

Constructing a Caring, Learning Community in a First Grade Classroom



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Implementing Character Education in a First Grade Classroom:

Question: What happens when I integrate character education into my everyday curriculum?

Sub-questions:

Can I successfully integrate character education into my everyday curriculum?

Will working in cooperative groups help my students learn to employ positive social skills towards one another?

How will I teach character education topics to my students?

How will my students interact with one another? Will my character education lessons impact their social-emotional learning?

How will my teaching change as I learn to implement character education as an integral part of my everyday curriculum? How will my view of character education change as my students' behavior changes?

Will my students learn to work together and respect each other as they learn about and discuss character education topics?

Rationale:

December 16, 2005

As usual, something always happens at the very end of the day when it's time to go home. Darren hit Matthew on the arm. We were lined up to go home. It was also a Friday. Do I ignore him or write up another discipline for him? Do I scold him and let it go? It was the end of the day and I was exhausted. I decided just to tell him to apologize to Matthew. This proved to be a huge mistake in the weeks to follow. Darren said mean things, stuck his tongue out at people, continued to put his hand on other people, and acted in inappropriate ways all day long. (Teacher Journal)

*To educate a person in mind and not in morals
is to educate a menace to society.*

-Theodore Roosevelt

Intelligence plus character-that is the goal of a true education.

-Martin Luther King Jr.

What responsibility does a teacher have towards society, community, students and to herself to teach character education in the classroom? The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) provides a list of Illinois Learning Standards for social and emotional learning in the classroom. ISBE defines social and emotional learning as the processes through which children develop awareness and management of their emotions, set and achieve important personal and academic goals, use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships, and demonstrate decision making and responsible behaviors to achieve school and life success.

The Chicago Public Schools website also provides information about Character Education- Chicago Style. The website lists a series of programs and initiatives that have apparently been implemented in schools throughout the Chicago Public School system. Although both organizations provide explanations and descriptions of character education, neither provided what I was looking for. As a

teacher who is inexperienced in character education, I needed some type of framework as well as practical, interactive examples of character education in action in the primary classroom.

Although I'd heard of character education during my college education courses, I was not provided with much more than theoretical information and research based data that supported the integration of character education into the curriculum. I received no instruction that would prepare me to teach lessons that supported socio-emotional learning. Munson (2000) cites that recent research of preservice teacher education programs in the U.S. do not offer sufficient instruction in the methodology of teaching character education.

The first day I entered my first grade classroom, I was filled with eagerness and anticipation to teach. I was determined to be an influential and positive role-model to my students. I imagined myself as a teacher who could, against all odds, teach my students in a holistic approach to education. My students would learn to be good citizens and good readers and writers.

After my first three weeks, I was miserable. I couldn't believe I had spent so many years working so hard to become a teacher, just to fail. My classroom environment was hectic to say the least. My students were out of control. They were rude to each other and constantly tattled, argued, and broke up into mini-cliques. Each and every day, I was faced with social dilemmas. I felt helpless and frustrated as I watched students in my classroom disrespect each other consistently. They lacked a sense of empathy towards each other. I couldn't believe this was happening in first grade. I found my positive, nurturing nature morphing into an exasperated, tense, and negative attitude. The more I yelled and screamed, the more my students were out of control. My threats and punishments only worked for the

short term. I felt that they were not only disrespecting each other, they were disrespecting me. I could already predict the students who would someday become bullies and the students who would become their victims. My classroom was like a person trying to get rid of static electricity on a sweater. When you finally think the shock is over, you get another one. I was constantly trying to smooth things over and found myself wondering, “Do I deal with this or just ignore it?” The conflicts that arise in a first-grade classroom could almost be humorous if you weren’t a first grade teacher.

I finally regained control of my classroom around December, but I was never able to foster a positive classroom environment in which my students could work together and learn from each other. As a result, every activity I created was geared towards direct instruction and independent learning. As the school year came to an end, I was eager to put the past behind me and to begin a new year with new opportunities to become a better teacher. I got over my feeling of failure, but I knew that something had to change the following year. I needed to find a way to positively affect my classroom environment.

With my first year behind me, I was once again eagerly anticipating my second year. I didn’t want to make the same mistakes again, but I wasn’t completely sure how to fix them. I thought about my role as a teacher. What kind of role model do I want to be? What kinds of social skills do I want my students to learn? How will I react when things don’t go as I had hoped? How am I going to learn how to do these things? My days are already filled with the challenge of teaching my students Language Arts, as well as Math, Social Studies, Science, Health, and Art. On the other hand, I estimated that I easily spent 20-40 minutes daily dealing with social issues in my classroom. That’s one whole class period! All summer long, I had thought about how I was going to change the tone in my classroom environment. I knew that I wanted to teach my students to demonstrate good character to each other, their teachers, and

their families. Now that I had figured out what I wanted to do, I needed to think about how I would implement such an immense goal.

I was not successful in finding information on the internet that would help me to collect and analyze data and resources that would help me develop an integrated curriculum. I was able to find information that defines and provides singular lessons on character education, but I was beginning to realize that I was going to have to stumble and trip through my own discoveries and interpretations of what character education would look like in my own classroom. I was going to have to decipher what character education would mean to me. I needed a framework to help me get started, however. Character Counts! defines the six pillars of character education as: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. This website provides a wealth of information about character education programs. It also provides a few lessons on how to teach character education lessons. The objective of one particular lesson is to help children in primary grades become aware of their responsibilities by playing, “Name That Responsibility” and identifying practical ways to show responsibility at home and at school. Although I appreciate the goal of such a lesson, I do not have the time nor the inclination to teach in this manner. My greatest challenge is finding time during my extraordinarily busy school day to fit in everything that must be covered without overwhelming or stressing my first graders. I could not possibly “add-on” another subject to teach. Therefore, I knew that I would not teach character education in the prescriptive manner that many of these programs recommend. The pull in and out methodology of character education programs fails to allow children to practice responsibility and cooperation, among other things, as guidelines that affect attitudes towards each and every interaction in the home and in the classroom. I wanted to teach my students to listen to, discuss, and reflect upon issues that affected their lives and their happiness. I would focus on the issues that either divided or united my students.

Regardless, it was going to be necessary for me to read about character education in order to educate myself about what other teachers were doing.

Barbour defines character education as “the development of a language with students that instills in them universal values that are worldwide.” (Rusnak, 1998). He further states that these values include concepts of honesty, trust, cooperation, respect, responsibility, hope, determination, and loyalty. Lickona (1991) defines character education as values in action. He states, “Good character consists of knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good-habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of action.” Classroom teachers certainly model positive character for their students, but do they require students to think about why they would want to act in such ways? Do teachers ask their students to ponder how they might react in certain situations? Do teachers provide enough opportunities for students to interact in ways that they can practice what they are asked to emulate?

Peterson (2005) noted that using positive reinforcement or encouragement was helpful in her classroom. She was careful to phrase verbal acknowledgements in a way that the student would “take ownership of the positive feeling.”

A research study conducted by Solomon (1993) investigated the long-term effects of a school-based character education program entitled, Child Development Project (CDP). Solomon found that the program’s effect on democratic values, while significant by grade 4, diminished by grade 8. Solomon believes that the rigid classroom environment in the middle grades was possibly attributed to this change. Researchers suggest that the change in environment became quite controlled and teachers provided students with fewer opportunities to participate in class decisions and activities. The research

conducted by Solomon (1993) also suggested that students up through grade 4 did develop a strong sense of democratic values. While the program did not seem to have an effect on self-esteem at grade 4, the program experience did help students develop personal confidence by grade 8. In addition, students developed skills in conflict resolution in the early grades and these skills were sustained through grade 8. Lickona (1991) also notes that academic gains were achieved during the CDP program.

Rusnak (1998) also cites project PAVE (Partners Advancing Values in Education) as another example of a good and effective character education program. He reports the analyses of Beales and Wahl (1995) and their key findings. According to these researchers, PAVE students scored higher on standardized tests. This suggests that educators can integrate character education into the curriculum and expect both social and academic achievement from students. Research findings such as this are contradictory to the arguments of critics, who believe that character education is detrimental to academic achievement. Rusnak adds, “Character education has largely been replaced by the belief that schools should singularly focus on academic growth.”

I believe that character education, at the primary level, is best introduced in the form of literature. There is an abundance of children’s literature that addresses values such as: respect, responsibility, honesty, fairness, tolerance, cooperation, and self-esteem. Even Alfie Kohn (1997), a critic of character education programs, agrees that certain literature may be used to teach values so long as they are rich and complex as well as developmentally appropriate. He believes that literature can be used to evoke reflection and discussion that are open-ended. Lickona (1991) describes storytelling as a moral teaching and a “natural way to engage and develop the emotional side of a child’s character.”

In addition to selecting developmentally appropriate values-based, literature for discussion and reflection; I would have to develop meaningful, academically-based cooperative groups in my classroom. Each activity I would develop would have to include both a social skill and academic goal to be achieved. In order to do this, I would first have to explore what cooperative grouping is and why it is important and relevant to academic and social achievement.

During the summer, before the start of my second year teaching, I became involved in a two-year professional development workshop that meets monthly, in which teachers learning about cooperative learning. The workshop, named S.T.A.R.S. (School Teams Achieving Results for Students), was initiated with the intent of teaching Chicago Public School classroom teachers how to incorporate cooperative learning activities in their own classrooms. In addition, S.T.A.R.S. teachers have the added responsibility of training teachers at their own skills, based on what they've learned. The S.T.A.R.S. workshop along with my research on character education and cooperative learning are vital and necessary in order for my classroom environment to begin to change. Without it, it cannot turn into a place where both my students and I can take comfort in learning from each other and learning how to treat each other.

The first thing I learned at these workshops is how to build a positive classroom environment by teaching my students social skills. Secondly, learning to group my students and teach them to work together was the next crucial step in teaching my kids about responsibility, fairness, cooperation, self-esteem, and trust.

According to Johnson & Johnson (1999), a cooperative learning group exists when students work together to accomplish shared goals. In addition, a high-performance group incorporates five basic elements, which include: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, social skills, and group processing. Johnson and Johnson believe that cooperative grouping cannot be successful if students do not know how to interact with each other. Each academic task must be accompanied by a specific social skill that students must focus on. Before the classroom teacher explains what the academic task will be, a social goal will be discussed. Students must decide what that specific skill will look like and sound like (S.T.A.R.S. workshop).

Students must be given clear roles during cooperative grouping activities. Each role must be interdependent of each other and each student must be individually accountable for the work. When Peterson (2005) assigned clear roles in her cooperative groups, she noticed that this helped group interactions.

Cooperative grouping provides opportunities for students to get to know each other, learn from each other, and co-exist in a much more naturalistic, authentic environment. Cooperative grouping gives students opportunities to actively demonstrate the social skills they are learning about. It also gives students a sense of ownership and responsibility regarding their own education. Goss (2005) argues that, “if teachers are focused on their math and reading basals, they will miss wonderful opportunities to learn from and with their students and create a community of learners.”

I am aware that I need to develop a classroom environment in which my students can learn in a cooperative fashion. I also realize that my students need to learn how to work together in order to

accomplish shared goals of learning. A challenging curriculum and lack of time necessitate an integrated approach towards character education. Cooperative learning is the method in which the character education may be put to use and action. Although I did receive some education with respect to character education and cooperative grouping, I was not taught how to effectively incorporate the two together. Both the S.T.A.R.S. workshops and the literature I read helped me to gain insight on how I can develop a classroom curriculum that introduces and examines certain social issues.

Teachers cannot afford to exclude character education from their everyday curriculum. If teachers choose to ignore the abundance of social issues they are inundated with on a daily basis, they will risk creating a negative environment in the school community. Students will grow to resent one another, become bullies, and lack the proper social skills to interact in society. If teachers take the time to build a positive, moral classroom environment, they may benefit in countless ways. I believe that students can be taught character education in ways that will encourage them to learn to listen, speak, read, and write. Research suggests over and over again that children learn best when they make a personal connection. Therefore, by integrating character education into everyday curriculum and carrying out lessons in a cooperative learning fashion, students will be given the vital tools to succeed in the classroom and in society.

Context:

Ernst Prussing Elementary is located on the northwest side of Chicago, Illinois. It is located in the neighborhood of Jefferson Park. According to chicagotribune.com, the 2005 estimated population is 40,349. Median years in residence are 3.7. The percentage of residents that have lived in Jefferson Park for less than 5 years is 39%. The average family income is \$70, 816.

According to the 2005 Illinois School Profile, Prussing School. has a total enrollment for 2005 of 686 students. The racial/ethnic background of the students is: 58.7% White, 1.5% Black, 34% Hispanic, 5.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and .4% Native American. Ethnic make-up includes a small Polish and Arabic population and an increasing Hispanic population. Fifty-four percent of the student population is low-income and 24.2% of students are limited-English-proficient. The mobility rate is 20% and the attendance rate is 95.3%. The average teaching experience, measured in years, is 13.4 for the district. Fifty percent of teachers in the district have graduate degrees.

Prussing School is making adequate yearly progress in both Reading and Mathematics. Student academic performance in the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) is the state test administered in grades 3-8. Math scores are slightly lower than the state average in all benchmark grade levels.

The School Principal has been at Prussing Elementary for 8 years. The school has a new Vice-Principal. It is his first year as a V.P. There are approximately 38 teachers in the school. The teacher turnover is low. A few teachers have been at the school for over a decade. They are joined by a relatively new batch of younger, less-experienced teachers. Most teacher turnover in the past few years has been attributed to retirement and maternity leave.

We have a new P.T.O. president this year. She has focused on improving parental involvement, which has historically been very low. Last year, two mothers were mostly responsible for all fundraising activities. This year, we will have room mothers and fathers and parent volunteers in the classroom. Although some classrooms have benefited from this, I have had almost no parental involvement in my

classroom. Parental involvement continues to remain a struggle at Prussing. There were 6 student teachers in the building from January through April.

Students are given 20 minutes for a lunch break. Aside from the core curriculum, students have classes in Music, Library, Computers, and Physical Education. Primary students are given physical education class once a week. Prussing Elementary is a closed campus; recess is not scheduled on a regular basis. However, teachers may schedule recess for students based on time allowance and behavior. Students are expected to abide by a school dress code. Non-compliance with the dress code is not acceptable. Students who break school rules such as lack of homework, consistent tardiness, non-compliance of the dress code, negative behavior, and academic failure due to lack of effort as outlined in the Discipline Handbook, are reprimanded via detentions, suspensions, and/or expulsions.

The administration focuses on test scores, student discipline, and teacher compliance with rules and regulations. The school focus is on improving the current writing plan, Reading and Math achievement and on professional development.

My first-grade classroom currently has 27 students. At the beginning of the school year, I had 36 students. This continued for 7 weeks. Eleven of my students transferred out to another classroom once a new teacher was hired. During the first 7 weeks, I focused on classroom management in order to maintain control of student behavior. Now, with my smaller class size, I have been able to assess student knowledge and behavior.

Almost half of my students have been identified as high-risk for failure in reading. Approximately 10 of my students are labeled some risk in reading. At the beginning of the school year, 9 of my students were identified as low risk in reading. First-grade teachers are using an assessment tool named DIBLES (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills). DIBLES is a standardized and individually administered. First grade teachers have monitored student progress in reading at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. In addition, we have monitored student progress of “at-risk” students on a bi-weekly basis. Almost all of my students are now making adequate progress towards reading achievement by the end of first grade. I attribute this in part to the new reading program we are using. In addition, I am spending most of my time focusing on Language Arts and Mathematics. My curriculum is quite challenging, however, in that I must teach: Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies, Health, and Art. The new curriculum for Language Arts is quite time-consuming if completely reviewed as scripted.

In my classroom, I have a large population of Hispanic students. I also have Polish, Arabic, Romanian and Asian students in my classroom. Seven of my students are receiving bilingual education services. They are pulled out one period per day for bilingual classes.

The climate in my classroom seems calm and productive at first sight. My students are busy at work any time of the day. Their desks were initially paired in groups of two. Now they are paired in groups of four. I have heterogeneously grouped my students. I believe that this is essential for cooperative group learning. Most of my students comply with the classroom rules, which are: use silent signal, use listening position, no talking in the hallway, no horseplay. Although students typically adhere to the rules, I am constantly struggling to maintain order in my classroom during times of transition. When

students begin to chatter amongst themselves, a few of the students actually begin to yell, moan, and even howl. My immediate reaction is to silence the entire classroom. I consistently apply the same classroom management techniques, but also experiment with others along the way.

Tools:

I wasn't really sure how I was going to implement character education, so I thought I'd start by selecting literature that covered the topics my students needed to focus on. The books I selected focused on cooperation, responsibility, and self-esteem.¹ These are the subjects I wanted to concentrate on since I not only wanted to build a caring community in my classroom, but also provide my students with the tools necessary to learn to work together. I also chose books about self-esteem and bullies. The parents indicated on a survey that they would like their children to build positive self-esteem in the classroom. I focused on bullies because I remembered how much I disliked the bully attempts in my classroom last year. I used teacher observations and reflections to record daily interactions. I also reviewed feedback from parent and teacher surveys about character education. I also collected student samples to help me evaluate student responses and interpretations.

- **Teacher Observations and Reflections**

I wrote notes about various things that were going on in my classroom with focus on these areas: student interactions, my reflections about my competence towards successfully integrating character education, implementation and success of cooperative group activities, strategies I used to develop social skills in my classroom, and descriptions of my character education lessons.

¹ A list of literature with character education topics and examples of curriculum integration is provided in Appendix 1

- **Parent Surveys**

I sent my students' parents surveys that asked their opinions about character education. I wanted to know which traits parents believed needed to be developed and discussed in school. I sent out twenty-six surveys and fifteen were returned. I also sent out follow-up surveys half-way through the character education curriculum to find out if students were discussing these lessons at home with their parents.

- **Student Samples**

My goal throughout this experience was to develop a character education curriculum that was integrated into my everyday subject matter. I wanted to focus on Language Arts as a foundation for expressing topics we discussed on character education. Initially, I had difficulty collecting samples because my students had not developed writing skills. As time progressed, I was able to help my students overcome this weakness by writing about themes that they could relate to, like bullies. Students orally discussed their feelings about topics like self-esteem and cooperation. Students were asked to use graphic organizers when working in teams. They were asked to use their comprehension and critical thinking skills while analyzing social situations in stories I would read to them. I recorded their observations.

Data and Analysis

Social Skills

In early October, my young and enthusiastic first graders were just beginning to get comfortable in my classroom. The uncertainty about how to behave and feelings of trepidation had worn off. As the leaves

began to fall off the trees outside the classroom windows, I could see each student struggling with his/her own identity. Some students immediately began to play the tattletale game. Every morning, I'd hear, "she did this and he did that." Students also misinterpreted each other all the time. I used to just listen to students complain, "he said a bad word" or "she pushed me." When I took the time to actually ask what was said or how it happened, I realized that much of the time students had not developed the social skills to realize that they were not actually being mean to each other. This behavior continued in my classroom throughout the winter.

January 9, 2006

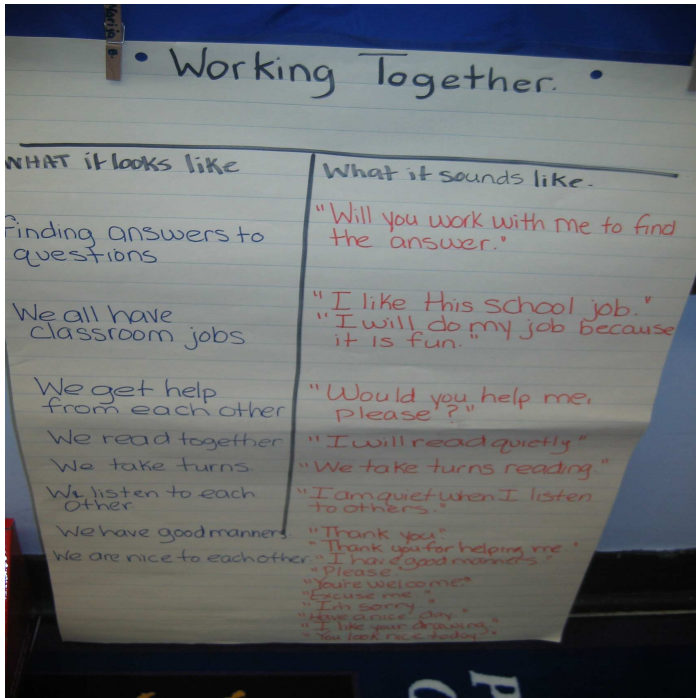
Matthew said, "Darren and Bobby were saying bad words." I asked him what the bad words were. He whispered, "Pee-pee." I just looked at him and said, "O.k." I wanted to laugh, but then I wondered to myself. Should I have a lesson about what bad words really are? (Teacher Journal)

January 10, 2006.

Robbie said, "Bobby said a bad word." I said, "what did he say?" "Punk." I responded, "OK, go get your things." It was dismissal time. I really didn't have time to talk to Robbie and Bobby about good manners. It always happens this way. Something always happens at the end of the day. Now that I'm writing all these things down, I realized just how often students get out of hand by the end of the day. Are they letting loose, because they can OR CANNOT? talk all day long? Are they just repeating what they've heard from other people? I need to remember to address this with my whole class. (Teacher Journal)

After reading, *Educating for Character*, by Thomas Lickona (1991), I had some ideas about incorporating lessons that would help my students develop the social skills in the classroom. I also drafted some ideas from the S.T.A.R.S. workshop I have attended this school year. I have used the following techniques to help my students learn to listen to each, get to know each other better, and develop respect for each other.

- Listening exercises: Students listen to each other talk about something for one full minute. They work in pairs and take turns. Afterwards, I asked the students to relay what they were told.
- Star of the Week: One student is selected at random. The student has the opportunity to share things about him/her with the class. The student is the teacher's helper for that week.
- Secret Person Bag: Students brought in a paper bag filled with five things that describe them. Each day we would sit on the rug and I would take each item out of the bag, asking the students what they predicted the item meant. After all items were displayed, students took turns guessing who the mystery person was.
- Good Deeds Tree: Students report good deeds other students do for them. The good deed is written on a leaf cutout and placed on the Tree of Good Deeds bulletin board.
- T-Chart for Social Skills: We would create a t-chart and identifying what a particular social skill looks like and sounds like.



I used this T-chart to talk to the class about what it looks like and sounds like to work together. We used this chart to help us remember how to work together in cooperative groups. The T-chart was used in conjunction with reading the stories: *The Little Red Hen*, *The Little Red Hen Makes Pizza*, and *A Chair for my Mother*.



I decided that my students should learn more about each other. Each student brought a paper bag with 5 items that tell about them. Each day, I open 3 bags and ask students what they think the clues mean. At the end, they guess who the secret person is. They love this!

I found these exercises to be quite useful and enlightening. I really enjoyed learning more about my students. My goal was to help them see each other as individuals and friends.

January 23, 2006

I have decided to have the students each bring in a bag that contains five items that describe him/her. On the first day, I opened four bags. The kids loved guessing and learning new things about their classmates. We all learned that Robbie is taking karate lessons and that Vincent collects comic books. The next day, several students repeatedly asked, "When are we going to open more bags?" They loved this activity and so did I. (Teacher Journal)

I wanted my students to learn how to interact immediately, so I divided them into groups of four. I arranged the desks so that each person in the group faced one another. I planned cooperative learning activities around my Language Arts curriculum. The first time I did this, the results were chaotic and disheartening. Many of my students argued and nothing was accomplished. This is described below in my journal entry.

January 17, 2006

My first cooperative group activity resulted in confusion and ambivalence. Students were told to write words that describe and parts of the object they were describing (like a motorcycle or jet plane). I had to repeat directions several times. Katrina didn't want to be the writer because she said she didn't know how to write. (Teacher Journal)

After our first attempt to work in cooperative groups, I realized that my students had no clue how to work together. They did understand the concept of working together. Although I assigned each student a role, some students simply did not want to comply with the assignments they were given. I reflected upon why students didn't work well

together at this juncture. I concluded that some students were simply not comfortable with each other yet. Also, this was an entirely new concept for them. For sometime in my classroom, they were only expected to be responsible for themselves and their own work. I decided that I would focus on devising activities and opportunities for students to get to know each other. In addition, I would keep the cooperative activities simple and fun.

January 27, 2006

Students were assigned a cold weather animal to research. They were supposed to discuss their animals in groups. I used the cooperative method called jigsaw. My students got along much better this time. They seemed to like sharing what they had learned. They were so very loud, though. Students who followed directions and were prepared reviewed facts with each other. They enjoyed discussing what they know. It was nice to see students discussing and cooperating. (Teacher Journal)

At this point, I was delighted with the methodology I employed for creating cooperative group activities. This time, the students didn't argue over jobs. They were focused on sharing. They really liked talking about the polar animals they had researched. The noise in my classroom continued to be loud, though. I kept telling myself this was not a deterrent for learning. I prayed no one would walk past my classroom, though. I'm still not comfortable with noise. Although Katrina's team did make some more progress, they were still arguing a little. I could have chosen to ignore it, but I didn't. Although it required more focus on them and little focus on the other groups, I had to deal with this issue. I asked Katrina's team to share what role each person had. Then, I asked the team to share why they thought they were not able to complete the assignment in a timely manner. Some students were not participating and playing around instead. We talked

about responsibility and cooperation again. We also talked about what good things happen when we work together.

February 7, 2006

Today we tried working in cooperative groups again. I'm really getting better at setting these things up. Each person had a specific role and had to figure out two sentences on their own. Great news! Katrina's team, who had such difficulty last week, actually did pretty well. They were finished at a good pace. This team got to go into Ms. V's class to present their accomplished work. They were very proud of themselves. Darren's team, on the other hand, experienced some difficulty. At one point, they were arguing over the correct answer for one sentence. I asked students to vote over which one they believed was right. Darren and Aaron said the correct answer. Lamon didn't vote and Donny voted against Darren and Aaron. Voting didn't seem like such a great solution to me. I need to teach them problem solving skills. Yet another insurmountable task I don't have time for.

Even though I wrote about the need to teach problem solving skills in my journal back in February, I didn't realize how much I need to do this until around April. I continued to believe that if I focused on developing social skills in my classroom, the number of conflicts would decline in my classroom. For many students, this was enough. For a few students like Darren, learning to be nice just wasn't going to solve problems. Darren's issues ran deeper and I just couldn't see it.

Creating Cooperative Groups



My students working on a cooperative group activity where each person has a specific role and each role is interdependent of one another.



Although my students continued to experience difficulty getting along at times, they really learned to work together with each subsequent cooperative group activity. After each activity, I would ask my students to comment about their experience. I incorporated strategies that I learned from both attending the S.T.A.R.S. workshop and from reading journal articles on cooperative learning, which were written by David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson. It is essential to mention my experiences with the cooperative groups, because I believe that this has been an integral part of creating a positive social-emotional

environment in my classroom. I could not establish an exchange of positive interactions amongst my students if they couldn't learn to work together in an academic setting. Therefore, by establishing cooperative groups in my classroom, I believe that I am also helping to foster positive character traits as well.

Although my journal entries only show three moments along the way, throughout the months of November through April, I learned to develop true cooperative groups, using five basic elements mentioned by Johnson and Johnson. These elements are: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, social skills, and group processing. I was careful to create group projects in which each individual had a specific role, yet each role was interdependent of each other (individual accountability and positive interdependence). I also allowed time for the group to discuss the information they were synthesizing (group processing and face-to-face interaction). I did try to talk about social skill roles before each group interaction, but sometimes I merely reminded them to remember how to work together, or cooperate. I fell into the "time" trap, as I believe many teachers do. Instead of taking the time to discuss certain social skills we wanted to model during an activity, I would merely mention the social skill. This is perhaps the reason some of my students continued to play instead of work and why my students were always so loud when they interacted.

As I learned more about how to create cooperative groups in my classroom, my students did much better jobs working together. I used a few books about responsibility and cooperation to help them understand why it's important to work together and what the

rewards can be. At the beginning, my students would argue and nothing would get accomplished. I gave each student a specific task and modeled the work they should do. I also picked activities that were simple and not too confusing to figure out.

I kept the same teams together for the duration of the school year. I felt that it was important to keep the same groups together. I wanted to force students to accept each other and recognize each other's strengths. In retrospect, I have noticed that it was incredibly difficult not to give in to the temptation of moving the desk of some of my students. For example, Nora's team initially had a very difficult time working together. Some of the group would argue or horseplay. As time went on, they became the most successful team that worked together. At other times throughout the day, though, some students in this group were always goofing around and misbehaving. Arnie would hit Keenan all of the time. Brad and Arnie would say bad words to Keenan. Keenan's mom has asked me to move Keenan. I had resisted because I wanted this team to learn to work together well during cooperative group time. If I've taught them the skills of working together, though, then they should be able to work with anybody, shouldn't they? In retrospect, I realized that my students are much like adults in the work place. In most cases, they had learned to get along during "work time". At other times, like when we would transition between subjects, they would pick at and annoy each other, showing their true feelings towards one another. Once again, I was reminded that I should have been teaching them conflict resolution as part of the set social skills we focused on.

The student comments after certain group activities, reminded me that I needed to continue to work with my students on developing certain social skills.

Student Comments about Working in Cooperative Groups

Nora: When we work together, we finish faster. It was loud.

Donny: What I did like, some people in my group were helping my read the sentence. What I didn't like is that some people were yelling at Penny. Some people weren't helping me circle my mistakes.

Jose: I didn't like when Darren was talking to us. We couldn't concentrate.

Katrina: I didn't like the noise...that people were talking.

Matthew: I liked when we worked together because we finished faster.

Bobby: I liked when our team worked together. All of us were working together. We were taking turns.

Donny: What is didn't like is that our team was fighting. What I did like is everybody was doing their own job.

Integrating Character Education

Once I became more comfortable with organizing cooperative group activities, I began to plan my character education curriculum. I was very worried that I would not be able to fit these lessons into my everyday curriculum. Initially, I kept pushing my character education lesson back a day, then a week. The following two journal entries illustrate my frustration.

January 23, 2006

So much to do...will I be able to pull this off? Will it be worth it? Will I have the type of classroom environment in which students respect each other? (Teacher Journal)

January 27, 2006

Second quarter report cards are due on Monday. I feel relieved because the last two weeks have been so stressful. Last week, we only had 3 ½ days of school, plus we were in the January assembly and practiced every chance we could. How much time do I devote to what I am supposed to cover in Language Arts and Math, Science, Social Studies, Health, and Art? I realized this week that although my students are reading, they cannot write very well at all. I will focus my character education curriculum in developing their writing skills. (Teacher Journal)

February 22, 2006

I have to stop subconsciously thinking of my character education lessons as separate pieces of the curriculum. (Teacher Journal)

As I reflected upon my dilemma, I thought about my tendencies towards teaching. I habitually tried to cram in as much “learning” as I could during a typical school day. I constantly felt as if I were racing against time to prepare my students for second grade. Then, I thought about what first grade should be about. I thought about how I’ve been taught that students learn best when they make a personal connection to what they are

learning about. I know that if my students are engaged, then they will absorb what is being learned. I knew what the problem is, but I was concerned about whether or not I'd have the time to find the solution. How much more time could I possibly spend planning my curriculum? I wish I could have started all over again at the beginning of the school year, but I couldn't. I couldn't go backward, but I couldn't more forward either; at least not in the fashion that I had been. I had reached a point in my teaching career when I realized that although I had not been teaching for very long, I was already clouded in my view of what teaching should be. I focused on teaching the lessons in my manuals in the manner which was prescribed by the publishers of these manuals. I was aware of the fact that I was doing this, but I struggled with teaching in a "safe" way as opposed to taking chances in my classroom. Taking chances might translate into the very thing every teacher is petrified of in her classroom-chaos!

Initially, when I began to think about how I would integrate character education, I envisioned it as part of my Language Arts curriculum. I purchased several wonderful books through a grant I received. Since I wanted to begin classroom instruction around cooperative group activities, the first books I read and discussed with my classroom revolved around cooperation and responsibility. The first books I read with my students were: *The Little Red Hen* and *The Little Red Hen Makes Pizza*. We discussed cooperation and the students recorded similarities and differences between the two stories on a Venn diagram. Although the lesson went well, it was still a supplemental part of my everyday curriculum. I had to take extra time to introduce the stories, discuss the topics, and teach my students how to record information on the Venn diagram.

After I discussed cooperation and responsibility with my students, we continued to use phrases such as “when we work together, we finish faster” and “we learn when we work together.” During a field trip to the Children’s Museum, my students proved that they were practicing these values inside and outside of the classroom, as the journal entry below illustrates.

March 28, 2006

We went on a field trip to the Children’s Museum today. I had several chaperones, so I only had five students with me. It was so nice to just hang out with them. They were constantly calling me over to look at one thing or another. One of the chaperones told me that Manny and his group were lining up dominos in a long row. Each person took a part of the line. The chaperone informed me that Manny said, “Hey, it’s true. If we work together, we get done faster.” Wow! It’s actually sinking in. This was a proud moment for me. I also noticed that the students didn’t complain when they were put into groups by me. They all interacted and got along. Not one person fought with someone else!

I decided to discuss self-esteem with my students. In November, I sent out a survey to parents about their beliefs on character education. I wanted to know their feelings about elements of character education. I was curious about how parents feel about the obligation that schools should have about teaching character education. Out of 26 surveys that were distributed, 15 responded. I was quite surprised at the responses to my first parent survey.

Which character traits does your child consistently display at home? (honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, cooperation, loyalty, positive self-esteem, other)

Most responses: honesty and respect

Least responses: fairness and responsibility

One parent noted: individuality (This student is always the student who never follows the rules in my classroom).

Which traits do you wish your child would display more often?

Most responses: Responsibility and positive self-esteem

Least responses: fair, honesty, loyalty

Which character traits have you discussed with your child at home?

Most parents answered all: honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, cooperation, loyalty, positive self-esteem.

I used the information I gained from the parent surveys to help me mold my character education curriculum. I also based my curriculum on student interactions in the classroom. In addition to issues with self-esteem, I noticed that some students had the potential to become bullies in the classroom and beyond. The following journal entries show the prevalence of unkind behavior in my classroom.

October 25, 2005

My kids are not always very nice to each other. Darren is constantly sticking his tongue out at one student or another. Arnie laughed when Karen fell from her chair. Brad says, "Ha-ha" when Keenan gets into trouble. Sandra is always bickering with Karim. I wish my students would learn to get along. I don't want them to become bullies someday. (Teacher Journal)

January 23, 2006

Today Brad and Arnie both served detentions. I didn't want to do it, but after several warnings, I gave up. The last time they were goofing around at dismissal time-running and chasing each other in the hallway. When I gave them the detention notices, they didn't seem bothered. (Teacher Journal)

One particular student, Sandra, had experienced being bullied by students that are older than her. This has happened more than once. Ironically, she is one student that I am afraid will become a bully someday if she doesn't learn to recognize what the traits are. It was interesting to hear how engaged students became when we talked about bullies.

February 16, 2006

Today, after lunch, Sandra seemed upset. I asked what was wrong. Karim told me that somebody made fun of her at lunch. I asked who it was. Katrina said it was an older girl. Sandra said, "they made fun of my pigtails." I hugged Sandra. "Let's talk about it upstairs." I responded. I was infuriated. At what age do kids start acting so cruel to each other? This was a chance to show them how to handle bullies. We re-enacted what happened, but this time I showed Sandra how to take the power away from the bully. I told them that bullies sometimes become bullies because they used to be bullied too. Jessie said, "My dad once said he got a wedgie from a bully." Sandra said, "My cousin is a bully. He said that people used to bully him." Keenan said, "That boy in Room 211...he said mean things to me. He's my bully." I supposed that our conversation worked because Sandra wore her pigtails the next day to school. (Teacher Journal)

I spent a great deal of time talking to my students about self-esteem and bullies. We read, *Pindulli*, *Odd Velvet*, *Stand Tall*, *Molly Lou Melon*, *Chrysanthemum*, and *The Brand New Kid*. We would orally retell the story in class and act out the story in the form of

dramatic play. I was still not incorporating these lessons into my Language Arts curriculum, though. I was simply fitting in the character education lessons whenever possible throughout the week. The following journal entries illustrate not only my continued frustration, but also my consistent conscious thought focused on finding ways to solve this issue.

February 18, 2006

I've been doing a better job of fitting in my character education curriculum. It's becoming a more natural process. I think that Fridays or Mondays are good days to introduce a new book and/or topic. Right now, I'm just trying to fit it in on my lighter content days. Of course, when my day doesn't go as expected and I am running behind, my character education is the first to be pushed back. (Teacher Journal)

February 21, 2006

I didn't have time to fit in my character education today. I had so much to do. I had to fit in two tests because so many kids in my class have been sick. I keep telling myself that it's ok. I'll make it up later in the week. If I had started in September, I'm sure I wouldn't feel so much pressure to teach character education every week. (Teacher Journal)

After several weeks, I realized that I needed to strategize if I was ever going to attempt to group themes together. It wasn't until I started to look ahead in my Language Arts curriculum, that I was able to truly integrate the character education stories I read with the concepts and skills my students needed to learn. For example, when my students wrote a friendly letter to a character in a story I'd read them, the goal was to teach them about self-esteem as well as how to format a friendly letter. My students were engaged in

the assignment and Manny has even asked me when I'm going to mail the letters to the little girl in the story.

February 23, 2006

Today I finally struck gold. I was faced with the challenge of fitting in writing, phonics, and reading into a day jammed packed with other subject matter. I have introduced ways to write a friendly letter. So, for character education, I read the book, "A Bad Case of Stripes," by David Shannon. It's about a girl who's afraid to be herself because she's afraid of what bullies might say to her. We've been talking a lot about bullies in class. I started out the lesson by referring to the situation Sandra was in the week before. Then I had Sandra role-play with 2 other students on ways to handle a bully. I told them to role-play like it happened in the cafeteria. I had the kids sit down on the reading rug. I read them the story. They were completely engaged. Throughout the story, the students were able to decipher that Camilla would get rid of the stripes if she ate lima beans. Donny responded, "She needs to eat lima beans." "Why?" I asked. "For she could be healthy." Donny responded. "That's right. But there's another reason." I said. Every child responded with the same answer. They all agreed that lima beans were healthy. Finally, I decided to take a different approach. I picked on Donny. "Donny, what's your favorite color?" "Green." He responded. "Well, guess what? I hate green and I say that you can't wear green anymore. What do you say about that?" Donny timidly replied, "I'll pick a new favorite color." "Nooo, Donny!" I cried with a grin on my face. "No one should make you pretend to be someone you're not." I picked on other students, getting them to reply, "so what?" to my attempts to manipulate them. Finally, I turned to Christie. "Guess what, Christie? I hate short hair. So, you'll have to grow it longer. If you don't listen to me, you can't come to my pool party and nobody will be your friend." Emmy meekly looked at Christie. "I'll be your friend," she said to Christie. "Yes! Yes!" I cried. "That's it! If you all stick together, then nobody can bully you." I was elated. They're beginning to understand what it means to be good to each other.

Afterwards, my students wrote the main character a letter, giving her advice about being herself. Ta-da! I'm finally, truly integrating character education into my curriculum in such a way that it is natural and beneficial in so many ways.

.Another assignment that was successful was when I read "Little Bill: The Meanest Thing to Say" to my students. They were divided into groups of four. I only read halfway

through the story. Students were supposed to come up with four possible solutions for Little Bill's problem with the bully. In this lesson, the goal was to teach students to practice problem-solving as well as learn about how to deal with bullies. Based on my data, I believe that students are more likely to be engaged when they work in groups. Therefore, I will continue to find ways to integrate character education in ways that will require my students to work collaboratively.

From time to time, though, I wondered just how effective these character education lessons were. I continued to read books and create lessons that revolved around diversity, tolerance, and citizenship. I wondered just how effective the lessons actually were. At times, I couldn't be happier with the way my students were treating each other, as the following journal entries show.

December 5, 2005

Today is Karim's birthday. He seemed sad in the morning as soon as he walked in. He began crying right away. He said, "Nobody likes me." I said, "Of course people like you, Karim. I turned to Lamon. "Lamon likes you. Right, Lamon?" Lamon walked over to Karim. "I'm your friend, Karim." (Teacher Journal)

December 16, 2005.

One morning while students were supposed to be writing in their journals, I noticed that Sandra was not working at her desk. Instead, she was on her knees, looking in Robbie's desk. I was about to say, "Sandra, what are you doing? Get back to your work." Instead, I just asked her what she was doing in a monotone voice. She responded, "Robbie asked me if I could help him find his journal." I nodded my head and looked back down at my desk. I peeked over at Sandra and Robbie. Sandra pulled out Robbie's journal from his desk. She said, "here it is." Robbie said, "thank you." They both went back to work. (Teacher Journal)

January 10, 2006.

Sandra said, "Mrs. Garrity, I gave Andy something, for he don't be sad." Andy was crying because we were playing sight word bingo and he did not win. I said, "what did you give him?" She responded, "a pen with a squiggly thing." I said to Sandra, "that's very nice of you. I'm very proud of you." Sandra hugged me. (Teacher Journal)

February 9, 2006

Robbie brought in cupcakes for his birthday. When we gave out the cupcakes and got to Manny's table, Jasmie picked the last cupcake with green frosting. "Aww, I wanted the one with green frosting." He whined. Jasmie replied, "You can have it." "Thank you," Manny said happily. (Teacher Journal)

The Good Deeds Tree



As I started to see how kind my students were acting towards each other, I wanted to highlight all of the wonderful things my students do for each other. In addition, I was hoping to positively affect the classroom climate and stimulate students to want to

do good deeds for each other. I created a bulletin board that displayed a bare tree. The bulletin board was entitled: Tree of Good Deeds. Each time a students performed a good deed for someone else, the recipient of the good deed was to report it to the teacher. Then the good deed would be written on a leaf cutout and placed on the tree. Initially, as I had predicted, a bunch of students were running up at me reporting each and every nice thing another students had done for them.

February 8, 2006

I finally put up the Good Deeds Tree. What took me so long? I explained to students that whenever someone does something nice for them, they should write what that was on a leaf and attach it to the tree. I gave two examples of nice things students have done for others. (Sandra for Robbie and Darren for Karim.) Immediately before lining up for lunch, Jose picked up Penny's lunch ticket off of the ground for her, Bobby and Darren picked up Penny's papers off of the floor as well. Penny didn't report the good deeds to me, though. (Teacher Journal)

February 14, 2005

Lamon came up to me with an assignment notebook at dismissal time. "Mrs. Garrity, I found this on the floor by the lockers." I say the Jose' name was written on it. "That's Jose' notebook." I responded. Jose approached me. "Mrs. Garrity, Lamon did a good deed for me." "Do you want to put it up on the tree?" I asked. "Yes." He responded. Immediately after, another child reported a good deed. (Teacher Journal)

For about two weeks, the students constantly remember to report good deeds in the classroom. The students really were going out of their way to be extremely nice to each other. I was encouraged by what I witnessed every day in my classroom. One particular incident brought me to tears.

February 16, 2006

Today some of the kids were misbehaving during Math class. Mrs. Lee walked in and told the students that those who were behaving would be invited to her room for a 100th day celebration. Later in the day, 7 students were invited to Mrs. Lee's class (Manny, Lamon, Saul, Nora, Andy, Donny, and Jessie). A few of the students were visibly saddened at not having been invited. Sandra and Christie had their heads down and Christie looked as though she would cry. Jose was frowning. I immediately regretted rewarding those students in this fashion. I asked the student's in Mrs. Lee's class to return to our classroom. I felt uneasy letting some of my students go celebrate while others stayed. Manny and the others had been given treats by Mrs. L, which they put on their desks. I noticed Jose was crying. "What's wrong," I asked. "I wanted to go to the

party.” He responded. Bobby got up and brought Jose some tissues. I asked Jose to talk to me but he would not. I decided to continue with the lesson when Lamon said to me in a low, timid voice, “Mrs. Garrity, would you give my treats to Jose?” Lamon had a strained, concerned look on his face. “Why don’t you give it to him?” I responded. Lamon got up from his desk. Saul followed him. They both put their treats on Jose’s desk. Immediately afterwards, Manny, Nora, and Donny brought Jose the treats they were given by Mrs. Lee. Tears welled up in my eyes. I couldn’t hide my emotion. I couldn’t believe what I’d just seen. Was this a reflection of the tone I’ve been trying to set in my classroom? Would this have happened regardless? No, I don’t think so. These kids are good kids and I’m sure they were empathetic regardless, but they were moved to action. They wanted Jose to know they cared about him and didn’t want him to be hurt. I learned two lessons that day. I learned that I don’t like the idea of rewarding and punishing students by pinning them against each other and I will never let that happen again. I also learned that I had created a family environment in my classroom. I was teaching them that they needed to look after each other. I couldn’t possibly be happier. (Teacher Journal)

After a couple of weeks, many of my students stopped approaching me to tell me about good deeds others had done for them. I didn’t want to push them to do this, although I was tempted several times.

February 15, 2006

It’s been about two weeks since I’ve put up the Good Deeds Tree. I’ve had to prod and gently remind students about it. Will this idea work? At the very least, I want to make respect and good manners things that are conscious effort in my classroom. I started off the morning by talking about some of the deeds on the tree. I have noticed that my students have been better behaved lately. (Teacher Journal)

My data still shows that students were good to each other and continued to observe and practice good manners in the classroom, though. Students stopped approaching me about good deeds that others had done for them, but I continued to witness these good deeds and good manners from time to time.

March 3, 2006

We've been working really hard in class for a very long time. I often forget they need a break every once in a while. That break came this afternoon for a measly twenty minutes. I let the kids pick which activities they wanted to participate in. My kids were so happy. They played well together. Only Arnie told Karim he couldn't sit with his group. Karim began to cry and said, "Nobody likes me. I have no friends." I reminded Arnie that everyone gets to play. He apologized to Karim. After free time was over, Bobby, Emmy, and many other kids approached me and said, "Thank you for the free time, Mrs. Garrity." There's that twinge of guilt again. (Teacher Journal)

March 15, 2006

Penny forgot to bring juice to school. She hates milk. Manny gave one to Penny. She responded with a thank you. (Teacher Journal)

May 2, 2006

Today we went on a field trip to Brookfield Zoo. We had such a great time. No one argued and everyone talked to each other like a friend. At lunch time, I noticed everyone shared or offered to share. They used good manners. Afterwards, a chaperone approached me and said that the students were very well behaved and exhibited wonderful manners towards each other. They all offered to share with each other. It was a proud and rewarding moment for me. (Teacher Journal)

As I reflect upon the good deeds of my students, I can't help but question whether or not this would have existed with or without my character education curriculum and my concerted efforts to build a community in the classroom. At times I am convinced that our conversations and reflections have everything to do with the wonderful humane actions of my students. At other times, I must simply give the credit to the parents and to the children themselves. Regardless, I feel that I could not possibly question the importance and significance of modeling caring, consideration, appreciation, and loyalty in my classroom. How could a child possibly survive without it?

My data shows that my students had learned to empathize with each other. They recognized what a good deed is and wanted to be recognized for doing positive things. They also showed good manners towards one another and their teacher. At the third quarter report card pickup, I was able to share some wonderful stories about my students with their parents. What a wonderful opportunity to mention something other than academic achievement.

Parent Survey Feedback

After months of teaching character education, I was curious to know if my students were talking about character education at home. I was hoping that they were discussing what was going on in the classrooms with their moms and dads. I sent out a second survey to parents. Out of 26 surveys that were distributed, 13 were returned.

My child has talked about the following topics at home. (Responsibility, Cooperation, Self-esteem, Bullies, None of the Above, Other)

Most parents said that their child talks about responsibility and cooperation.

“Lamon talks about working with others all the time and how he and his friends get certain tasks to do together.”

“To be responsible with his things. To pick up after himself and the importance of working together as a team of family”

“He talked about how to stay away from bullies and to be nice to people.”

“He has talked about how he tells his friends they’re good at things.”

“My child has talked about responsibility by showing us that she can take responsibility in doing homework.”

“Jessie has talked about working together and of being star of the week.”

Do you feel that our classroom environment is a positive one?

12 said yes. 1 said no. That was Karim’s mom. Karim always mentions that he has no friends and that no one likes him.

Please describe why/why not you believe that our classroom is/is not a positive environment.

“My son loves school, he cries when he is sick and has to stay home. He talks all the time about Mrs. Garrity and Mrs. Rodriguez and how much he loves his friends.

In Spanish: “I do believe that it is positive because you are teaching them to share in groups and responsibility.”

“She is learning to be responsible, to work hard. She has new friends.”

“My son has a positive attitude about school.”

“I think kids learning how to work together, developing writing and working on language and comprehension.”

“My son Matthew always comes home excited from school and talks about what he learned in school.”

“I believe that your classroom is a positive environment because you teach my daughter many things in school.

“Jessie has learned to be responsible in her daily activities.”

After reviewing the parent feedback comments, I was even more determined to develop my character education curriculum. I tried to develop activities that the students would enjoy and remember. I also read literature that was engaging and important to the lives

of my students. They mentioned bullies to their families and they also talked about cooperation. I decided that the following year, I would develop a parent survey early on in the year that would encourage parents to provide information about their children that would help me develop the character education curriculum.

One Size Does Not Fit All

My data shows that my students exhibit good manners towards one another. I seem to have accomplished my goal in that they have learned to work together cooperatively. My students also seem to take pride in themselves and their accomplishments, although this has been much more difficult to gauge. How do I measure a student's positive self-esteem? I can only contribute by letting them know how special each and every person in my class is. In addition, they recognize the traits of a bully and most students do not treat each other in such a manner. Unfortunately, I still have a few students who have consistently not displayed either empathy for fellow students or respect. Both Darren and Arnie are two students in my classroom that seem to have difficulty regulating their behavior at certain times. They have both been disciplined with detentions. I have tried so many things to get them to change their behavior. I was hoping that my character education would help all my students learn to get along and respect each other. I was definitely wrong.

January 23, 2006

Darren received a detention today as well. He asked Manny to put his hand over his face, and then he slapped Manny's hand onto his face. Manny was upset and told me right away. When I asked Darren, "what happened?" He replied, "It was just a game.

People do that to me.” His mom told me that Darren thinks that if he misbehaves, his mom will transfer him back to his old school.” (Teacher Journal)

February 3, 2006

Karim and Darren got into trouble for arguing. Darren claimed that Karim “cut” in front of him. Karim said this wasn’t true, but I’ve seen him do it before several times. They were both told to pull a card. Karim began crying at his desk. This struck me because Karim barely cries. “I didn’t do nothing.” He said. Darren got up from his desk and paced back and forth. He had a picture of an ice cream cone in his hand. His head hung low. He walked over to Karim and said, “Here, Karim. Pretend this is an ice cream cone and your mother gave it to you.” (Teacher Journal)

(This particular incident intrigued me because Darren is mostly noted for his negative and anti-social behavior. In this case, Darren got Karim into trouble, but was apparently feeling sorry for him.)

February 28, 2006

Manny and Darren are arguing again. They approached me. Manny said, “He told me to be quiet.” Darren responds, “He’s talking and I can’t concentrate.” Manny says, “I can’t read in my head.” Darren responds, “Well, he could be a little quieter.” I ask Manny, “could you be a little quieter?” Manny responds, “Yeah, I think so.” I say to Darren, “What will you say to Manny next time it happens?” Darren replies, “Please be quieter.” I say, “Great. Now shake hands and say, “that’s the end of it.” They shake hands and giggle as they repeat the phrase. (Teacher Journal)

March 9, 2006

Manny approaches me. “Mrs. Garrity, I asked Darren to move and he said no. I asked him for a favor and he said no. I looked at Darren. He said nothing. “What did you say to him when he said no?” I asked Manny. “Nothing.” He responded. “You should tell him how that makes you feel.” I say. He looks at Darren. “I felt like you didn’t care.” Darren says nothing. (Teacher Journal)

March 14, 2006

Arnie stepped on Karen's art project, and then laughed. He denied laughing. I said, "If you did it by accident, you should still apologize." Arnie turns around and apologizes to Karen. "That's ok." She replies. (Teacher Journal)

According to my data, most of my students have learned to get along. There are still a few students who do not know how to get along. They often bicker over seemingly insignificant things or use their hands inappropriately to push, shove, or play fight. These journal entries were the ones that made me reflect and revisit the most. The two boys, Darren and Arnie, consistently did things to hurt others, but surprised me from time to time with their innocence and seemingly genuine remorse for what they had done. These entries consisted of not only mean-spirited acts by these boys, but also examples of regret for bad behavior.

Findings

It wasn't until I analyzed my data and re-read the journal article written by Peterson that I realized I was missing one key component in my character education curriculum. Although I had managed to teach these students to learn to work together and display good manners, I had never taught them how to resolve conflict. Peterson, a classroom teacher, recommends that teachers model and help student internalize the use of practical problem solving skills in the classroom. In addition, these skills should be applied during authentic experiences in the classroom. Therefore, as difficult as it may seem, conflict between students should be handled when they happen and not as an afterthought minutes, hours, or even days later.

It could have been my imagination, but it seems as though the number of complaints, tattling, and miscommunication is much less than what I had experienced last year and at the beginning of this school year. I still have to take the time to ask students to talk to each other about what happened, but now I'd feel like half a teacher if I didn't address it when it happens. I've learned that taking the time for those "teachable moments" gives us all peace of mind in the long run. Was it really fair for me to ignore a situation throughout the day, just to force my student to sit at his/her desk and sulk or worry over what had happened? I realize that my students watch everything I do and listen to everything I say. I hear them say things to each other like, "that's not appropriate" or "we are a family" and I know that my responsibility is far greater than I originally imagined. Of course, I'm far from perfect and still lose my cool from time to time. On days that I'm feeling sick or run-down, it takes an insurmountable amount of self-discipline to address those tattletale issues or arguments that ensue. I try to remember that no matter how much of a hurry I'm in, ultimately I must address the issue at hand.

Once again, I am already looking forward to next year. I am somewhat satisfied with the progress my students have made academically. I am thrilled with their socio-emotional growth in my classroom. I plan to continue the challenge of integrating character education into my everyday curriculum. I still consider this a huge challenge, since I have reverted back to relying on my core curriculum and have neglected character education for four weeks. As I reflect upon my research, I have found that although I may not introduce a new piece of character education literature, the classroom is still using skills that were acquired as a result of learning how to work together, respect each other,

and have consideration for others. When I pair up students now, no one refuses to work with anyone else. As a matter of fact, the other day one of my non-literate students was paired up with another student. Karim has had difficulty learning to read all year. As a result, his self-esteem has suffered greatly. Instead of ignoring the situation, I found opportunities to mention how we are all different learners. The students had quickly picked up on the fact that Karim can't read. I still pick on Karim to sound out words, read, and answer comprehension questions. I simply say the words for him and he repeats them. Not once has another student made fun of Karim for this. As a matter of fact, the last time students partnered up, I noticed that Karim's partner was reading to him and Karim was repeating the words. I beamed with pride. I learned that if a teacher sets up a classroom climate that is safe and nurturing, everyone can feel comfortable enough to not only make mistakes, but also learn from them.

It has certainly been quite a challenge to integrate character education into my everyday curriculum. It requires forethought and planning. It also requires paying attention to what the classroom climate is like. I consider teaching and running to be very similar. Years ago, when I began to run, I couldn't do very much. I still refer back to my journals in which I was so proud of myself for running 1-2 miles on a treadmill. Today, I can run eight miles. Recently, I began running outside, on the pavement. This is an accomplishment I never thought I would achieve. I hope to run a marathon someday. Each time I run, I think about teaching as a never ending race. I'm constantly going the distance but taking different turns each time. I remind myself that I needed to train, strengthen, and focus in order to achieve my goals. Next year, I'll focus on character

education once again. I'll implement the conflict/resolution component this time. Hopefully, I'll look back someday and say it wasn't so hard after all. As a matter of fact, it was worth all the effort.

Policy Recommendations

For the classroom:

- Teachers should begin by creating opportunities for students to socialize with one another.
- Teachers should allow for cooperative group time in order to allow students to learn to work together.
- Teachers should implement a character education curriculum that is integrated within the core curriculum and meets the needs of the students and the classroom environment.

For the district:

- Teachers should be provided with practical, easy to access resources for character education.
- Character education resources should include, but not be limited to types of literature, journal articles, and lessons taught by other teachers. This information should be available on internet sights with links.
- Teachers should be given the opportunity to attend character education workshops facilitated by fellow teachers during professional development days.

- Appendix 1: Examples of Integrating Character Education

Title of Book	Author	Character Education Focus	Integration into Language Arts Curriculum
The Little Red Hen Makes Pizza	Philemon Sturges	Cooperation	Venn Diagram comparing with The Little Red Hen
Pindulli	Janell Cannon	Feelings/Bullies	Oral Retell, Dramatic Play
Odd Velvet	May E. Whitcomb	Self-esteem	Oral Retell, Dramatic Play
Stand Tall, Molly Lou Melon	Patty Lovell	Self-esteem	Oral Retell, Dramatic Play
Chrysanthemum	Keenan Henkes	Self-esteem	Oral Retell, Dramatic Play
The Brand New Kid	Katie Couric	Bullies	
A Bad Case of Stripes	David Shannon	Bullies/Self-esteem	Writing a friendly letter of advice to the main character
Bill Cosby's Little Bill: The Meanest Thing to Say	Bill Cosby	Bullies/Self-esteem	Graphic Organizer-Problem/Solution Frame. Agree on the best solution
How to Lose All Your Friends	Nancy Carlson	Bullies	Students write a letter using proper format, giving advice to a bully about how to lose friends.
Berenstain Bears and Too Much Teasing	Stan and Jan Berenstain	Bullies/Friendship	
Pigsty	Mark Teague	Responsibility, Citizenship	Student reads and discuss with others.
The Big Orange Splot	Donny Manus Pinkwater	Diversity, Tolerance	Students drew pictures of their dream houses. "My house is me and I am it." Students wrote paragraphs to describe houses.
Oliver Button is a Sissy	Tomie DePaola	Self-esteem/Tolerance	Oral discussion
A Chair for my Mother	Vera B. Williams	Cooperation	Oral discussion
Berenstain Bears Lend a Helping Hand	Stan and Jan Berenstain	Citizenship	Make a list of ways to help others in the community-work in cooperative groups
Snail Started It!	Katja Reider	Self-esteem/Bullies/Feelings	
A Porcupine Named Fluffy	Helen Lester	Self-esteem	Students discuss self-esteem

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