

Building “Character” into Education: A Partnership Takes Shape

Maria Sudeck

Why Character Education Now?

Within the last two years, headline news stories have revealed the strength of character and moral fiber of individual Americans. The tragedy of September 11 showed us the heroism and bravery of firefighters, rescue workers, and ordinary citizens. On the other hand, a steady stream of corporate collapses has resulted from the long-standing unethical behavior of many business executives and auditors.

Over the last decade, there has been a resurgence of character education that shows no sign of waning. The conviction that schools should take the lead and instill desirable character traits in children is not a new fad, but part of a rich tradition in American education. Social movements and curricula about morals, virtues, and the qualities that make a good citizen have been part of the educational scene for over 200 years.¹ How can we teach and encourage the values of good citizenship in a manner that is appropriate for today’s society? And which values shall we emphasize? This article is about one elementary school’s response to this interesting question.

What is It all About?

Character education should not be thought of as yet another “add-on” program to an already-full curriculum. (As classroom teachers, we know that there is no time left to cram some new topic into the academic school day.) It might be more useful to think of character education as a shift in perspec-

tive: The content we are already teaching probably contains many examples of good character, and we can point these out and hold them up, rather than racing over or ignoring them.

According to the Character Education Partnership,² there is no single script for effective character education, but there are some important basic principles, such as

- Providing our children with the tools they need to become ethical, responsible people;
- Espousing the belief that moral educa-

tion is as important as academic development;

- Viewing schools and families as material partners in teaching good character traits;
- Making character education an integral part of a typical day at school;
- Reaffirming collective values and virtues in an increasingly complex world.

At Radix Elementary School in Monroe Township, New Jersey, I have worked with individuals and with teams of teachers on infusing character education into the curriculum in ways that empower teachers and students.

Selecting Character Traits

A single teacher could draw up such a list or simply copy it from a book or website, but for a spirit of community ownership to evolve, members of the community must participate in deciding what will be taught and emphasized. I believe that a group process of some sort is best way to develop a program for elementary character education.

The process can begin with the formation of a “Citizenship Council,” composed of teachers from each grade level, parents, administrators, and support staff. The council’s task is to compose a list of character traits that reflects the values and priorities of the wider community. Each school can determine its own decision making process.

As a starting point for discus-



Children design and create personal emblems to wear to an assembly on the events of 9-11.

On the cover

Students choose a career, wear the appropriate “costume,” and discuss responsibility, citizenship, and cooperation.

Photographs by Maria Sudeck.

Table 1

Character Traits (As suggested by various authors)

1) Name: CHARACTER COUNTS!
 Description: A nonpartisan alliance of human-service and educational organizations.
 Source: www.charactercounts.org
 Character Traits: Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring, Citizenship

2) Name of Author: NELL NODDINGS
 Description: Dr. Noddings is an expert in the development of the ethic of caring in children.
 Source: *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2002).
 Character Traits: Caring for Others, Empathy, Responsibility

3) Name of Author: WILLIAM J. BENNETT
 Description: Dr. Bennett is a former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education.
 Source: *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).
 Character Traits: Honesty, Self-Discipline, Work, Perseverance, Compassion, Responsibility, Friendship, Courage, Loyalty, Faith

sion, give council members several lists of character traits that have been recommended by an organization and/or notable author (Table 1). Council members could cite examples of behaviors that reveal specific traits, and use these examples to arrive at a common understanding or definition of each trait. Then, the council must decide (by consensus or, more likely, by a majority vote) which character traits it would like to see emphasized in the elementary classroom. The council can adopt a ready-made list (such as the six pillars of the Character Counts program) or compose a list of its own. The list should include no more than seven or eight items so that young learners might be able to memorize it, and to avoid creating a “laundry list” of items that is too big to handle.

After reviewing various lists of character traits, our site council chose Caring, Citizenship, Cooperation, Honesty, Perseverance, Respect, Responsibility and Tolerance as key character traits for good citizenship in our community.

A “Natural” Link with the Curriculum

The good news is that you are probably incorporating character education into

your curriculum already. Identifying what these components are might be helpful. Analyze what teachers are already doing in social studies and language arts that seems to fit naturally with the character traits. Are teachers reading stories that lend themselves to discussions about the character traits? At Radix School, we devoted a summer workshop to that question. With the help of the reading specialist, second grade teachers organized their read-aloud books according to which character trait (if any) was emphasized and what state standards (in our case, New Jersey standards)

and national social studies standards were addressed (Table 2) in the story.³

Also, look beyond the confines of a single classroom. Good character can be displayed anywhere in the community. At Radix School, we highlight activities and assemblies that are part of what the classroom teachers, the school, and the community do on a regular basis. These can become part of the character education effort.

Start Small!

A grand scale is not necessary or even appropriate. Look at the work you, your grade level colleagues, your school, and community are already doing. Character education is perhaps best understood as a philosophical “shift in thinking” about what is already in place. It means pointing out to our students the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that lead toward good citizenship. Think about the following activities (and the related character traits):

- Does your community have a local Memorial Day or July 4th Celebration? (Citizenship, Respect)
- Does the Fire Department visit your school or sponsor poster contests on fire safety and prevention? (Cooperation, Responsibility)
- Does your school band or chorus visit nursing homes or senior citizen communities to entertain them? (Respect, Tolerance, Caring)
- Does your PTA or PFO have Holiday Shops or Food Basket projects? Do they purchase items for the children such as academic planners that highlight char-

Table 2

Literature, Character Traits, and Standards (For use by teachers)

Book (title and author): _____

Traits (strengths of character): _____

State Standard (relevance to state curriculum): _____

National Standard (social studies strands I-X): _____

acter building? (Caring, Cooperation, Perseverance, Tolerance, Responsibility, Respect)

- Is there service work that students can do around your school, such as gardening, guarding cross-walks, and welcoming newcomers to the neighborhood? (Caring, Cooperation, Perseverance, Tolerance, Responsibility, Respect)

No “One” is an Island

As with any educational initiative, it takes some work to establish common ground and share common terminology. I spent part of last summer “talking it over” with Radix teachers and community members. I hosted several “Coffee Klatches” to get acquainted with the Radix school “family.” At the initial gathering, we discussed how to go about defining terms, integrating curriculum, and gathering support from parents, community members, and instructional assistants.

The next gatherings were voluntary brown bag lunches. The council selected an article relevant to character education

for each lunch, placing copies of the article in the teachers’ mailboxes ahead of time. Then on the brown bag lunch days, I facilitated discussions of the article. The council met in either a conference room or a corner of the library. The size of the discussion groups varied through the weeks, but attendance was steady overall. It was an informal and relaxed environment.

Update, Regroup, Refine, Assess

In future years, our work will involve refining the process of curriculum integration, gathering materials to enrich character education, and working with parents and community groups on new projects. We are also designing assessment tools to measure positive changes. Some of these measures might be

- surveys given to students about school’s social climate and friendliness;
- teacher reports of classroom behavior;
- surveys given to parents about their children’s attitudes and behaviors; and
- a rubric for student writing that employs character traits.

Success and Benefits

Character education programs are linked to many positive classroom and school outcomes and objectives.⁴ These outcomes include:

- increased critical thinking skills;
- higher academic achievement;
- more involvement of parents;
- an increase in family involvement in community events; and
- overall improvements in school climate.

Our work is exciting. We are beginning to see the benefits of taking some time and resources to build a program around the values of civic responsibility. We believe that our program at Radix Elementary School is meaningful because it presents an academic setting that respects all learners. And perhaps the most important aspect is that we practice ongoing reflection as professionals in a supportive environment.⁵ 📖

Notes

1. Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).
2. Character Education Partnership, “Character Education: A National Movement Creating Schools That Foster Ethical, Responsible and Caring Young People. Questions and Answers” (Washington, DC: CEP, 1999), www.character.org.
3. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994); “New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for Social Studies” (www.state.nj.us/njded/cccs/11sociointro.html).
4. V. Battistich, “Child Development Project,” *Journal of Primary Prevention* 21 (2000): 75-99.
5. Kevin E. Ryan and Karen E. Bohlin, “Now More than Ever, Help Kids Build Character,” *Education Digest* 67, no. 3 (2001): 8-15.

MARIA SUDECK is an assistant professor in the Elementary/Early Education Department, College of Education, Rowan University, in Glassboro, New Jersey.