development. The hidden curriculum can and should drive the agenda for any deliberate character education activities.

As a teacher, I believe that opportunities for demonstrating appropriate morals to students exist in various situations throughout the school day. I have attempted to incorporate character education with my kindergarten students during the school year, but would like to make a more concentrated and deliberate effort to instill good character in my students.

In this action research project, I will develop a program in which two specific character traits, responsibility and tolerance, are thoroughly examined and practiced by kindergarten students. I will begin by giving all students a pre-test regarding their awareness of each character trait. The students will then spend two weeks solely focusing on each trait. Responsibility will be the focus for the first two weeks and tolerance will be the focus for the second two weeks. At the end of each two week block, I will be assessing if the students' awareness and behavioral demonstrations of each character trait increases as a result of their thorough examination of the trait.

Rationale

The need to foster students' moral development is felt by educators in our local area of New York State. Administrators are looking for ways to implement character education programs in their districts. For example, in an effort to include some form of character education in the daily routine, primary students in the Medina Central School District learn about a new character trait each month. Each monthly character trait is discussed school-wide during the principal's morning announcements to the student body. However, I believe that more needs to be done within individual classrooms to discuss, model, and reinforce character traits, specifically responsibility and tolerance.

Even though proficiency in reading and math will always remain a goal of teaching primary students, educators need to make it a priority to utilize approaches within their classrooms to also teach students about character development. I am compelled to find an effective way of teaching my students about character development while also meeting their academic goals. Through my integrated

character education program, I hope that students will gain not only an awareness of the importance of good character, but will also successfully demonstrate the character traits taught during their everyday lives. The following chapter analyzes the current research on character education and moral development. In the literature review I discuss the history of character education, analyze the implementation of character education in public schools, demonstrate the benefits of character education for primary students and their parents, and discuss the relationship between character education and good citizenship.

Definition of Key Terms

Character Education – “Strategic instruction that promotes social and personal responsibility and the development of the good character traits and moral virtues that make this possible” (Vessels & Boyd, as cited in Pearson & Nicholson, 2000, p. 244).

Moral Development – An increased knowledge of one’s personal value system by which a person makes choices in their daily life.

Chapter II

Literature Review

History of character education

Over the course of history there has been a constant ebb and flow in the debate over the need to include moral formation in students' formal education. According to Davis (2006), it seems everyone in the educational arena can agree with relative ease on those specific qualities a moral person should possess, such as honesty, self-control, fairness, and respect, but it has been markedly more difficult to determine how students should acquire such "good" qualities.

In the history of the West, moral education was typically derived from a religious-based standard. Colonial America was a time when sectarian schools controlled by churches and missionary societies were commonplace. Schools controlled by local governments also began to emerge at this time and became known as common or free schools and eventually as "public" schools (Davis, 2006). However, in a largely Christian society, the Bible was regularly used in most school settings. Algera and Sink (2002) noted that, "the Bible served as the primary textbook for reading and the daily lessons reinforced commitment to moral codes of behavior based upon scripture" (p.163).

Mid-19th century religious friction between American Protestant and Catholic hierarchies over the public school's embrace of Protestant values in textbooks and readings from the King James Bible eventually led to the creation of a separate private religious and parochial system of schools (McClellan, as cited in Cuban, 2001). Thus, government funded public schools adopted the separation between

church and state and left religious training to families, churches, and other voluntary organizations. Progressives such as John Dewey and Horace Mann began to emerge in the beginning of the 20th century and their educational approach swept the nation's public schools. McClellan (as cited in Cuban, 2001) emphasized that, "Progressives saw moral education as a process of individual and, more importantly, social improvement" (p.458).

Despite separation of church and state, the role of religion in public education was not a null issue. Religious revivals after the World Wars of the mid-20th century led to legislation determining that "released time programs" were an acceptable way for children to receive religious education, provided these programs were held away from school campuses. Davis (2006) claims that at least 750 school districts around the country still actively utilize released time programs. However, for school districts not using released time, a decision had to be made regarding the place for religion in public education. Teachers today may teach about religion, through history or literature, but, as stated by Davis (2006), "teachers are prohibited from encouraging students to become religious or showing them how to be religious" (p.8). In this way, students are only given the religion-based education they need to make sense of the world.

Present educational dilemmas still center on ways to deliver moral instruction to students, while abiding by laws separating church and state, and more importantly, making this instruction meaningful and useful for students' daily lives (Davis, 2006). Howard (2005) notes that in the later 20th century, brief periods of renewed interest in moral education have followed incidences of scandal or tragedy, such as the

Watergate scandal of 1974 and the tragic shootings at Columbine High School in 1999. Howard (2005) further claims that, “The post-tragedy spotlight on moral education is typically short-lived and other agendas regain dominant status” (p.46). Despite Howard’s view on the short-lived revival of moral education in our schools, common opinion remains that tax-supported schools should improve the moral character of future generations (McClellan, as cited in Cuban, 2001). It is a matter of infusing conscience into the curriculum, according to Wishon and Geringer (2005), “If we care about our children and the future of society, education for conscience, including the denunciation of dehumanizing aspects of human discourse, is a moral imperative” (p. 247). Educators have decided that they can no longer take a *laissez-faire* attitude toward moral education. Davis (2006) reports that at least six White House-congressional conferences on character education took place during the 1990’s. Current president George W. Bush has also requested that Congress triple the funding for character education to \$24 billion (Davies, 2006).

Moral education in today’s society has evolved into several different “worlds” as demonstrated by Joseph and Efron (2005). Moral education is not synonymous with character education, and in fact, character education is only one possible model for implementing moral education in the public school. Teaching and encouraging moral development varies extremely in approach. Joseph and Efron (2005) explain their seven different worlds of moral education in today’s schools: character education, cultural heritage, caring community, peace education, social action, just community, and ethical inquiry. These “worlds” do not necessarily exist in isolation, but may help define the characteristics of programs being used in public schools

across the country. Joseph and Efron (2005) noted that, “The most popular world of moral education at present is character education” (p.532). Diverse approaches to moral education have led to a wide variety of implementation strategies found in our schools.

Implementation of character education in public schools

Specifically, two very different approaches to understanding moral development have gained wide-spread attention in recent years, according to Tappan (1998). He defines these two approaches as the cognitive-developmental approach and the character education approach. In the cognitive-developmental approach, students pass through specific stages that mark changes in underlying structure of moral thought. Joseph and Efron (2005) note that this approach can be linked to the “just community” world. Students form a democratic community and foster a sense collective responsibility when asked to deal with moral dilemmas that arise in their community. On the other hand, the character education approach is much more traditional and sticks to teaching children a core set of values, often by using stories or narratives (Tappan, 1998). However, Tappan (1998) feels that neither of these widely debated approaches to moral education is entirely effective on its own, but rather a Vygotskian/socio-cultural perspective would successfully combine the best elements from both approaches.

Vygotsky developed the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) which captures those functions or abilities which have not yet matured, but are in the process of maturing and can only be accomplished with assistance (Tappan, 1998). According to Tappan (1998) “Moral education entails a process of guided

participation, whereby children are helped by their parents, teachers and more competent peers to attain new and higher levels of moral functioning” (p.7). Students are guided and assisted in their efforts and thus their new forms of moral thinking become internalized. It is the guided practice of practical activities that leads to students’ internalization of moral thinking (Tappan, 1998). Dialogue and discussion are also key components of guided practice and often center on discussion of a narrative story. Tappan (1998) believes, however, that students should not be expected to shape their behaviors after those of the characters in a story if they have not had the opportunity to discuss and dialogue the actions of those characters.

It is a dialogue-rich environment, filled with guidance and modeled behaviors that can be seen as the most successful way to implement character education in a school. Bulach (2002) claims that, “Students have to talk about each character trait and its implications, but they also have to see the behaviors modeled by the people in their daily environment” (p. 81). Bulach (2002) further provides implementation suggestions for character education programs and also warns about common areas of downfall. Approaches such as character trait of the month or week may not be working because each trait can be widely interpreted and students become bored hearing about the same traits year after year.

Conversely, Bulach (2002) suggests that the focus should be on one or two behaviors of the week, which may fall under the category of a certain character trait. For example, the commonly used character trait “respect” has multiple interpretations, however, behaviors related to “respect for property” are much more concrete for students. Students should discuss why each behavior is important and faculty and

staff should know what behaviors to look for from the students. Parents and community members should also look for these behaviors being demonstrated outside of the school. School leadership must play an active role in order to rally support for the program.

If the focus is on behaviors, not character traits, teachers can hopefully find ways to infuse character education curriculum throughout the school day and not necessarily at one specific time. As Heenan (2005) remarks, “Effective character education is not an addition to an already crowded curriculum, but rather uses existing curriculum, the school culture and the relationships within the school to define and model good character” (p.1). School culture and relationships define what psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg calls the hidden curriculum in education (as found in Yuksel, 2005). In his research related to school culture, Bulach (2002) found that, “Students are more likely than teachers to know what goes on in bathrooms, hallways, and buses, or when teachers’ backs are turned” (p.80). The hidden curriculum of the school environment provides the framework for students’ moral development, though it is often overlooked. Much attention is placed on the formal curriculum for moral development: textbooks and other educational materials. It is, however, the creation of a moral atmosphere or culture that can most profoundly affect the moral development of students at school (Yuksel, 2005).

When Campbell (2004) studied nine teachers in four diverse urban school settings, her overall objective was to develop an understanding of the moral and ethical complexities of educational practice as well as teachers’ interpretations of these complexities. Data collected through personal interviews with the teachers as

well as visits to the schools demonstrated that “Often teachers’ actions of a moral and ethical nature are not planned or consciously executed, however, teachers can articulate with depth and intention what they hope to achieve morally and ethically in their classrooms and how they hope to facilitate it” (p.425).

As described, the daily acts of character education in schools are largely spontaneous, but teachers can still perceive and explain them within a moral framework. Unprompted teachings in variations of the “Golden Rule” were abundant in classrooms along with the mutual feeling that if teachers show respect to their students, then students will start respecting themselves (Campbell, 2004). Teachers strive to be seen as living by the same principles they want their students to embrace. Pearson and Nicholson (2000) claim that good character needs to be taught from a “do as I do,” not simply a “do as I say,” perspective.

As the need for moral education in today’s society becomes increasingly more paramount in the eyes of educators, Pearson and Nicholson (2000) want to remind educators that a “comprehensive character education program should be a collaborative effort of administrators, teachers, counselors and parents” (p.3). Teachers may become overwhelmed if they feel the daunting task of students’ moral development lies solely on their shoulders. Pearson and Nicholson believe that it is through the collaborative efforts of the school community that character education can be implemented to the fullest. In addition, Bulach (2002) claims that, “Everyone in the school community should be involved and the process and progress should be evaluated” (p.81). It is important to remember that schools are embedded in the larger community and consequently school officials should, according to Bulach (2002),

find out those characteristics that are valued by their community and which of the characteristics are present or lacking in the student body before proceeding to implement a character education program.

Strategies implemented for a successful character education program should account for the egocentric nature of primary students as well as the sociocentric characteristics of students in the upper-elementary grades, claim Pearson and Nicholson (2000). Suggestions to empower committed administrators, teachers and counselors are given by Pearson and Nicholson (2000) to promote the achievement of character education that serves the students and school community and retains that collaboration is the key to success.

As part of a school-wide approach, administrators should look to create focus groups of parents and teachers, hold school assemblies, utilize morning announcements, newsletters, recognition programs, staff development programs, hall displays and school and community projects. Teachers can work toward developing classroom rules, using positive language, being conscious of phrasing choices, direct instruction, learning partners, appreciation time, mentoring, journal writing, cooperative activities, literature-based discussions, class meetings and parent links. Counselors can help facilitate teachers' efforts in several ways including: consulting, developing behavior management plans, classroom guidance activities, parent education, conflict resolution and individual and small-group counseling (Pearson & Nicholson, 2000).

Howard (2005) explores the potential compatibility between educational standards and moral education. He explains that discussions of moral issues can

happen in the classroom using subject matter in the humanities, science and even mathematics. At the elementary level, discussions of ethical issues can be directly correlated to classroom management as well as existing curriculum.

Academic service-learning is another strategy for incorporating moral education into academic content areas. An example of such a service-learning project for students, according to Howard (2005), could be providing a resume writing service to unemployed homeless. In this situation, students would be directly practicing writing and vocational skills, while also confronting ethical issues about government responsibilities toward the homeless, poor, or abused. The benefits of moral education abound both academically and behaviorally for students.

Benefits of character education for students and their parents

With the increased emphasis placed on student achievement on high-stakes testing in recent years, it is important to realize that moral education can have a positive impact on student success. Howard (2005) claims that, “The knowledge and skills taught in moral education can prepare students for high-stakes tests as well” (p.47). Howard further explains specific examples of assignments found on high-stakes assessments which ask students to take a particular stance on an issue, often relating to social justice, and argue their stance with supportive evidence and reasons. Moral education helps students recognize and respond to ethical issues. The critical thinking skills required to successfully complete such a task are part of the moral education students receive in the classroom (Howard, 2005).

Moral education not only has its place relative to students’ academic performance, but also in regard to students’ behavior. Bulach (2002) believes that “If

students practice behaviors associated with forgiveness, sympathy and kindness, bullying behavior should decrease” (p.79). Bullying is known to be one of the major causes of increased violence in public schools across the nation. With a successful character education program, an improvement in student behavior and school climate should occur and this result should trickle into an improvement in academic achievement and test scores (Bulach, 2002).

Students can indeed benefit in multiple ways from a successful character education program implemented in the school community. It is stated by Hiatt-Michael (2006) that schools with successful character education programs reported fewer disciplinary referrals for behavior, increased attendance at school, fewer student dropouts, and higher scores on standardized tests. Improvement in such areas will not only benefit students, but teachers, administrators and other school faculty will be rewarded as well. As the 1996 and 2000 Gallup polls suggest, (cited in Hiatt-Michael, 2006) the most important purpose of public education is to prepare students to become responsible citizens in their future lives. It is the achievement of this goal, through character education, that mutually benefits all those working collaboratively in the big picture of the school community.

Once students have internalized their learning from character education, it is hoped that they will possess a common understanding of key terms and articulate those key ideas throughout their daily lives (Revell, 2002). Students who have experienced successful moral education share a common vocabulary with which they can express their ideas. While Revell recognizes that views articulated by students still in the school setting are not necessarily indicative of future actions, their

experience in character education influenced their attitudes and awareness and thus their beliefs and understandings of certain issues. According to Revell (2002), character education is not designed to create students who can readily produce a list of qualities and their merits, but rather aims to guide children in absorbing the general values that frame character education.

In the world of elementary education, first grade teacher Gloria Rambow Singh, wanted to use character education to develop positive character education traits within her students before she had to deal with negative behaviors (Singh, 2001). Singh chose six traits from the Character Counts! Coalition, a non-profit, nonpartisan, nonsectarian, national organization that supports curricular and behavioral advances in the classroom through the use of their Six Pillars of Character. Singh surveyed her class and determined that more than 50% of her students demonstrated no understanding of the six identified traits: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. Singh then worked from the very first day of school to build a sense of community in her classroom, actively involve students in games or role play of the traits, use puppets to enhance learning, incorporate character language into general classroom life and practice cooperative learning techniques.

Singh (2001) found that after only five months of shifting the focus of her teaching to emphasize the themes of character, 90% of the students showed an increased understanding of the character traits. More importantly, however, students demonstrated their internalization of the traits as classroom misbehavior decreased significantly. Students were holding themselves and their classmates to higher

standards, noted Singh (2001). Parents of children in Singh's classroom claimed that the character education students received at school also carried over into the home.

Awareness of the benefits of character education for parents and families should be an important part of a character education program's design. Royal and Baker (2005) found that character education programs typically do not address the moral development status of parents, a troubling fact considering the importance of parental influence in early childhood. In their research, Royal and Baker (2005) proposed that "intervention programs that enhance the moral judgment of parents also have potential to enhance the moral development of their children" (p.226). The goals of such programs would be to help parents better understand the development of their children and also respond to their children in references to morality. Higher levels of moral development may ultimately be achieved by both parents and their children. Royal and Baker (2005) found, however, that there needs to be a balance between the right of families to develop their own values and the right of educators to teach shared values of the larger community (p.228). Incorporating parents into character education programs can prove highly beneficial toward enhancing students' character development.

Although character education programs have proven to demonstrate many benefits, Revell (2002) indicates that students do not always positively receive such programs. In her research, younger children were often unaware that character education was a discreet subject, most likely viewing it as something integrated into storytelling and normal classroom activities. Older students were more likely to question the role and effectiveness of character education programs and identified

distinct curriculum related to this aim. They often felt that character education should occur in the home with their parents and that they were patronized by character education efforts in school. Bulach (2002) also discovered that the character traits deemed desirable by a school system are often in the eyes of the beholder. That is to say, one community may emphasize certain character traits that are not valued by citizens of another community. The same can be said for parents, as Royal and Baker (2005) observed that parents of different cultures follow different parenting styles and values and may object to limited character education programs. Despite such obstacles to the success of character education, the civic purpose of public education reigns true (Hiatt-Michael, 2006).

Character education and good citizenship

Research in recent years has demonstrated a direct correlation between character education and citizenship. Howard (2005) stated that, “Many educational theorists agree that moral education in schooling prepares the next generation of democratic citizens” (p.44). President Bush (as cited in Davies, Gorard, and McGuinn 2005), claimed during the National Character Counts Week in 2003 and 2004 that “the development of character and citizenship has always been a primary goal of America” (p.345).

In her study of students attending public schools in Chicago, Revell (2002) discovered that younger children tended to describe a citizen using words such as “nice,” “good,” and “honest.” Such terms could be directly related to values taught during character education lessons the students received. On the other hand, Revell found that older children considered factors such as the law, employment, and

education as contributing to good citizenship. It seems, according to Revell, that “successful character education was indeed the way to gain citizenship in America” (p. 425).

Davies, Gorard and McGuinn (2005) explore the idea that character education and citizenship education can be considered separate entities, claiming that a decent society should be concerned with both issues of character and citizenship. The two fields are mutually linked in their ties to moral education. Character education, however, is only one portion of the larger picture of citizenship education. Holden (2003) claims that in order to effectively meet the needs of citizenship education, educators must go beyond teaching right from wrong and good behavior.

While character education aims to alleviate the fear of reduced morality among young people, Holden proposes that citizenship education goes further by addressing a perceived breakdown of community involvement and an acknowledgement that young people are becoming out of touch with mainstream politics (2003). Citizenship education is based on social and political frameworks, while character education is concerned primarily with morals. Both character and citizenship education can be seen as responses to crises in the climate and culture of today’s society (Davies, Gorard, & McGuinn, 2005).

According to Holden (2004), the strands of citizenship education have been identified as: social and moral education, community involvement, and political literacy. Citizenship education aims not only to educate young people to be active members of society, but also well-informed to participate on many levels. Holden (2004) discussed her recent research in two primary schools, in which she discovered

that teachers felt they had adequate programs in place for social and moral development, but noted that they neglected teaching about community and topical, political issues, the two subsequent statutes of citizenship education.

Parents in the research of Holden (2004) had similar views to the teachers, feeling comfortable with the social and moral education in school, but feeling hesitant about the teaching of topical, political issues, especially at the primary level. A few parents also held reservations about the merit of the school's fostering involvement in the community, as this was an area possibly outside the school's control or that schools already did enough. Kristjansson (2004) discusses the potentially radical objection that citizenship education may overly politicize moral education beyond good reason, teaching only political literacy and specific democratic social skills.

Even with such difficulties, teachers can find ways to extend character education programs to include good citizenship. This is not to say that teachers should simply look for easy-to-use resources that are labeled "citizenship" (Davies, Gorard, & McGuinn, 2005). With the aim of creating citizens who can reflect on moral and social issues, participate in discussions and reach informed decisions, teachers can use critical discussions in the classroom as springboards into such topics (Kristjansson, 2004). According to Davies, Gorard, & McGuinn, (2005), classic literature, mentioned as an approach to integrating character education lessons, can prove beneficial for exploring key ideas about democratic society, as well as providing direct moral guidance. In primary education, circle time commonly provides a good starting point for discussion of social and moral issues linked to citizenship. Holden (2003) proposes that circle time transform into a "thinking circle",

providing teachers and students with a specific setting in which to discuss current and past moral issues. The institution of a school council or some other form of school government can also help students bridge the gap between good character and citizenship. In addition, constitutional classrooms, in which methods of teaching and management are congruent with an intention to prepare students for an active role in democratic society, can help students practically apply their learning of citizenship education (Davies, Gorard, & McGuinn, 2005). Character education is a fundamentally important piece in helping students become productive citizens.

Chapter III

Method

Introduction

The members of the target group of this action research project are kindergarten students in a rural school district located approximately one hour between the cities of Rochester and Buffalo in New York State. The project has two major objectives. The primary purpose of my research is to examine how I, as a classroom teacher, can best integrate character education lessons into the pre-existing core curriculum for kindergarten set forth by my district and New York State. The study is designed to see the effectiveness of a program which allows students to learn about and practice two specific character traits, responsibility and tolerance, for two weeks each, in the kindergarten classroom. A second goal of the research study is to assess students' awareness and behavioral demonstrations of each character trait after their thorough two week examination of the trait. The study will help to determine students' growth in character development.

Participants

This study includes eighteen kindergarten students from one classroom and one kindergarten teacher. There are approximately 450 students in the entire school, which houses all primary students kindergarten through second grade in the school district. The poverty rate in the school, demonstrated by the number of free and reduced lunches, is about forty percent. The classroom population used in this study closely reflects this percentage. I am the general education teacher in charge of the classroom used in this study. In my classroom, there are eight boys and ten girls. Four

students, approximately twenty-five percent of the classroom, are racial minorities. The classroom is general education and there are no students with individualized education plans.

Procedures

Along with the entire student body of the school, the students in my study are exposed to a different, school-wide character trait each month as part of the school's character education plan. These school-wide character traits are examined through the use of the principal's morning announcements as well as a monthly school assembly. The students in my classroom, however, will further meet the school's character education requirement by dividing the study of each character trait into smaller, more concentrated increments of time within the classroom. By analyzing the school's list of monthly character traits, I selected the two traits that I felt held the most importance for my kindergarten students, responsibility and tolerance. Using responsibility and tolerance, I designed a two week series of activities for each trait, during which students in my classroom will have the opportunity to study, discuss, and experience the trait (see Appendix A).

As part of each two week period of study, students will gather background knowledge about each trait, listen to and discuss literature related to each trait, share personal experiences, both positive and negative from home and school, and engage in creative writing and role playing activities regarding each trait. Thus, a similar scope and sequence of activities takes place over the two week block for each character trait. Examination of the character trait will take place five days a week

during each two week period. The entire study will take a total of four weeks to complete.

Instruments of study

All students are given a pre and post survey to assess their awareness and understanding of each character trait (see Appendix B). Both surveys will be conducted with individual students in small groups immediately preceding each two week period and then immediately following each two week period. I will analyze the results of both pre and post surveys and will use Microsoft Word to create a table to display the survey results.

Students will also be assessed through the use of one-on-one interviews with the teacher. I will meet with students at the completion of each two week period to discuss their perceptions of the character trait and how they feel they have demonstrated the character trait by asking them three questions (see Appendix C). Students will be asked how they felt about examining each character trait, if they believed they learned more about each character trait by studying it for two weeks in the classroom, and how they believe they have positively demonstrated each character trait, either at home or at school. Student answers to these questions will be analyzed qualitatively to determine how students perceived the character education program. I will further conduct informal anecdotal observations of the students during each two week period to note positive and/or negative demonstrations of the character traits seen in the school setting (see Appendix D). The results of these informal observations will also be qualitatively analyzed to determine how well students

internalized their understanding of each character trait and how their examination of the traits influenced their daily actions.

Chapter IV

Results

Student achievement

During the course of each week of study on the two character traits, responsibility and tolerance, students in the class were anecdotally noted for demonstrating the character trait being studied in the classroom (see Appendix D).

The results of these anecdotal observations are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparison of Character Trait Demonstrations per Week

	Week 1	Week 2
Character Trait		
<i>Responsibility</i>	24	41
<i>Tolerance</i>	15	36

From the eighteen students in the class, there was a combined total of 24 noted demonstrations of responsibility during the first week of study on this trait and a combined total of 41 demonstrations of responsibility during the second week of study. During the first week of study on responsibility, three students in the class were not anecdotally noted for demonstrating the character trait in some way; however, during the second week of studying responsibility, all students in the class had at least one positive demonstration of the trait noted on the record sheet.

In regard to the study of tolerance, there was a combined total of 15 noted demonstrations of this character trait during the first week of study and a combined total of 36 demonstrations during the second week of study. During the first week of

study, five students in the class were not anecdotally noted for demonstrating tolerance in some way. However, during the second week of studying tolerance, this number dropped to only one student not recorded for demonstrating the character trait.

Student attitudes toward the character traits

At the beginning of each two week unit of study on the character traits, students in the class were given a seven-statement survey to assess their attitudes and self-perceptions about each of the two character traits (see Appendix B). Students in the class were then given the same survey at the completion of each two week unit of study to assess their growth and any increase in self-awareness of the trait being studied.

In the responsibility survey, all seven statements were written to express positive behaviors regarding the character trait. In the tolerance survey, four of the statements reflected positive behaviors regarding tolerance and three of the statements reflected negative behaviors regarding tolerance. Both surveys used a rating scale of *Always*, *Sometimes*, or *Never* in response to each positive or negative statement about the character trait. The surveys were designed with simplicity for the kindergarten class. For the purpose of calculating survey results, however, the response *Always* has been assigned a value of 3; *Sometimes* a value of 2; and *Never* a value of 1. The average scores of the responsibility survey results are reported in Table 2, found on the next page.

Table 2

Comparison of Student Responsibility Survey Results – Positive Statements

Question	Pre-Survey Average	Post-Survey Average
1. I show my school work to a grown-up at home every night.	2.53	2.94
2. I take home and return my blue folder every day.	2.65	2.63
3. I return my library book on time.	2.47	2.75
4. I bring the supplies I need for school with me everyday (backpack, sneakers, homework, Share-A-Book).	2.59	2.81
5. I put classroom materials that I used away carefully and neatly every time I use them.	2.71	2.94
6. I keep track of my pencil case and folder at my table and make sure I have all the materials I will need to do my work every day.	2.41	2.63
7. I turn in my lunch money to the teacher in the morning and put away juice that I have for snack time.	2.53	2.44
Positive Statement Class Mean - Responsibility	2.56	2.78

The survey results show that every positive statement about demonstrating responsibility achieved a mean score over two points. In the pre-survey, the class mean for responsibility was 2.56. The statement, “I put classroom materials that I used away carefully and neatly every time I use them” received the highest positive rating of 2.71. In the post-survey, the class mean for responsibility was 2.78. The statements, “I show my school work to a grown-up at home every night” and “I put classroom materials away carefully and neatly every time I use them” both received the highest positive rating of 2.94. Most statements received a slightly higher rating in the post-survey on responsibility. However, the statement, “I take home and return my blue folder every day” received nearly the same rating both pre and post, and the

statement, “I turn in lunch money to the teacher in the morning and put away juice that I have for snack time” received a lower rating in the post-survey. The average scores of the positive tolerance survey statements are reported in Table 3.

Table 3

Comparison of Student Tolerance Survey Results – Positive Statements

Question	Pre-Survey Average	Post-Survey Average
1. I appreciate the way my friends are the same and different from me.	2.76	2.81
2. My classmates and I are all good at different things and we help each other when something is hard/ difficult for another person.	2.88	2.81
6. I get along well with others in school and at home.	2.65	2.75
7. I think it is good and fun to try new things.	2.94	2.63
Positive Statement Class Mean - Tolerance	2.81	2.75

Every statement written positively about demonstrating tolerance received a score over two points in both the pre and post surveys. The pre-survey class mean for positive tolerance statements was 2.81. The statement, “I think it is good and fun to try new things” earned the highest score of 2.94. The post-survey class mean for positive tolerance statements was 2.75, a slight decrease from the pre-survey mean. The statements, “I appreciate the way my friends are the same and different from me” and “My classmates and I are all good at different things and we help each other when something is hard/ difficult for another person” both received the highest score of 2.81. Two positive statements showed an increased score from the pre to post survey, while two other positive statements showed a decrease in score from pre to

post survey. The statement, “I think it is good and fun to try new things” showed the most significant decrease in score from the pre to post survey, 2.94 to 2.63. The average scores of the negative tolerance survey statements are reported in Table 4.

Table 4

Comparison of Student Tolerance Survey Results – Negative Statements

Question	Pre-Survey Average	Post-Survey Average
3. I laugh when someone else in class makes a mistake or doesn't understand something.	1.35	1.00
4. I only like to sit by certain people in class.	2.12	1.75
5. I think it is funny when someone else looks or talks differently than me and I like to laugh at that person.	1.59	1.25
Negative Statements Class Mean - Tolerance	1.69	1.33

Every negative statement about tolerance, with the exception of one, attained a score under two points. The one exception occurred during the pre-survey with the statement, “I only like to sit by certain people in class” receiving a score of 2.12. In the pre-survey, the class mean for negative tolerance statements was 1.69. The statement, “I laugh when someone else in class makes a mistake or doesn't understand something” received the lowest negative rating of 1.35. In the post-survey, the class mean was 1.33. A decrease in overall rating occurred for all three negative statements about tolerance from the pre to the post survey. In fact, the statement, “I laugh when someone else in class makes a mistake or doesn't understand something” had the lowest negative score of 1.00. This score means that all students in the post-survey rated this statement as a 1 or *Never*.

Sixteen students in the class were interviewed at the completion of each two week study of the character traits. Each student was asked the same three questions for both character traits (see Appendix C). The responsibility interviews indicated that all sixteen students believed that they had learned more about responsibility by studying and practicing it in school. Students on average felt, “good and proud” about studying how to be more responsible. One student said that she learned, “when you take toys out, you need to put them away and not wait for someone else to do it for you.” Another student reported that she had shown responsibility in school because, “I haven’t been going to the lost and found as much as I used to!”

The tolerance interviews indicated that most of the students believed that they had learned about tolerance by studying and practicing it in the classroom. Fourteen students reported that they had learned more about tolerance; one reported she had learned, “a little bit” and another that he felt he had not learned more about it. Students on average felt, “good and happy” to be learning about tolerance in school. One student claimed that she learned, “you should never ever laugh at people if they make a mistake,” while another student talked about learning not to “hurt people on the inside or outside.” Many students reported that they had been showing more tolerance at home by trying to get along with and say kind words to their siblings. Overall, the students expressed very positive attitudes and behaviors about the two character traits studied.

Chapter V

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this thesis was to expose primary-age children to direct character education instruction in the classroom. I further wanted to determine the effectiveness of this direct instruction on students' character development and growth. The character education unit of study developed for this thesis project was based around two week time periods for instruction and practice on one of two focus traits: responsibility and tolerance. Responsibility was the focus of the first two weeks, while tolerance was the focus of the second two weeks. By analyzing the results of the student surveys, interviews and anecdotal notes, I have drawn some conclusions about the effectiveness of the character education unit of study.

When observing the data, it was clear that the students demonstrated increased behavioral awareness of the character traits as they spent more time studying and practicing them in the classroom. This was evident by the increased number of character trait demonstrations per week for both traits from week one to week two. Students began integrating their knowledge and understanding of the traits into their actions and words throughout the day. This suggested that the character education unit was effective at promoting an increased student awareness and behavioral demonstration of the character traits.

A few parents also commented that their child had been using the words responsibility and tolerance to describe situations at home, proving that children in this research study truly did take their learning about the character traits to heart and attempted to further their character growth at home as well. This finding aligned well

with the current research on character education. Recent studies have shown that the most successful character education programs utilize an effective partnership between home, school, and the community at large. By engaging in group discussion, literature, role-play, creative writing and music related to each character trait, students were able to internalize their learning about the traits and in turn, used their understandings to foster more frequent demonstrations of the traits in the classroom.

Several interesting conclusions can be drawn by analyzing the survey results. When I looked at the responsibility pre and post surveys, it was evident that the children had grown in their understanding of the trait from the beginning to the end of the two week study. With statements such as, “I show my school work to a grown-up at home every night,” and “I put classroom materials that I use away carefully and neatly” scoring the highest after the post-survey, it was clear that these are responsible behaviors that most students highly value. On the other hand, it was also evident, with a decrease in score, that student responsibility to turn in lunch money and juice boxes in the morning was a behavior that needed to be further addressed in the classroom.

By analyzing the positive statements from the tolerance survey, it appeared that students did not grow in their positive awareness of this trait, as the overall rating showed a decrease from the pre to post survey. Of the four positive statements on the survey, student ratings indicated only fifty percent of the questions demonstrated growth from the pre to post survey. Students on average had more difficulty comprehending the positive attributes of tolerance. Especially in kindergarten, children are often timid and unsure of their school experience and statements such as,

“I think it is good and fun to try new things” can intimidate young children. Students also tend to cling to a set group of friends that, in kindergarten, they feel is safe and often have difficulty understanding how to accept others who are different from them. Research indicated that there is a very egocentric nature about young children and a resistance to things and ideas that are unknown.

On the contrary, when examining the survey results for negative statements regarding tolerance, students showed an overall decrease in score. This demonstrated that the students gained a better awareness of behaviors that do not display tolerance. Thinking of behaviors in the sense of what a person should not do is often an easier concept for children. In fact, on the post-survey, all students scored a “1” or *never* in regard to the statement, “I laugh when someone else in class makes a mistake or doesn’t understand something.” Students seemed to have a strong natural sense that showing tolerance meant to avoid doing things that would be considered “mean” to another classmate, including laughing at people or making a person feel bad about themselves. Although the class grew in their awareness of trying to not always sit by the same people all the time, the statement “I only like to sit by certain people in class” goes back to that feeling of safety young children have in the group of friends that they know and trust. Survey results showed that tolerance in general is a character trait that this class should revisit and discuss periodically throughout the year.

The student interviews indicated that students on average felt good to be studying and practicing the character traits of responsibility and tolerance in school. Students also used words such as proud and happy to describe their feelings about

doing character education in school. All of the students interviewed felt that they had learned something about responsibility by studying it in school, while most of the students felt they had learned about tolerance. Overall, the students' attitudes toward their character development were very positive and most responded very well to the unit plan. Students also readily came up with great examples of ways that they were demonstrating the character traits on their own, either at home or at school.

I believe that more research should be done on programs that are designed to help teachers successfully integrate character education into the demands of core curriculum and New York State Standards. Academic demands are growing annually and teachers are often finding it difficult to have enough time in a day to teach just the basic subjects. Even though I found it effective to block a few minutes in my normal morning circle routine to engage the children in discussions and activities regarding the character traits, this approach may not be feasible for all teachers. I believe successful character development is not completed in one year with one teacher, but rather takes a community effort from teachers and parents during every year of a child's education.

Throughout my teaching career, I have wondered how the important job of teaching children to have good character could still have a place among such an overburdened academic curriculum. I have always tried to take the character traits identified by my school as being valuable for our students and teach them in my classroom. However, I have never before done so with so many hands-on, enriching activities for the children, which were delivered for a variety of learning styles. I learned that such a character education program could be successfully implemented

with careful selection of meaningful character traits and development of coordinating activities.

By reviewing the literature on character education and moral development, I found that there are many benefits for students and their families from direct instruction in the areas of character education and moral development during the regular school day. As a result, I created a character education unit plan focusing on the traits of responsibility and tolerance. As I completed the unit with my kindergarten students, I assessed their growth through pre and post surveys, student interviews, as well as anecdotal notes and observations on their behaviors demonstrating the two character traits. I found that the students did grow in their overall awareness of the two character traits and their behaviors demonstrating the traits showed a marked increase in the classroom. These findings demonstrate the importance of deliberate character education in the classroom, especially beginning at a young age for primary children. In the future, more research needs to be done on how character education can be successfully integrated into classrooms across all grade levels in an ongoing effort to help students achieve higher standards of moral development.

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Appendix A

Unit Plan for Character Trait Study

<p>Week 1, Day 1 Responsibility *Administer pre-test (survey)</p>	<p>Week 1, Day 2 Responsibility *Brainstorm ideas and understandings about trait onto word web. *Create a class definition of trait.</p>	<p>Week 1, Day 3 Responsibility *Read and discuss a piece of literature related to trait. *Share connections to story from home or school experiences.</p>	<p>Week 1, Day 4 Responsibility * Listen to a song about trait. Discuss reactions. *Create a class “Y-chart” regarding what the trait looks, sounds, and feels like.</p>	<p>Week 1, Day 5 Responsibility *Re-visit “Y-chart” and literature. *Engage students in role-play activities involving the trait.</p>
<p>Week 2, Day 1 Responsibility *Listen to and discuss poetry related to the trait.</p>	<p>Week 2, Day 2 Responsibility *Re-visit class “Y-chart” *Begin student illustrations of trait.</p>	<p>Week 2, Day 3 Responsibility *Complete student illustrations and add a sentence to describe the picture.</p>	<p>Week 2, Day 4 Responsibility *Students will share their illustrations / writing about the trait with the class. *begin student interviews</p>	<p>Week 2, Day 5 Responsibility *Administer post-test (survey) *conclude interviews</p>
<p>Week 3, Day 1 Tolerance *Administer pre-test (survey)</p>	<p>Week 3, Day 2 Tolerance *Brainstorm ideas and understandings about trait onto word web. *create a class definition of trait.</p>	<p>Week 3, Day 3 Tolerance *Read and discuss a piece of literature related to trait. *Share connections to story from home or school experiences.</p>	<p>Week 3, Day 4 Tolerance * Listen to a song about trait. Discuss reactions. *Create a class “Y-chart” regarding what the trait looks, sounds, and feels like.</p>	<p>Week 3, Day 5 Tolerance *Re-visit “Y-chart” and literature. *Engage students in role-play activities involving the trait.</p>
<p>Week 4, Day 1 Tolerance *Listen to and discuss poetry related to the trait.</p>	<p>Week 4, Day 2 Tolerance *Re-visit class “Y-chart” *Begin student illustrations of trait.</p>	<p>Week 4, Day 3 Tolerance *Complete student illustrations and add a sentence to describe the picture.</p>	<p>Week 4, Day 4 Tolerance *Students will share their illustrations / writing about the trait with the class. *interviews</p>	<p>Week 4, Day 5 Tolerance *Administer post-test (survey) *conclude interviews</p>

Appendix B

Pre and Post Student Survey

Name: _____

Responsibility Survey

1.) I show my school work to a grown-up at home every night.

Always Sometimes Never

2.) I take home and return my blue folder every day.

Always Sometimes Never

3.) I return my library book on time.

Always Sometimes Never

4.) I bring the supplies I need for school with me every day (backpack, sneakers, homework, Share-A-Book).

Always Sometimes Never

5.) I put classroom materials that I used away carefully and neatly every time I use them (centers, playtime).

Always Sometimes Never

6.) I keep track of my pencil case and folder at my table and make sure I have all the materials I will need to do my work every day.

Always Sometimes Never

7.) I turn in my lunch money to the teacher in the morning and put away juice that I have for snack time.

Always Sometimes Never

Name: _____

Tolerance Survey

1.) I appreciate the way my friends are the same and different from me.

Always

Sometimes

Never

2.) My classmates and I are all good at different things and we help each other when something is hard / difficult for another person.

Always

Sometimes

Never

3.) I laugh when someone else in class makes a mistake or doesn't understand something.

Always

Sometimes

Never

4.) I only like to sit by certain people in class.

Always

Sometimes

Never

5.) I think it is funny when someone else looks or talks differently than me and like to laugh at that person with my friends.

Always

Sometimes

Never

6.) I get along well with others in school and at home.

Always

Sometimes

Never

7.) I think it is good and fun to try new things.

Always

Sometimes

Never

Appendix C

Student Interview Questions

1.) Describe how you felt about studying responsibility / tolerance (circle one) in school?

2.) Do you think that you learned more about responsibility / tolerance (circle one) by studying and practicing it in the classroom? How so?

3.) How have you shown responsibility / tolerance (circle one) either at home or at school?

Appendix D

Anecdotal Observation Record Sheet

Character Trait: _____

Student Names	Days of Week: _____
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