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Student Character Building

If we don't model what we teach, we are teaching something else

Abraham Maslow.

Innovation has many definitions mostly referring to different aspects of originality. For purposes of this paper, to be innovative in teacher training especially regarding character education is to ask ourselves better questions of ourselves, our schools, our approaches to character education. By asking reflective questions, we can create a developmental frame work for approaching character education based on historical research and practical applications of that research.

When adults look about them and bemoan the wrongdoing in the world, they look to the schools to teach ethics – character education. At first in the 1920s codes of conduct were adopted until research showed that they had nothing to do with actual conduct. Urging students to behave in a certain manner does not result in them doing so. In the 1960s the work of Lawrence Kohlberg and Sidney Simon respectively pioneering the ‘moral dilemma’ discussion approach and the ‘values clarification’ approach added new impetus to character education giving teachers more tools to use. In general their work’s value was limited since character education is better understood as not just a curriculum rather about the adults in a student’s life – it is about

creating trust. (pp30-31 How Good People Make Tough Choices – Rushworth M. Kidder)

In Teacher training – Do we ask what is trust? How to build trust in a classroom between colleagues, between administration and teachers, in other words a community of trusting learners.

Trust = Credibility - to believe first in oneself

Trust is a function of two things: character and competence. Character includes your integrity, your motive your intent. Competence includes your capabilities, your skills, your results, your track record. And both are vital to any relationship.

Teacher training usually focuses on capabilities – what do I do: plan, teach, assess. While this training is important, none of it is about character. Teacher training assumes teachers have character. Rarely do we attempt to teach or measure character in teacher training. Perhaps it is because we understand that you cannot create laws that result in character and you cannot regulate for character. You can be very clear about your values and give people training in how these values translate into actual behavior.

Does your school have clear values that are reflected in the behavior of adults as well as the students? To have effective character education, look to the adults for what they are modeling. Is there any gap between adult intent and adult behavior? Are adults concerned about what is right more than being right, about acting on good ideas rather than having the ideas, about embracing the truth than defending an outdated position, about building a team than exalting self, about recognizing contributions than being recognized for it. School's that promote a clear set of values have their community intent and behavior aligned.

Teachers need to be in schools that build trust starting with the adults as character education for students begins with the adults - “The students are watching”. Everything about a school community teaches. What are we teaching in our school? For relationship t rust, we must

practice consistent respectful behavior. For organizational trust, school communities need alignment between stated values and policies, behavior, and budget.

Student Character Building

A starting point for understanding an innovative program for student character building is to understand that successful schools are communities of individuals who trust each other – administrators, teachers, staff, students, and parents. What is trust at its simplest – confidence which builds understanding, collaboration, and positive results. And, its opposite, distrust, creates suspicion, fear, and anxiety. “We judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behavior . . . one of the fastest ways to restore trust is to make and keep commitments – even very small commitments – to ourselves and to others” (p.13 *Speed of Trust*, Stephen M. R. Covey, Jr.)

Successful Schools seem to be doing the following to have an environment of trust that lives their values:

- “Promoting alignment of ethical values and action across the school community
- Seeking out leaders who operate ethically and actively inspire ethical behavior in others
- Inviting students to take on authentic roles in administration and stewardship of their school”

In an education study by Stanford University expecting teachers to build positive relationships with students rather than simply delivering content, Professor Tony Bryk shows that schools with high trust had more than three times higher chance of improving test scores than schools with low trust” (p. 21 *Speed of Trust*)

Research on 1st grade at risk children found when teachers tuned into the child and responded to needs, moods, interests, and capabilities, letting them guide their interactions, created an upbeat classroom climate with pleasant conversation, lots of laughter and excitement,

showed warmth and positive regard towards students, they achieved the best results. (p.283 Social Intelligence – Daniel Goleman)

Character is defined in nouns: respect, integrity, honesty – hard to reach for.

Character building is a reflective process and needs verbs – watching, modeling, grappling, bluffing, sorting, shoving, fearing. What are we modeling about character about citizenship what routines and rituals do we have and what are they teaching especially about character?

Modeling: What do we stand for in this place? How is that stance reflected in our routines, activities, rituals? How do we model – as institutions and the people who work within them- that which we most value (p11 Students are Watching)

Successful schools are family like environments in which individuals are valued and rules of membership are clear – which behaviors, which values, which qualities are being modeled – do the rules apply to everyone – all the adults – remember that moral orders are voluntary and rules come out of environments not books. They are arrived at through explanation, exploration and persuasion – conversations. Those conversations start with adults agreeing to the nouns and the verbs concerning character.

A final point to consider, schools need to recognize that the task of raising moral children falls heavily upon parents – “the healthiest children, psychologists tend to agree, have parents who are warm and accepting rather than cold and rejecting; who set up firm rules and consequences rather than remaining lenient; and who support a child’s individuality and autonomy rather than exerting heavy controls . . . role models of values and the creation of a work ethic . . . reciprocal teaching “ (p 209 “Magic Trees of the Mind”, Marian Diamond and Janet Hopson)

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Tools for Character Education:

Become a community of clear values:

- Answer the following questions
 1. What sort of person do we want our students to become? (graduate profile)
 2. What will character education mean to me if I am the model of it?
 3. What will Character Education look like school wide?
- Create a touchstone – a creed or way to express the shared value(s) and aspiration(s)
- Create a character based motto
- Involve the students in the planning and leadership of the program

“Discussion and storytelling rather than preaching or didactic teaching are the appropriate ways to help children as they learn to make these choices.” (P. 3 A Call to Character)

See – Speak – Behave - Dramatize

1st six weeks to discuss and positively reinforce the rules – reinforcing, reminding, redirecting (p.50 Call to Character)

Discuss moral dilemma at school knowing that just discussing does not relate to changes in actions

Journaling & sharing

Web Site: www.character.org

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