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A Character Education Seminar for Perservice Teachers

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Character without knowledge is weak and feeble, but knowledge without character is dangerous and a potential menace to society. Character and knowledge together are the twin goals of true education.

Boston Latin Grammar School, 17th century

Introduction

Present society places many demands upon classroom teachers. They are expected to deliver all areas of curriculum with mastery and ease. They are forever being called upon to incorporate one more essential piece needed for full student development. Character Education has become one of those new essential pieces. All teachers, no matter what their grade level, discipline, or years of experience, need information and guidance on how to demonstrate and implement positive character traits in the classroom. Experts agree that the best way to train teachers in character education is to reach them before they ever get into the classroom. Therefore, departments of education need to begin incorporating Character Education into their teacher education curriculums.

A survey conducted by the Boston University Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character (1999) demonstrated that over 90% of the deans and directors of teacher education across the country supported the teaching of core values in schools. Yet over 81% reported being unable to adequately address Character Education in their own teacher preparation programs (Ryan & Bohlin, 2000). Clearly this is a call to initiate and deliver components of Character Education in undergraduate teacher training curriculums. This paper will address one institution's initial response to this call and how a Character Education thread began to be incorporated into its teacher preparation curriculum.

The Call for Character Education

Historically, Dewey believed that moral education could not be divorced from the school curriculum. Rather it should be delivered through all of the "agencies, instrumentalities, and materials of school life" (Dewey, 1909). Ryan (1996) suggested that the morals, values and ethics we want students to learn should be identified by adults and taught by matching the topic and level of intensity to the students' developmental level. Direct teaching of these pre-selected morals aims at the transmission, acquisition and exercise of what are seen as the accepted moral values of the culture (such as honesty, and responsibility), and emphasizes the principles of learning and social learning theory and the importance of adult guidance and direction (Solomon, Watson, & Battistich, 2000).

This pedagogical view and recent tragedies such as the Columbine, Heritage, and Santee school shootings have impelled school boards and administrators to view Character Education as a way to counteract and prevent violence. The result has been the development and implementation of Character Education programs in public schools across the nation. Federal monies from the U.S. Department of Education have been available to school districts since 1995 to support the development of pilot character programs. As of

May 1999, nine states have initiated such projects. In Virginia, Georgia, Florida, and Mississippi legislation has been passed mandating that Character Education programs be implemented statewide. As a result, teacher education programs are now being called on to provide a basic framework of Character Education to preservice teachers. Greer (1998) believes that matters will certainly grow worse if the schools of education—and their colleagues in the liberal arts colleges—do not prepare the nation's future teachers to teach effectively about morals and character.

Developing a Character Education Preservice Component

In the fall of 1998, discussions began in our traditional four-year teacher preparatory program on how to introduce our preservice teachers to the concepts of morals, values, and ethics. We wanted them to clarify for themselves where they personally stood on these issues. In addition, the preservice teachers needed to investigate the perspective of being the classroom teacher transmitting these pieces to their students. Discussions revolved around the notion of teachers being "centered" and "teaching from the heart" as being the best grounding for productive teaching.

Our vision of "centered" teachers is derived from Hargreaves (1994) idea of the boundless self, where an individual is able to dynamically respond to the changing environment through a continually reflexive stance (Texas A&M University, 1995). Thus the individual is always open and able to honestly embrace whatever may come next. "Teaching from the heart" comes from Parker Palmer's (1998) discussion of what makes a good teacher. He defines a good teacher as one who can weave connections between oneself, the subject, and the students. These connections are held not in the teachers' methods but rather in their hearts—meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect, emotion, spirit, and will converge in the human self (Palmer, 1998).

Through these discussions we, as an education department, began to clarify not only how we view a "teacher" but also what we believe preservice teachers need to come to terms with in relation to Character Education. We want them to begin investigating the morals, ethics, and values that support their sense of personal self, understand how these terms are presently being defined, and be introduced to possible strategies for incorporating Character Education into classroom teaching.

As a result of on-going discussions and the inability to add Character Education into an already crammed curriculum, the education department decided to begin implementing these elements through a Character Education Seminar. In the fall of 1998, the department conducted a survey with all junior education majors on morals, values, and ethics. The survey sought to understand where students stood on these issues and identify the needs as related to their concerns about character education. Survey questions included: is moral formation of conscience an important aspect of education?; should values be taught in school?; which values or whose should we teach?; and what is a caring community of learners? Results indicated that the education majors strongly believe that the teacher is a primary avenue for delivering the values of the society, aiding in the formation of the individual conscience, and responsible for providing a classroom atmosphere of safety and belonging.

Based upon this feedback, a seminar was crafted that would serve as an introduction to Character Education. This first seminar was offered in the spring of 1999. Junior and senior education majors were invited to a one-day, nine to four, workshop on Character Education.

The day, chosen many months previously, was ironically the Saturday after the Columbine killings. The seminar group reeled under the enormity of what had taken place and helped cement our mission for the day. We began with a moment of silence dedicated to the students, teachers and administrators, families and the community of Columbine.

The seminar was divided into several blocks of time encompassing different approaches and outcomes. The first block of time focused on reflection and discussion of personal morals and values. The discussions centered upon the basic values of trustworthiness, responsibility, caring, and respect. Faculty and students discussed how these are developed individually and how they guide their life. Student teams then investigated how abiding these values are through moral dilemma exercises where the decision to do what is "right" versus the pressure of the group played out.

Another block of time was devoted to the delivery of overviews on pre-developed Character Education curriculums, including the Character Counts! Coalition (1993), the Child Development Project (1981), and the Positive Action Model (1998). In addition, a presentation of a senior research paper on Character Education highlighted the national call for educators to address this arena in classrooms.

Students were actually relieved to be able to openly discuss these issues and garner responses to thoughts and questions from peers and faculty. They left that day feeling refreshed by the honesty in their own personal evaluation of morals, values, and ethics. Students also felt energized by having taken this first step in understanding the role of Character Education in today's public school classrooms.

Due to this positive student response a second Character Education seminar was developed and implemented in the spring of 2000. Again junior and senior education majors were invited to attend a one-day seminar. The format remained basically the same except for the addition of a student-team presentation. Two senior education majors, who had attended the 1999 workshop, requested an opportunity to participate in the 2000 session. These two education majors inspired and dedicated to what they had seen and heard in the 1999 seminar asked permission from their school administration to implement the "I Care" Character Education (1997) curriculum into their student teaching classrooms. Permission was granted and the program was implemented with such success in their classrooms that the principal asked them to present the curriculum to the entire school faculty. The following spring the "I Care" program was successfully adopted school-wide and continues to be used today. During the 2000 seminar, these two students told the story of what had happened and presented an overview of the "I Care" curriculum with actual lesson plans and activities. The education majors not only left this seminar feeling refreshed and energized but now they also felt empowered. They could make real differences in classrooms with students.

The department has presently completed its third Character Education seminar. Some of the basic components of that first seminar remain. Students were engaged in various blocks of time including, reflection and discussion of personal morals and values, moral dilemma exercises, and delivery of overviews on pre-developed Character Education curriculums. In addition, this year teams of senior education majors presented the various character education curriculums being used in the districts in which they taught and where the juniors will student-teach. Juniors attending were excited and relieved to be able to overview the Character Education curriculums and ask questions of the seniors. It is hoped that through these presentations our juniors will enter their assigned student-teaching placements and

our graduates their first teaching position with a great deal of understanding and confidence in this school required curriculum area.

Conclusion

Through the ages, into the future, and especially now in the present, teachers play a crucial role in the development of children's character. Nationally teachers are being called upon to intensify their efforts in Character Education. This necessitates that teacher education programs provide training in Character Education. If we believe that teaching is intrinsically and unavoidably a moral act (Ryan & Bohlin, 2000), then post-secondary educators must initiate preservice teachers in the body of knowledge referred to as Character Education. The Character Education seminar described above has been the beginning of one institution's response to this call.

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