

Character Education: Who Is Responsible?

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Character education is not a quick-fix program; it is a part of school life. The question becomes who is responsible for reinforcing age-old qualities of character? The classroom could be one arena to reinforce, model, and practice positive character traits on a daily basis; therefore, the teacher is central to character education. The processes (classroom strategies utilized and environment created) within the classroom are critical. Effective lesson plans for today are not the lesson plans of yesterday. If educators want students to exhibit positive character traits, it is obvious a different way of thinking regarding the educational system can allow students to "grow" with character and dignity, but only if educators provide an innovative teaching and learning environment that continuously incorporates our common core of character traits: respect, responsibility, fairness, and hard work.

Lately more and more politicians, state education departments, parents and schools are looking for ways to effectively incorporate character education. Why is this such a hard task when we are simply speaking of respect, responsibility, fairness, and hard work? If we merely open the doors of an effective school, the essence of character education is embedded throughout the curriculum and school building.

Benninga (1988) suggested that the ongoing debate about how to teach morals, ethics, values, or good character in the schools really comes down to a competition between the product desired and the process by which that product is to be achieved. Character education is not a quick-fix program; it is a part of school life. The question becomes who is responsible for reinforcing age-old qualities of character? Obviously there is no single panacea; however, in the "ideal world", families, schools, and communities would work in harmony to teach young people the positive character traits that would reduce

violence in our society. As we know, consistency with this collaborative effort does not exist. The classroom could be one arena to reinforce, model, and practice positive character traits on a daily basis; therefore, the teacher is central to character education. The processes (classroom strategies utilized and environment created) within the classroom are critical.

Educators are faced with a multitude of research and pedagogy that must be dissected and analyzed in order to design the effective lessons that have character education embedded within their process. Designing an effective lesson is like a farmer selecting the best fertilizer to yield a productive harvest. The farmer does not stop his thinking at the point of the fertilizer but continues his thoughts to weeds. For if the farmer does not select the best herbicide to prevent the weeds from choking the growth of the seed, the harvest will be lost. Educators must do the same with their approach to designing effective lessons so that a harvest of productive citizens will be sowed versus a harvest of weeds. Effective lesson plans for today are not the lesson plans of yesterday. Educators want students to be well-rounded, productive citizens; therefore, when designing effective instructional strategies, they must mesh the web of effective research-based knowledge that will incorpo-

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rate the reinforcement of character education. If educators want to "grow" a healthy harvest of students, they must first be willing to exhibit and incorporate the following:

- Generosity of time and spirit of commitment
- Respect for others and working together in an atmosphere of mutual trust
- Opportunities for service in the community provided to students
- Wisdom to understand what skills are needed to motivate students to learn

Character education can not be taught as a separate curriculum, but must be entwined in all curriculums.

Monroe (1997) states, "that all good work is worthy of our dedication. And the most worthy is what changes lives profoundly—in mind, body, and spirit." For a professional educator to change student's lives profoundly requires generosity of time and a spirit of commitment. By definition, generosity is characterized by a noble or forbearing spirit and liberal in giving. Students are directly effected by the generosity bestowed to them by professional educators in numerous ways. This active attitude of generous giving to enhance professionalism and student achievement will generate an attitude that staying with the status quo is unacceptable. Generosity is also exhibited as educators devote personal time for professional growth. Professional development should be at the heart of every professional with action plans for improvement developed and implemented. According to Covey (1997), "you must make a deep, continuous investment in learning and growth."

Dobson (1970) stated that "respectful and responsible children result from families where the proper combination of love and discipline is present. Both these ingredients must be applied in the necessary quantities. An absence of either is often disastrous." An effective educational environment exists when staff, students, and fami-

lies work together in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. Respect must be permeated from within the home and the classroom. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) recently stated in its book, *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*, "schools must unabashedly teach students about such key virtues as honesty, dependability, trust, responsibility, tolerance, respect, and other commonly-held values important to Americans." In 1986, Molnar stated that before we become slaves of the Information Age and its complex technology, we need to ask ourselves not how much information we can generate and absorb, but what information is of most worth and for what purposes. In light of all the violence witnessed by so many schools, it is unlikely that thirteen years ago Molnar was thinking of information related to a common core of values; instead, he was looking at information in terms of instruction, not civility.

On July 7, 1998, Vice President Al Gore announced ten states that received a total of \$2.7 million in grants to form partnerships with local school districts and the community to help youth incorporate good citizenship into their learning experiences. According to Gore, "Schools should also reinforce parental efforts to teach children good character and basic American values—including respect, responsibility, fairness, and hard work." As educators, content is not the espoused curriculum, but a mere map by which we navigate students to an understanding. Within that understanding students should be provided hands-on learning experiences that apply directly to life skills. These life skills can be provided through classroom and community service projects that allow students to practice responsible leadership skills. This generous giving of time and energy back to the community encourages students to look beyond themselves. The end product of such a lesson will reinforce positive social behavior and de-

velop essential citizenship skills. Our students must be surrounded in the education environment with professional educators who emulate character traits such as integrity, courage, trustworthiness, and compassion.

Diamond (1998) and her squad of researchers at the University of California at Berkeley have provided research showing that an enriched environment for children will influence the brain's growth and learning. In the book, *Magic Trees of the Mind: How to nurture your child's intelligence, creativity, and healthy emotions from birth through adolescence*, Diamond and Hopson stated the following:

"Since nearly half of all schoolchildren have divorced parents and less than one-third have parents with college degrees, these correlations predict an uphill battle for the majority of students, and in fact, this matches the statistics. All of this said, biology is not destiny and neither is family background; many students do well despite gender, family income, native language, parents' educational level, and the rest. The maverick variable is motivation, and some students have it in abundance. Motivation is itself central to a third explanation for the American education system's relatively poor showing: Many of our traditional teaching methods depend on a child's inner motivation to pay attention and complete assignments. Yet they often do little to bolster that inner drive and, in fact, in some ways actively erode it." p. 270

Brandt and Wolfe unveiled four findings in their review of brain research (Brandt & Wolfe, 1998). The findings are as follows:

1. The brain changes physiologically as a result of experience. The environment in which a brain operates determines to a large degree the functioning ability of that brain.

2. IQ is not fixed at birth.
3. Some abilities are acquired more easily during certain sensitive periods, or "windows of opportunity."
4. Learning is strongly influenced by emotion.

Words which echo a string of melodies related to brain-based learning are motivation, emotion, enrichment, and creativity. If professional educators want to change the learning environment they must possess the wisdom to understand what skills are needed to "motivate students to learn so they understand and remember what they study, think for themselves, and reach higher for a brighter future." (Diamond and Hopson, 1998) In the book, *Understanding By Design*, Wiggins and McTighe state the following:

"Teachers are designers. An essential act of our profession is the design of curriculum and learning experiences to meet specified purposes. We are also designers of assessments to diagnose student needs to guide our teaching and to enable us, our students, and other (parents and administrators) to determine whether our goals have been achieved; that is, did the students learn and understand the desired knowledge?" p. 7

If educators want students to exhibit positive character traits, it is obvious a different way of thinking regarding the delivery of instruction must be emerged.

At its root, character is defined as moral excellence and firmness. Integrity refers to soundness or a firm adherence to a code of moral values. Effective educational programs do not divide character and integrity, for one can not exist with the other. The future implications of our educational system can allow students to "grow" with character and dignity, but only if educators provide an innovative teaching and learning environment that continuously incorporates our common core of character traits: respect, responsibility, fairness, and hard work.

However, effective teachers and schools must extend the incorporation of character education beyond the classroom and into the community. A firm foundation will be established if schools, families, community organizations, and other agencies work together for an integrated approach to character education.

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