How Character Education Helps Students Grow

Gloria Rambow Singh

First graders need character education as much as they need to learn to read and count.

I sat in my kitchen, stunned by what I had just heard on the evening news: A young girl in a neighboring city had been sexually molested by other children under the age of 10. News reports about children and teens violently hurting one another, committing crimes, and sometimes taking lives made me wonder about what might have influenced them to act as they had. I began to consider the impact that I have on the moral development of the 1st graders in my classroom. Could I do more to influence how they treated others?

I have always taught my students such concepts as honesty and respect, but usually in response to something negative that has already happened. I wanted to foster their desire to develop positive character traits before I had to deal with negative behavior. Although I believe that families provide the foundation for character development, I also agree with Thomas Lickona that "schools cannot be ethical bystanders at a time when our society is in deep moral trouble" (1991, p. 5). More than 90 percent of respondents to a 1993 poll agreed that schools should be involved in teaching such values as courage, caring, acceptance, and honesty (Elam, Lowell, & Gallup, 1993). Although I knew that my efforts could not cure all the ills of the world, I decided to try to make a difference in my little corner. My two challenges were to find time for character education and to create a program that worked.

Finding Time

After considering my students' needs, my weekly schedule, the standard 1st grade curriculum areas, and the ideas in An Integrated Approach to Character Education (Rusnak, 1998), I realized that I could integrate character education into what I was already teaching. Many stories in children's literature, for example, reflect lessons in morals and virtues; we can read and discuss these moral lessons without taking time from core subjects. Character education also fits well with social studies and health topics. Accepting individual differences, showing courage, developing citizenship, taking responsibility for oneself, and making positive choices were already part of my 1st grade materials, so the hurdle of finding time for character education became

less intimidating. I needed only to shift the focus of my teaching to emphasize the themes of character.

Also, talking about good character traits fits naturally into the scheme of setting up a successful primary classroom. Instead of just assigning chores, I began to use my classroom job chart to teach about responsibility and teamwork. Our class developed a constitution for how we wanted to run our room, and we discussed respect and responsibility in that context (Developmental Studies Center, 1996). When we introduced games in math, we reviewed the ideas of fairness and cooperation. I found many places to fit in such lessons with subjects that I routinely cover.

But because I teach elementary students, whose understanding of character is just emerging, I also wanted to set apart some lessons specifically for character education. I needed to create a yearlong program that would be effective and age-appropriate.

**Plotting the Course**

For my framework, I chose the six character traits that the Character Counts! Coalition has defined as crucial—respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Allman, 1999). These traits include a wide range of behaviors that 1st graders can understand.

Next, I built a common language base with my class. My hunch was that elementary students would not understand the language of character education that I planned to use. I asked a volunteer to conduct individual surveys of my 21 students, asking each student to define the six character traits and to give examples of times when they had demonstrated each virtue. With the exception of the word *responsibility* (which only five students didn't understand), half or more of my students demonstrated no understanding of the identified traits. This finding did not necessarily mean that they were unable to exhibit the behaviors, but rather that they could not articulate the terms.

**Traveling the Course**

As I prepared lessons to introduce these traits and to incorporate character education into what I was already teaching, I found strategies that consistently helped engage young students in the learning process.

**Building a Sense of Community**

At the beginning of the year, I created a strong sense of classroom community, helping students get to know one another through introduction games and activities. I emphasized that every student was a valuable member of the class team. We even gave ourselves a team name.
We set up classroom expectations together, and I implemented other community-building activities throughout the year. Why is building team spirit important? In previous years, I had not invested much time or effort in building a team spirit in the classroom. When I included a wide variety of community-building activities, students developed a high level of trust and camaraderie that encouraged them to demonstrate respect, caring, and a sense of responsibility. They wanted to act in ways that would help the team.

**Actively Involving Students**

Whenever possible, we used games or role playing to help students understand each character trait. For example, when we talked about fairness, several students acted out different scenarios that I whispered to them. Their peers had to determine whether the situation portrayed was fair or unfair. To learn about respect, we played "The Good Manners Game." Students drew slips of paper describing a particular situation—for example, "You want to borrow a crayon from a neighbor. What do you do?" Students came up with responses that exhibited good manners. Students always greeted these activities with enthusiasm, and off-task behaviors were minimal.

**Using Puppets**

Students are delighted when an imaginary character arrives in class to deliver the lesson. A furry bear puppet named Responsible Ralph visited our classroom to teach us about responsibility. After he helped the children learn about the trait, he traveled in a backpack to each of their homes to see what kinds of responsibilities the students performed there. This teaching tool was so successful that several parents asked for a repeat visit, citing how enthusiastically their children had completed their chores during Ralph's visit.

**Incorporating Character Language into Classroom Life**

Using the new vocabulary every day seems awkward at first, but integrating it into the daily running of the classroom helps students remember the concepts. We reviewed vocabulary by consulting posters on character education that we displayed on the walls. I included character language in class discussions whenever I could. For example, when my class began to get too loud, I sometimes said,

> Close your eyes. Ask yourself if you are being responsible with your talking. If you are, great. If not, think of what you could do to show responsibility right now.

As we walked down the hall, I frequently reminded students to show respect for the other students in our school by keeping voices quiet and using only half the hall.
After a time, using the character words became natural as we went through the day—and the students began to use them, too. When our class created our constitution this year, the students used many character words to express their ideas.

**Practicing Cooperative Learning Techniques**

Partner and small-group learning activities are natural complements to character education, providing students with opportunities to practice cooperation, respect, teamwork, and responsibility. Students usually enjoy cooperative activities, and working with peers is a brain-friendly technique that enhances learning (Jensen, 1996). These techniques supported the discussion portions of our character education lessons. For example, I frequently set aside one or two moments for students to discuss a character topic with a partner—such as, "Tell your partner about a time someone was unfair to you."

We also used cooperative learning for more complex activities. For one lesson, pairs of students received one piece of paper and one crayon and then came up with a fair way to share the crayon to draw a picture. When they finished their project, the pairs explained to the class what they had done and how it showed fairness. The results were amazing—students did everything from drawing a line down the middle to breaking the crayon in half to taking turns to create a picture together.

**Does It Work?**

Can character education really make a difference? It did for my classroom. When I administered the student survey five months later, 90 percent of my students showed an increased understanding of the six character traits. But, much more important, their classroom behavior improved. Character education did not make all the problems go away, but it did have two noticeable effects. First, misbehavior occurred less frequently and was unlikely to escalate when we used our new character vocabulary to talk about a problem. Our classroom was a calmer, more positive place.

Second, students began to hold one another and themselves to higher standards, though I doubt that they realized it. I began to hear less tattling and more conversations among students. Students began to use the character words to resolve conflicts. The physical education teacher reported that a student who was upset with a classmate’s behavior exclaimed, "That's not being responsible!" A parent remarked that character education at school had carried over into the home environment.

Teaching about character is just as important as teaching the basics of writing, math, and reading. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education" (1947). Educators should work in partnership with families and communities to give students every opportunity to grow.
into people of good character, and especially to counteract society's potentially negative influences. Character education cannot cure all the world's evils, but it can improve our classrooms and influence our students in positive ways, giving them the skills that they will need to be successful adults. As educators, we can make a difference in our little corners of the world.

References


**Gloria Rambow Singh** is a 1st grade teacher at Elm Creek Elementary School, 9830 Revere Lane N., Maple Grove, MN 55369; gandls@gateway.net.