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Teaching Character Education to Students with Behavioral and Learning Disabilities through Mentoring Relationships

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Abstract

Despite nation-wide efforts to implement character education programs in schools, there is no research that specifically examines the effectiveness of these programs on students with behavioral and learning disabilities. SO (Service -Learning Opportunities) Prepared for Citizenship, an inclusive after school program, was designed to enhance the character development of elementary students by teaching specific character traits including: (1) responsibility and self-control; (2) cooperation and teamwork; and (3) respect and appreciation of diversity through language arts and other activities. The program relies on high school and college mentors to introduce the curriculum to the children and build friendships. In this ethnographic study, we examined participants' knowledge of the curriculum and perceptions of the program. Data gathered from in-depth ethnographic interviews of 19 students with behavioral and other learning and language disabilities were coded through domain analysis. Descriptive statistics are included. Results indicate that students with disabilities: (1) expressed responsibility for their actions; (2) responded to the ideas of cooperation and teamwork and respect and appreciation of diversity; (3) learned to make new friends; and (4) found learning about character to be fun and rewarding.

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The decade of the 90s has seen a renewed interest in developing character education curricula in schools. While educators have long been concerned about the moral education of students and specific character education programs have been in existence since the 1920s, the recent renewal of interest has developed from a mounting concern over the increasing moral decay of children and youth (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 1998a; Kilpatrick, 1992; Lickona, 1992). The character education movement of the 90s was fueled by the policies of Secretary of Education William Bennett who actively called for schools to play a distinct role in molding the character of youth (Bennett, 1993) and two national coalitions, The Character Counts Coalition and The Character Education Part-

nership. President Clinton echoed Bennett's sentiments with a forceful call to schools in his January 23rd, 1996 State of the Union address saying: "I challenge all our schools to teach character education, to teach good values, and good citizenship."

Increasingly, states and individual districts have begun to require some form of character education for all students, including those with disabilities. In New Hampshire for example, the State Board of Education adopted a policy on November 30, 1988 that mandates each local school board adopt and implement written policies relative to character and citizenship development, "to be included in courses of study and instilled through an educational climate which encourages and prepares parents and teachers to be positive role models for our children and youth." As a result of the policy shift towards building character through direct instruction, a dramatic increase in the number and variety of character education curricula has become available to schools (Leming, 1993).

According to the Character Education Partnership (1993), character education refers to the deliberate effort by schools, families, and communities to help young people understand, care about, and act upon core ethical values. Lickona (1996) argues that all schools should be engaged in character education for three compelling reasons. First, good character helps us become fully human and more capable of work and love by building strength of mind, heart, and will. Next, Lickona believes that schools are better places, "when they are civil and caring human communities that promulgate, teach, celebrate and hold students and staff accountable to the values on which good character is based" (p. 93). Finally, teaching character education is essential to the task of building a moral society.

The difficulties that students identified as seriously emotionally disturbed (SED) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, P. L. 105-17 as amended) have in caring about and acting upon the core ethical values of society described by the Character Education Partnership are longstanding. Many students identified as SED are lacking in the very character traits such as respect, responsibility, honesty, empathy, tolerance, and cooperation that the resurgence in the field is aimed at enhancing. For example, studies have shown that students with conduct disorders of the overt aggressive type exhibit significantly higher rates of noxious behaviors such as noncompliance, negativism, negative physical attacks on others, and destruction of property than their peers (Patterson, Reid, Jones, & Conger, 1975; Quay, 1986) while others with covert antisocial behavior patterns exhibit higher rates of lying, stealing, and truancy (Quay, 1986).

Asher and Hymel (1981) believe that due to deficits in social skills, many students identified as SED experience social isolation, peer rejection, loneliness, and problems in establishing and maintaining relationships. Indeed, the inability to develop and maintain effective relationships with peers and adults is one of the basic characteristics of the

federal definition of SED. Many educators would agree with Nicolaou and Brendtro (1983) who state that despite limited success in teaching some splinter social skills, "we too often have fallen short of the goal of instilling prosocial, responsible, caring interpersonal behavior in troubled children and adolescents" (p. 108). Problems with interpersonal relationships and character development are of course not limited to students with SED. In fact, according to Gresham (1997), these deficits are also associated with a substantial subset of students with both learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit disorder (ADD).

The development of friendships is an important goal of childhood and crucial to the integration of students with disabilities in general education classes (Stainback, Stainback, & Wilkinson, 1992). In fact, a meta-analysis conducted by Newcomb and Bagwell (1995) suggests that the development of friendships promotes positive social interactions, conflict management, and the completion of academic assignments. Yet, research studies have shown that children with behavioral and learning disabilities develop limited friendships in school and are at-risk for being rejected by non-disabled peers (Asher & Hymel, 1981). For example, Kupersmidt, Patterson, and Greisler (1988) found students with SED to be three times as likely, and students with LD twice as likely, to be rejected than their non-disabled peers in general education settings. In two related investigations, Gresham, MacMillan, Bocian, and Ward (1997a; b) found that young elementary students who were at-risk for behavior disorders were much less likely to have friends than their age and gender-matched non-disabled peers. In the first study, only 20% of third grade students at-risk for behavior disorders had one or more friends in a general education classroom compared with roughly 50% of their non-disabled peers (Gresham et al., 1997a). In their follow-up study of third and fourth graders, the researchers found that, compared to their peers without disabilities, the at-risk group had fewer friends, lower social preference scores, and lower teacher-rated social skills (Gresham et al., 1997b). Interviews of middle school adolescents with behavior disorders also revealed that these students spend more time interacting with teachers and less time interacting with peers in general education settings than do their non-disabled peers (Neel, Cheney, Meadows, & Gelhar, 1992).

If character education programs are to succeed with students with behavioral and learning problems, students must have multiple opportunities with various people in different settings to overlearn and generalize the skills and behaviors associated with the character traits being taught (The Peacock Hill Working Group, 1991; Stokes & Osnes, 1988). Moreover, the skills and behaviors must be lived within the context of a "reclaiming environment" (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990). According to Brendtro et al., a reclaiming environment is predicated on the development of trusted and positive relationships and includes experiences that are experiential in nature, designed to build responsibility through action, and include the teaching of caring through service-

learning and other activities.

Research on the effectiveness of character education programs consists of studies on commercially available curricula and local programs developed by educators working directly with students. Program evaluations on commercial curricula such as *AEGIS* by The Institute for Research and Evaluation (Weed & Skanchy, 1996), *The Child Development Project* (Developmental Studies Center, 1996), *Project ESSENTIAL* (Teel, 1996), and *An Ethics Curriculum for Children* (Heartwood Institute, 1992) have been mixed, but generally supportive. For example, while research on *The Child Development Project* K-6 curriculum using quasi-experimental designs and questionnaire, interview and observational data collection techniques found statistically significant increases in variables such as sensitivity and consideration of others' needs, spontaneous prosocial behavior, and conflict resolution skills (Soloman, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1992), an evaluation of the K-6 *AEGIS* curriculum found inconclusive results for students in grades 1-3 and gains for program students in grades 4-6 on only four of nine character traits (Weed, 1995). In an extensive review of ten such programs, Leming (1993) remarks that the general approach has been to establish a causal link through the use of quasi-experimental or causal-comparative research designs that compare program students with non program students while concluding that it is too early to state "what works" and "what doesn't". None of the program evaluation research of commercially developed curricula specifically addressed students with disabilities.

There is some evidence that suggests character traits such as responsibility can be taught to students without disabilities and those who are gifted and talented through a locally developed thematic curriculum approach that includes social studies and language arts activities. For example, in a study aimed at improving self-control, Cassell (1995) taught citizenship building skills to 237 fourth through sixth grade students while focusing on one character trait a month using a standard social studies text supplemented by role-plays, literature and debates. Using direct observation and referral records, Cassell found a 34% decrease in administrative referrals for serious misbehavior and a 49% decrease in observable out-of-control behaviors in the cafeteria, library, and playground. Yeatts (1990) used questionnaire methodology to ascertain whether a character education program which emphasized story writing and story telling would enhance the cooperation and responsibility skills of prekindergarten through third graders. Results indicated that the children showed improvement in cooperation and responsibility along with decreases in behavior problems.

In the only study which has focused on exceptional children, Hogan (1996) used multiple strategies such as teaching the core value of responsibility, presenting moral dilemmas, and teaching a unit on heroes and heroism during a daily two hour language arts class in order to increase specific levels of responsibility of gifted fourth graders. Using a teacher-

made checklist and a pre-post design, Hogan found that the locally de-
veloped 12 week program produced improvements in student coopera-
tion, effective decision-making, and the production of quality school
work. However, no research exists on the effects of character education
programs on students who exhibit behavioral and learning disabilities.

The purpose of this preliminary study was to describe how elementary
students with behavioral and other learning disabilities and those who
are at-risk for identification responded to an after school character educa-
tion program called SO (Service- Learning Opportunities) Prepared for
Citizenship. Specifically, the study was designed to use ethnographic in-
terviews to assess what the students learned about specific character
traits and their reactions to the program. SO Prepared for Citizenship is
a national model demonstration program supported by the Council of
Independent Colleges and the New Hampshire Campus Compact for
Service-Learning. The program is a unique higher education/K-12 col-
laborative partnership between a small private college, an inner city K-6
elementary school, a K-8 parochial school and two high schools designed
to promote the character development of elementary and middle school
students while engaging local high school students and college students
in service-learning experiences. The primary goal of the program is to
teach elementary and middle school students social skills and attitudes
that will build character (New Hampshire College and University Coun-
cil, 1997).

Method

Participating Students

Thirty-two students attending an inner city K-6 elementary school in a
small New England city with a population of approximately 85,000 peo-
ple were involved in one SO Prepared after school program during the
Spring of 1997. The school is one of eight elementary schools in a district
of 7,862 elementary students, and the majority of the 462 students in the
school are of low to middle socioeconomic status. Of the 32 total stu-
dents, eight were non-disabled or gifted, and the remaining 24 had iden-
tified disabilities or were at-risk for school failure. Twenty-one of the stu-
dents were male and 11 female. Twenty-eight students were Caucasian,
three African- American, and one Hispanic. The program met nine times
during the spring. Three units of study from the character education
curriculum, (1) responsibility and self-control, (2) cooperation and team-
work, and (3) respect and appreciation of diversity, were taught. Of the
32 students enrolled in the program, two participated in the pilot testing,
three were absent due to a field trip scheduled on the interview date, and
one moved during the last month of school. Therefore, 26 students were
interviewed at the school on May 19, 21, 29, and 30, 1997. Of those 26, 19
were identified as disabled or at-risk for school failure and seven were
non-disabled or gifted. For the purposes of this study, the sample in-

cluded five students identified as seriously emotionally disturbed (SED), four with learning disabilities (LD), two with speech and language impairments (SLI), five who were on specific 504 plans due to either attention deficit disorder (ADD) or other behavior problems, two identified as having ADD but not receiving services in school, and one considered at-risk for the development of behavioral problems who was receiving counseling services from a community mental health agency. The sample included 12 males and seven females. Eighteen of the students were Caucasian and one was African-American. Table 1 presents descriptive information on the 19 students.

Table 1

Sample of Students with Identified Disabilities and those At-Risk for School Failure

Student Number	Interview Code	Grade	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability Type
1	1	2nd	Male	Caucasian	504 for behavior
2	3	5th	Male	Caucasian	LD/ADD
3	4	5th	Female	Caucasian	ADD
4	5	5th	Male	Caucasian	504 for ADD/Gifted
5	6	4th	Male	Caucasian	ADD
6	7	6th	Female	Caucasian	504 for ADD
7	8	3rd	Male	Caucasian	SED
8	9	4th	Male	Caucasian	SED
9	12	3rd	Male	Caucasian	LD
10	13	1st	Female	Caucasian	SED
11	16	3rd	Male	Caucasian	LD
12	17	4th	Female	Caucasian	504 for ADD
13	19	6th	Male	Caucasian	SED
14	20	6th	Female	Caucasian	SLI
15	22	4th	Male	Caucasian	LD
16	23	5th	Male	Caucasian	504 for ADD
17	24	4th	Male	Caucasian	At-Risk/Counseling
18	25	4th	Female	Caucasian	SLI
19	26	2nd	Female	African-American	SED

Note. SED = seriously emotionally disturbed; LD = learning disability; SLI = speech and language inpairments; ADD = attention deficit disorder; 504 = students on Section 504 plans due to either attention deficit disorder or behavior problems.

The SO (Service-Learning Opportunities) Prepared for Citizenship Program

The SO Prepared for Citizenship program covers the Six Pillars of Character developed by the Josephson Institute (1998b) and is directly aligned to the public school's district-wide character education program covering: (1) responsibility and self-control, (2) cooperation and teamwork, (3) respect and appreciation of diversity, (4) trustworthiness, (5) fairness and justice, and (6) caring. Each trait is taught as a unit of study

that typically lasts four weeks. During the first three weeks, the theme is introduced and taught both formally and informally. During the fourth week, formal lessons are suspended and replaced with a culminating service activity designed to help students apply the learning while performing a service for their school. The formal lessons are designed by college students majoring in education in collaboration with their professors. Each 45 minute lesson is specifically designed to connect the trait to either art, literature, math, or drama. Each lesson in every unit includes: (1) a definition of the trait; (2) exposure to prosocial examples; (3) a discussion of examples and non examples; (4) a hands-on guided practice activity; (5) a reflection designed to enhance generalization; and (6) a method to assess student learning. For example, one literature-based lesson for the theme of cooperation and teamwork involved reading the stories *Baseball Saved Us* by Ken Mochizuki and *No Girls Allowed* by Stan and Jan Berenstain and discussing the problems and solutions available to the characters. Working in cooperative groups, the students then produced story maps based on real life dilemmas they were experiencing and retold their stories to the group using puppets.

To achieve its goals, the program uses multi-age cooperative learning teams in which college and high school students co-mentor and co-teach the curriculum to the elementary and middle school students. Each learning team consists of one college student, one high school student, and two elementary or middle school students. Multiple learning teams are arranged into PODS by grade level of the children. Some PODS consist of students from one grade (e.g., first or second) while other PODS are multi-grade (e.g., fourth and fifth).

Each weekly session lasts two hours and follows a structured format. Once the students arrive, they immediately report to their learning teams. After connecting with teammates, socializing, and eating snacks, all the participants form a "community circle" to discuss the week's topics and their individual team's tasks. For example, if the week's topic is "responsibility and self-control", the group discusses what "responsible behavior" really means and the ways people act "responsibly" to themselves, to others, and to the larger community. Students from three or four learning teams then combine to form the larger learning POD at their grade level and rotate through two of the four learning centers that contain the formal curriculum described above. After the formal lessons are completed, the students then get back into their smaller learning teams to debrief and complete a behavior checklist that will be turned over to the classroom teachers. The culminating activity each week involves getting back into the "community circle" and allowing students and mentors to describe any prosocial behaviors that were observed throughout the afternoon.

In their relationship with individual students and others on their teams, the mentors are trained to assume the three interrelated roles of caregiver, model, and mentor outlined by The Center for the 4th and 5th

Rs (1999). According to the Center, mentors maximize their influence on young people when they serve as: (1) effective caregivers who treat their younger students with respect and worth while helping them succeed at program activities; (2) moral models who demonstrate a high level of respect and responsibility in their interactions with others and discuss morally significant events; and (3) ethical mentors who provide direct instruction and guidance through explanation, storytelling, discussion, encouragement of positive behavior, and corrective feedback when students engage in behavior that is hurtful to themselves or others. An intensive training process includes five hours of instruction for the high school and college mentors prior to the program and two and a half hours of follow-up training each month. The content of the training includes modules on mentoring, the nature and needs of students with behavioral and learning problems, behavior management techniques, interventions for deescalating conflicts, service-learning, and the character education curriculum. Moreover, a half hour of guided reflection takes place after every weekly session.

Table 2
The SO Prepared for Citizenship Interview

Question	Summary of Content
1.	What did you learn from the SO Prepared Program?
2.	What do you think a responsible citizen-leader is?
3.	Give examples of yourself as a responsible citizen-leader?
4.	Scenario: Billy finds a copy of a math test with all the answers on it next to his teacher's desk. What would you do if you were Billy?
5.	Scenario: Dexter, a Black or Chinese boy, moves into the neighborhood. Your best friend (Tommy or Mary) will not be friends with you if you play with Dexter. What will you do?
6.	What is a team?
7.	How would you describe a citizen-leader to someone who wants to join SO Prepared next year?
8.	What does a citizen-leader do on a team?
9.	Are you a citizen-leader? Why or why not?
10.	Give examples of yourself as a citizen-leader at school/home/community.
11.	Did you enjoy the program? What did you like best and why?
12.	What were your most favorite activities? Why?
13.	What were your least favorite activities? Why?
14.	How do you feel about your team from SO Prepared? Why?
15.	What things should be changed for next year? Why?
16.	Did you like having older students on your team? Why/ why not?
17.	Did you like having younger students on your team? Why/why not?
18.	Did you like having high school and college students on your team? Why/ why not?
19.	Would you sign up for SO Prepared next year? Why/why not?
20.	What grade would you give SO Prepared? Why?

The Ethnographic Interview

The interview questions were designed by an experienced ethnographic interviewer and the program director and covered the students' knowledge of the curriculum and their perceptions of the program. The initial set of questions was pilot tested with one second grade student and one fifth grade student from the school on May 19, 1997. One student was identified as LD. The pilot tests were then transcribed and reviewed by the interviewer and the director. As a result, unfamiliar vocabulary words such as "diversity" were deleted, and the interviewer adjusted the gender of the best friend in question #5 for male and female respondents. The final interview, which included twenty guiding questions, is divided into two sections: Students' Knowledge of Curriculum (questions 1-11) and Students' Perceptions of the Program (questions 12-20) and presented in Table 2.

Data Collection

This study consisted of focused interviews which followed the guidelines set for ethnographic interviews by Spradley (1980). The interviews were conducted by an Associate Professor of Education trained in anthroethnographic research techniques at Rutgers University with ten years experience collecting, collating, and interpreting ethnographic research in Africa. She employed various ethnographic research techniques to analyze the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa in 1996 and review to the educational training of Tswana secondary school teachers at Mankwe Christian College in Bophuthatswana, South Africa in 1992. She also collected oral histories while assisting refugees in gaining access to education in Kenya in 1990 and designed and administered a needs assessment of teacher training programs in Cape Palmas, Liberia. The interviewer was independent and objective in relationship to the SO Prepared program, for she was neither involved as a participant in the program nor was she in any way connected with the elementary school; however, her biases include a background in Character Education and an interest in the SO Prepared program.

The one interviewer conducted all the interviews four weeks after the end of the program in a private room near the guidance counselor's office. Two problems identified in doing ethnography with young children were addressed during the interviews (Hatch, 1988). Students were introduced to the interviewer and indicated they felt at ease; they were assured that there were no "right answers." Each student understood how the tape recorder worked and was invited to listen to his or her taped interview after the session. Each session lasted from 10 to 40 minutes. Throughout the sessions, the interviewer clarified information given by

the students. All 19 interviews were transcribed by the secretary of the Education Department at the college and checked for accuracy against the tapes by the interviewer.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved sorting, coding, and organizing the interview. The interviews were coded independently by the ethnographic interviewer, the director of the program, and a graduate research assistant. The director and assistant were trained in domain analysis by the ethnographic interviewer. The independent recodings by two additional sources were designed to produce interobserver reliability and partially triangulate the data. Because a standard interview format was used with 19 individuals, answers to related questions were grouped together from all the respondents into patterns, and the data was coded through domain analysis (Best, 1998; Spradley, 1980). The specific process used to derive the codes involved summarizing each student's response to each answer and sorting related responses into categories. Then a percentage of students who responded in like manner to the questions in the categories was determined. The methods used for refining the codes involved discussion among the coders who synthesized students' responses and connected answers to related questions. Six sets of codes emerged from the interview questions including: Code #1 Learning (question 1); Code #2 Cooperation and Teamwork (questions 6, 8, 14, 16 ,17, 18); Code #3 Citizenship and Leadership (questions 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10); Code #4 Responsibility (question 4); Code #5 Appreciation of Diversity (question 5); and Code #6 Perceptions of Program (questions 1, 11, 13, 15, 19, 20).

Results

The results of this preliminary evaluation of the SO Prepared program suggest that students with behavioral and other learning disabilities were extremely satisfied with a program they perceived to be about fun, friendship, teamwork and cooperation, and learning. Results of the interviews also reveal that many of the students believed the program taught them, among other things, how to cooperate with students of different ages, to solve problems, what it means to be a citizen-leader and a member of a team, how to be responsible when confronted with the answers to a test, and how to reach out to peers from diverse backgrounds who are new to the school.

In response to the open-ended question about learning, 88% of the students who responded indicated that they learned something from the program. Nearly half of the students stated that they learned how to cooperate to solve problems and complete activities, get along with others, and/or be a part of a team through their experiences at SO Prepared. The response of one sixth grade girl on a 504 plan for behavior was char-

acteristic of the sample. She stated: "I learned how to read better. I learned how to get along better with kids. We learned how to share." In response to the questions about cooperation and teamwork, 90% of the students who responded stated that a team is a group of people that work together, and every student indicated positive feelings about working on the SO Prepared team. Almost half of the students said that they had made nice friends who seemed to like them. One fifth grade girl with ADD discussed her feelings about the team: "I'd say it was a good team. I liked being around them. They were fun to hang out with. They helped me with problems that I need help on as well as I helped them. We helped each other do everything. If we didn't understand something we'd help that person." The majority of the students mentioned that they enjoyed having older and/or younger students on their team. The students felt that the older students were helpful, and the younger children were fun, had skills, and became good friends. When asked why students enjoyed having older students on their team, one fourth grade girl with a SLI stated: "Because they taught us responsibility. . . . It's just fun to have older people on your team. And they learn what you're learning and you learn what they're learning." A fifth grade boy with a LD and ADD shared his idea of working with others on a team saying:

It's like a colored cube. You try to put it together, you get so frustrated you want to throw it at the wall and smash it. But you have to take time, you have to cooperate with it. You have to make it go the way it needs to go. When you finally do it, you're like, 'man', I'm kind of glad I didn't throw it at the wall and smash it. So I know how to do what I need to do now. I know what I need to do to make this cube work. And sometimes life is like that. And you need to be patient. You need to get all your anger out and cooperate with this cube -- with the cube of life.

... Yea. You need to stay in control. You need to cooperate. You need to have fun and see if they (others) will have fun with you. Just like this cube, and you can try. You could throw the cube at the wall; you can break the cube, but it won't get you anywhere. You won't learn anything. You won't make new friends. You won't have fun.

In terms of citizenship, the majority of students defined a "citizen leader" as someone who behaves, listens, and helps others. A fifth grade boy on a 504 plan for ADD described a citizen-leader's role on a team:

He takes in all ideas, and if they're decent, uses them. Or if they are not decent, (he) ask(s) them if they could switch it around. Or, (he) just does everything that the other people want and decides the best thing for the whole team - group. (He does) a lot of listening, and once he's done listening, then the group does the listening, and he does the talking.

Another fifth grader identified with LD and ADD responded with an answer that describes a leader as mentor. He claimed:

A leader, he tries to set an example for the other kids. Say there is a younger kid, and he's about five years old, and he's not in school yet. He probably does a lot of wrong stuff, and he probably doesn't know what he's doing yet. So you could probably set an example by helping this kid, by playing with him, by going out and doing a lot of stuff with him and talking to him and teaching him what's good and what's wrong. . . . (A)nd if he still doesn't understand, you have to show him.

With respect to the question about their high school and college mentors, 84% of the students who responded replied that they enjoyed having the older students on their team. In general, the students indicated that their mentors were teachers who helped them learn and made learning fun. A sixth grade girl on a 504 plan for ADD liked having the mentors on her team, "because if you were to do something wrong, they could help you out. And if you were to get into a fight or something like that, they could stop you." A younger second grade girl identified with SED commented that her mentor "was a lot of fun and I liked her."

Over 50% of the students indicated that a "citizen-leader" works to help, guide, and lead others on a team. Approximately 60% of the students identified themselves as "citizen-leaders". A fifth grade boy identified with LD and ADD responded to the question of what a citizen-leader meant to him with the statement:

Well, being a responsible citizen-leader means that you can show everybody how to act and show your feelings in ways that are good and in ways that are not harmful to each other. . . . (F)or an example, we could have someone that is rude or not being polite to you; you could probably get up or talk to them, get up and move away, or talk to them, or tell a nearby adult . . . .

In terms of the responsibility theme, approximately 80% of the students indicated that they would not cheat if they found a test with the answers on the floor under their teacher's desk. Thirty-three percent of these students reasoned that it is not right and not fair to cheat while 80% explained that it is important to study and try their hardest. For example, one fourth grade girl on a 504 plan for ADD remarked: "It's not really right to cheat off a paper that doesn't belong to you, just to get all the answers right," while a fifth grade boy identified with LD and ADD said: "The way to learn is (to) ask the teacher for some of the math problems or similar problems that are on the math test each week . . . (and) you can take that and go study and see what you can get out of that."

Eighteen of the 19 students responded to the question on diversity. All 18 students indicated that they would befriend a new student of another race in their classroom. Forty-four percent of these students indicated that students of African-American, Hispanic, or Chinese decent are equal and the same as others. Approximately 30% of the students indicated that their best friend could not shake them in this belief. When faced with the possibility of losing their best friend over the diversity is-

sue, 100% of the students indicated that they would either drop the old, intolerant friend, convert this prejudiced friend, or play with both the new student and the old friend separately. For example, a Caucasian girl in first grade with SED remarked: "Well you should tell her it doesn't matter who is brown or black or any color. You can still play with them." An African-American girl in second grade who is identified as SED responded similarly:

"Well, I would talk to the new boy cause he's like a person - the same. He just talks different and looks different, but he's a person. I'd talk to him. I wouldn't care if she (her former best friend) wouldn't be my friend. . . . I'd become friends with the Chinese boy."

Finally, in reflecting upon the program, 95% of the students who responded indicated that they enjoyed the program. One fifth grade girl with ADD summed it up by saying: "I liked the friends, I liked the games. I liked the fun we had. Everything was awesome. I liked every single bit of it." Over 50% mentioned that they enjoyed the games, activities, and projects. Forty-two percent of the students indicated that they enjoyed the program because of the nice people and friends they met. For example, a second grade girl with SED responded to the question of what she liked best about the program by stating: "Well, for one I had a very, very nice helper (mentor) and we played good games and everybody there was nice to me. And I was nice to them." In response to the question on preferred activities, over 50% of the students stated that they enjoyed art the most, and several students highlighted creating the "wamp" world out of garbage as their favorite activity. Three students indicated that math was their least favorite activity while four students reported reading and writing activities to be their least favorites. When asked if they would change anything about the program, over 50% indicated they would not change anything. Two students indicated that they wanted more sports, and two students suggested single gender and smaller groups. Other requests included having older books, a quicker snack period, and more activities.

When asked whether they would sign up for the program next year, 95% of the students responded "yes". Over 70% indicated they would sign up again because the after school program was fun. One fourth grade boy with SED said he would return, "Because it's wicked fun there -- like a lot of things to do. Also, I don't have to go home (and) listen to my sisters fight, listen to my mom yell at me, and I don't have to go to my nana's to get disciplined." Another 3rd grader with SED wanted to return because, "They show respect. They show leadership." Finally, 81% of the students who graded the program gave it a grade of "A++", "A", or "A-". The remaining students graded it a "B+" or a "B". In response to the question of why they gave it a "B" grade, a third grader with a LD stated it was because arrival time "was noisy " while a 6th grader with SED wished the program was smaller and consisted of all

sports activities.

The data for this preliminary study is not formally triangulated; the focus is on ethnographic interviews with the elementary school participants of the program only. Throughout the year however, the mentors kept anecdotal records of learning and behavior outcomes using rubrics included in their lesson plans, a likert-type behavioral checklist which was completed at the end of each session and shared with classroom teachers, and verbal and written responses to specific reflective questions that were posed during the reflection period after the children had gone home. Moreover, family members of students who participated were contacted by phone by college students at the completion of the program and asked to answer several questions, including questions regarding ways the college or the program could be helpful to the families. Informal analysis of the anecdotal assessment data collected from these two sources supports the information gathered from the student interviews. For example, all but one of the six families that could be contacted by phone reported that their children were enthusiastic about the program saying it was "Great!" and that they "Loved it!" One family member contacted said the child didn't talk much about the program. However, none of the families contacted reported any unpleasant or difficult experiences.

Discussion

Students with learning and behavioral disabilities are prime candidates for after school programs designed to enhance character development. However, many students with behavioral disabilities will require additional instruction beyond the standard curriculum, and perhaps the school day, to acquire the requisite attitudes, knowledge, and skills included in such programs. In order to engage these students in structured learning activities beyond the school day, voluntary after school programs must be perceived as fun. Otherwise, students will simply refuse to attend and spend their time elsewhere, or they will fail to participate even if they are required to attend the program by their parents or guardians.

Above all else, this study allowed the students with disabilities who participated in the SO Prepared program to speak for themselves. As a result of detailed ethnographic interviews, we discovered that the students responded positively to the character education traits of responsibility and self-control, cooperation and teamwork, and respect and appreciation of diversity. In their own voices, the students described the SO Prepared program as a fun place to learn where cooperation and teamwork characterized the activities, and friendships between students of all ages developed.

Fundamentally, the study found that students could articulate the basic character education concepts studied; this finding is consistent with

research on disabled and gifted students by Cassell (1995) and Yeatts (1990) previously cited. The fact that students with learning and behavioral problems who often struggle in school found learning about character education in cooperative teams with mentors to be fun and voted to continue the program is encouraging. This result is consistent with the claims of Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) who maintain that programs for students with learning and behavioral problems must be experiential, active, interesting, and relevant. Moreover, the fact that these students enjoyed learning with older and younger teammates, articulated taking responsibility for their actions, and saw themselves as citizen-leaders who could impact the lives of others is important. These outcomes are even more significant in light of the fact that students with behavioral problems generally do not take responsibility for their misbehavior (Rockwell & Guetzloe, 1996) and often disrupt learning when working in small groups (Long & Morse, 1996). It is reasonable to assume the use of one-to-one mentors who were trained in specific relationship building techniques such as the use of encouragement and other behavior management strategies including techniques to deescalate behavior may have contributed to these outcomes.

Finally, the fact that students made new friends is an important accomplishment for youngsters with disabilities who are sometimes shunned by their peers and often have difficulty making friends at school. This outcome is consistent with the work of Searcy (1996) and Searcy and Meadows (1994), who argue that students with disabilities are more likely to make friends in programs that integrate friendship development into the curriculum, include cooperative teamwork and buddy systems, and honor friendships with rituals.

Despite these positive outcomes however, the results of this preliminary investigation should be interpreted with caution. First, the study was conducted at one inner city elementary school in New England, and the findings may not be generalizable to wider populations in other areas. Second, the ethnographic research was restricted to in-depth focused interviews; the design did not involve full triangulation including participant-observation and document analysis or survey research. Triangulating the data by asking the children who answered the questions to confirm the accuracy of the resulting analysis or interviewing the mentors to determine the extent to which their opinions of the children's progress were similar to those expressed by the children themselves would be useful additions to future research. Third, there are limitations in using self-report research as students may not be able to put their ideals into practice in applied settings.

More extensive research on the effects of character education programs on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral development of students with disabilities is clearly needed. Future investigations should use experimental or quasi-experimental designs to enhance rigor. Moreover, these studies should expand data collection and analysis to include:

(1) curriculum-based assessments of learning; (2) direct observations of student behaviors in the program and in other environments; (3) behavioral checklists; (4) disciplinary referrals and attendance records; (5) teacher reports of changes in learning and behavior; and (6) parent/guardian reports of satisfaction. Questions worthy of scholarly pursuit include the following: To what extent do character education programs increase the observable levels of responsible, respectful, cooperative, and trustworthy behavior of students with learning and behavioral problems both within the program and in school settings? Does involvement in character education programs decrease the frequency of antisocial behaviors that lead to office referrals and suspensions or truancy?

Our work at SO Prepared has implications for practitioners attempting to set up after school character education programs that include students with learning and behavioral disabilities. They include: (1) establishing a planning and assessment team that takes ownership of the program, consists of members of the faculty of the schools and any community partners involved in service-learning projects, and meets periodically throughout the year; (2) gathering pertinent information from faculty and families about students' strengths and needs and using the information to match them to mentors with similar interests; (3) developing a communication system that can be easily completed by mentors each session and shared with classroom teachers; (4) developing art, literature, drama, and service-learning activities within the curriculum; (5) providing on-going training and support for mentors through formal workshops, verbal and written reflection experiences (e.g., discussions and journals), and on-site modeling and coaching by faculty and staff; and (6) organizing a year end celebration that recognizes the achievements of the participants.

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