Action Research as a Method for Reflective Planning and Practice: Character Education in a Middle School Classroom

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Evaluation is frequently viewed as something done by evaluators on teachers and students after the fact. Teaching is frequently viewed as something guided by intuition, distinct and separate from evaluation. In reality, good teaching requires ongoing evaluation or systematic reflection before, during, and after the implementation. This article recounts one teacher's use of action research for planning and monitoring the implementation of character education in her sixth-grade classroom. The qualitative data provides a rich narrative examining the use of action research to inform teaching practice. Specifically, the research describes a process for confirming and clarifying the teacher's intuition by utilizing a more systematic approach for gathering data on students' prior knowledge, as well as ongoing assessment of their grasp of the key concepts during implementation.

Introduction

It's not all that surprising to classroom teachers when a new educational fad comes along; character education is one of those seemingly new fads that has actually been around for a long time (Leming, 1997). Not surprisingly, many of my colleagues want to know, what character education is. Answering this simple question, however, is not so simple. Lickona (1998) examines two general approaches to character education frequently observed today: broad and narrow.

The narrow approach, as critiqued by Kohn (1997), essentially involves training children to act and think according to external standards established by adults—the "fix-the-kid" approach, as Kohn refers to it. The narrow approach tends to devalue the importance of students' reasoning, while focusing inordinate attention on training students to act according to external norms. In addition, the narrow approach frequently involves extrinsic incentives provided to persuade students to comply. These extrinsic rewards tend to undermine the intrinsic value of the moral action, when for example, certificates and stickers given for helping another child lead to the belief that you help people to get stickers or rewards. In essence, the narrow approach prevents children from internalizing their actions and from understanding the reasons for their decisions.

According to Lickona, the broad approach to character education is more theoretically sound in so far as it addresses the complete moral person—knowledge, affect, and behavior—and the moral community in which they dwell. The broad approach encourages active involvement of students in authentic activities that facilitate moral development from the inside out. In this approach schools and classrooms are transformed into caring communities where students feel safe and comfortable, responsible for themselves and for their classmates, and challenged to grow socially and morally. The power of this sense of caring community is substantiated by rigorous character education research (e.g., Schaps, Watson, & Lewis, 1996); it is corroborated by intuition as well. Instead of creating children who are trained and reinforced into moral robots, the broad approach to character education seeks to develop thoughtful, caring, and committed moral individuals and communities. However, achieving this lofty and idealistic goal requires as much knowledge, commitment, and reflection on the part of the teacher as it does the student.

Getting Started

Character Education was a relatively new term to me, but it was a concept that I had been using in my classroom for the past several years. Last fall, as I began a discussion with my students about the character traits of an individual from a novel we were reading, I noticed mostly blank stares and very little class participation. As I attempted, with little success, to elicit information concerning the character traits presented in the reading and how they were related to the

ten character trait posters displayed in my classroom. Students were uncertain of the connections. However, I came to a very important conclusion: How do I expect my students to be respectful and responsible if they do not know what these traits look like and involve? This was the beginning of my interest in action research.

Effective implementation of character education in the classroom requires internalizing several key concepts. First, you must have a clear understanding of the prior knowledge possessed by your students concerning character education and the related concepts. You must have knowledge of terms that students are unfamiliar with or those that to which they have assigned incorrect definitions. Next, you must constantly monitor students' knowledge, reasoning around, and personal use of the character traits throughout the course of the implementation. Character education is not a two-week unit that is taught and mastered, never to be reviewed again. Finally, teachers must understand that character education is not a unit designed and delivered exclusively by the teacher. The most effective character education is created in a collaborative effort between student and teacher. Given these and a host of other interconnected factors, action research becomes a powerful tool for directing and monitoring the implementation of character education.

Initial Attempts at Action Research

I began my action research by simply talking with the 106 students whom I teach on a daily basis. They are sixth graders, who are approximately 11-12 years old. The children are generally from middle class families and have parents who take a supportive and active role in their lives, both socially and academically. This does not mean that we do not teach children who are neglected, both physically and emotionally. Finally, our school is located in a community that is supportive of school programs and activities that benefit the education of their children.

We began our discussion by reviewing the ten character traits I have posted on my wall. The character traits that we focused on were compassion, trustworthiness, respect, fairness, responsibility, self-discipline, honesty, integrity, perseverance, and citizenship. I chose these ten traits as my focal point because any of the positive actions that I wanted the students to recognize in others and duplicate themselves could be categorized into one of these traits. When deciding on these ten traits, I also reflected on the negative behaviors that I observed in the students and the missing character quality suggested by the negative behavior. By using these tactics, I was able to match character traits to the needs of my students and use these as the basis for my action research. I assured my students that we were not reviewing the traits for any quiz or test. I told them that knowing the definitions on paper was not my goal. Rather, my goal was to see them use and appreciate each trait. We continued reviewing each trait and the students began giving me examples of each trait that fit into their sixth grade schema. By the end of our discussion, I found that the students now had a better understanding of each trait and an idea of what each one looked like.

For the second step in my research, I handed each of my students a survey to take home one Friday afternoon. The self-created survey consisted of the ten character traits that we had discussed the previous day. I asked the students to keep the survey with them over the weekend and observe the people around them. I encouraged them to watch family members, friends, and even strangers in the grocery store exhibiting any of the traits that were listed on the survey. As soon as they recognized an act of character, they were to jot the example down next to the trait it portrayed.

My reasoning for this step in my action research project was simple, but multi-faceted: It was an attempt to gather background information concerning my students and their knowledge of character traits. I wanted to see if my students could spot the behavioral examples of people who were demonstrating positive examples of the character traits. If they could recognize the traits in people's actions, then I would feel more comfortable that the students had the knowledge of what each of the traits meant. Again, having students simply write a definition for honesty was not my goal. I wanted them to recognize it in action, and be able to act in a similar way. Second, I wanted my students to look at the people around them and search for the good. There are so many negative views of society today that it is easy for children to believe that people are uncaring and that to not be hurt, they should act the same. Students are afraid to open up to adults because they fear being ridiculed or punished. They get these ideas from watching people and from the media that surrounds them. Unfortunately, the bad things stay with a child, sometimes longer than the good. Using my survey, I could have my students focus on the positive. Allowing my students to be positive and feel good about themselves and those around them was a good start to having character education become a lived experience for my students, not just a word on the wall.

When the surveys were brought back to class, we engaged in a conversation concerning their findings. Some students were concerned because they could not find actions demonstrating certain character traits. When I asked them why they felt they had difficulty doing this, many confessed that they had not understood what the trait meant and therefore, they could not find a suitable action. This confirmed my suspicion: students were indeed having trouble understanding what traits like integrity looked like because they didn't know what it meant. This became a valuable piece of data. It was interesting to watch as our discussion progressed. A few students seemed frustrated at not understanding what certain traits meant. However, what really captured my attention were the surprised, and also proud, students. These students were the first to admit that they had found examples for each trait and remarked how surprised they were. One student wrote that, "Even though society is getting worse, people still have perseverance, citizenship, integrity." This response moved me because I was able to see that student face reality, but

still look at the positive aspects concerning it. Many students commented on how they had never really watched others this closely to notice the small things. Some students focused on themselves. They were interested to see how often they showed the character traits themselves. This was a tremendous eye-opener for those who need character education the most. These students really had to search for examples of the character traits in themselves and this became a powerful and authentic learning experience-way beyond what they could learn on paper.

Students also had noted positive character attributes in people whom they never would have suspected or noticed before. For example, one student saw a young boy with one arm in Klein's, a sporting goods store, looking at hockey sticks. The student described this as an act of perseverance. This student went on to say that he thought the boy was showing perseverance because a lot of people would just give up and not play any sports if they were missing an arm. The student went on to explain that the boy must be very strong because practicing must be very difficult with only one arm. Many children would have dismissed the young boy as crazy for trying to play hockey with one arm. Others may have ridiculed him for even considering such an idea. A proud moment for me came when my student looked beyond those simple thoughts and picked out perseverance in the situation. This example suggested that the survey allowed my students to look closely at others, and also at themselves.

Curricular Connection

As a culminating activity derived from the survey data, I posted each trait on a separate piece of paper. Then, I invited my students to write their examples under the correct heading. I wanted the students to see the big picture. I wanted them to see that there are many ways to show character, and that the people around us can serve as models of this. The posters were then mounted outside of our classroom and became "The Great Wall of Character" to accompany our unit on China. Discussion began concerning the wall built around China and the walls that people put around themselves. China used their wall to protect themselves from the threat of external invasion, but the wall also prevented many of the good things outside from coming in. This seemed no less true for our class: we discussed how we frequently do things to protect ourselves from things we don't understand (for example, being mean to people different from us), but in so doing we may miss out on some great and profitable people and experiences. Our discussion then moved to analyzing why we are afraid to get hurt by others and why we choose, at times, to not be a positive influence in the lives of those around us. Finally, we talked about how helping others can actually make us stronger, both mentally and emotionally, and this in turn can help us to avoid being hurt by others. Tearing down the emotional wall because we feel stronger about ourselves was then compared to the crumbling of the actual Great Wall of China

and the reasons why that wall is not a necessity for China any longer. Our "Great Wall of Character" bulletin board serves as a daily reminder of the things we can do to show positive character traits and thus, become stronger individuals. I watched everyday as students stopped to read the blocks and show them to others who passed by. The activity gave them ownership and a sense of pride in their knowledge, but more importantly, in their actions.

Reflecting On The Survey Experience

The next step in my action research project was to find out how my students felt about doing the survey and the results that they found. I had the students respond to three questions based on the information they gathered over the weekend . The results were surprising. When asked what they had learned from doing the first survey questionnaire activity, many responded that they had never noticed so many nice things happening around them. They admitted that they had people do nice things for them, but never really connected the actions as examples of compassion or honesty, or the other character traits. A few responded that they had a better understanding of the traits now that they had completed the survey because they had actually observed the traits in action, instead of just reading them off of a poster. One comment that sticks in my mind came from a student when he was asked what he had learned from the survey, he responded by saying, "I found out that some people have a hard time showing some of the character traits because they were never treated nice." This was an incredible statement to me. Now, I not only had my students starting to recognize the character traits, but I also had the students beginning to see the motivation behind them.

Another question that students were asked was how we could encourage others to show more positive character traits. I allowed students to pair up at the beginning of our discussion to share their ideas. This allowed students to talk with their peers first and gain the strength needed to participate in the next step of our activity. After group discussions were complete, we came together as a class with our chairs in a circle. This allows everyone to make eye contact and gives a speaker the attention of all of his peers. I feel that this pre-discussion opportunity was very beneficial for my students because they generated wonderful ideas. Some worked on the concrete level. A few suggested that we participate in charity work. They suggested that we could generate skits or commercials for others to watch. The characters involved would show some of the traits that we have been discussing. Another proud moment for me occurred from the next suggestion. From the first day of school, I have stood behind The Golden Rule (Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.) I have constantly used that concept with my students when dealing with class conflicts or life issues. I was very pleased to see that many of my students suggested faith in the idea that if we showed positive character towards others, that they would reflect the same back to us. Students' understanding that their

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actions and attitudes will influence others is a milestone for my class to accomplish. We are on our way to understanding why honesty, compassion, integrity, and the rest of the traits are important in our lives.

A final response that was suggested many times was to show appreciation when others showed positive character traits towards us. They explained that if we don't say thank you when someone does something nice for us, that person may not be eager to be kind again. This response shows a deep understanding about how to make others feel good, along with ourselves. A final question from the survey reflection questionnaire has the students making a connection between the traits of good character and real life. I asked the students to explain to me how the ten traits could help them in life. Many students responded by saying that showing character would make us happy, along with the people we show it towards. Students argued that this leads to better friendships and relationships with the people around us. One student even said that maybe if we could demonstrate positive character attributes when dealing with each other, "Maybe there would be less fighting and less war." This suggests, at last, a beginning concern for students thinking on a global level, something students at this age struggle with. Students at this age seem only to be interested in the here and now. The responses suggest an evolving notion of citizenship-local and global.

Curricular Connections and Follow-up

As a result of my findings and my reflection concerning that information, several concrete teaching strategies evolved. First, my students and I will be creating radio commercials for the school to listen to for the holiday season. The students will create a skit focusing on a particular trait and then perform the skit over the school's PA system. This activity will allow the students to not only continue to examine the traits, but also to share and model them for other students. Second, my class publishes their own newsletter every two months. A few students suggested that we put character awards in the newsletter to recognize student displays of positive character. We have also decided to put a few blank ones in the newsletter to allow the readers and parents to take part in their own recognition of good character. This will be an ongoing project throughout the year. Third, my students have been participating in a canned food drive for the holiday season and we are signed up to participate in a 5-mile Lion Quest benefit walk in the spring. These events will allow the class to show citizenship, compassion, and integrity. I know that these activities may seem trivial when exposing children to character and caring for others, especially in today's world where we are facing oppression, injustice, and poverty. However, knowing that my students are at a young and vulnerable age, I wanted them to have the chance to participate in activities that would give them a positive and strong feeling about themselves and the concepts of character mentioned above. My hopes are that my students will continue on, because of the positive

activities in my classroom, and work to influence our world and take on those larger challenges. Children need opportunities to help others and themselves; many have that first chance in my classroom. The authentic opportunity for experiencing moral knowledge was more valuable than anything that I could teach them about the feelings associated with helping others in need. I am just here to give the children a chance to feel a sense of pride and self-worth. Finally, we have continued to connect the traits we have learned to the characters that we are reading about in our literature books. The characters now serve as models for my students and this becomes very valuable. With all of the actions set into place, students will be immersed in character development activities throughout the year. The wonderful part is that many of the activities were developed by the students themselves. This involved flexibility in my planning, but the benefits can't be denied given my hope not only to facilitate their academic development, but also their emotional and social development.

I realize what a valuable tool character education is to my students and myself. I know that it is not a subject to be taught, but a lifestyle to be learned. This action research was not for me, so much as it was for my students. Students were given the opportunity not only to become familiar with the definitions of the ten character traits, but also with real-life examples of people displaying these traits. No story or worksheet can give that to my students. Their responses showed me a level of thinking that I was pleased to see. My children were not self-centered, but were aware of the people around them. They understood that actions, whether they are towards you or they are your own, become a model that will set the mood for your future. Whether it is a job or a relationship, showing good character will influence all aspects of life. I am realistic in understanding that there were students of mine who were not affected by the survey. Unfortunately, those are the same students who did not take the time to watch those around them. They did not allow themselves to look for the positive in people. I hope that the great enthusiasm, along with the many opportunities to view and model character throughout the year, will spark those students. If it does not, then I will continue to work in building their sense of self-confidence and appreciation for others. I was proud of the students' response to this project and was even more excited to see the growth in their sense of pride. This pride also flowed into my principal as she passed our great wall. She commented on how much she liked the display and what a positive activity my project had turned into. This shows how character and the positive feelings that go along with it can influence many people without a lot of effort.

As for myself, I found that action research is a valuable teaching tool, one that helps me to locate where students are and where they need to get to. In essence it gave me the tools I need to help the students teach themselves. Students are told what to do from the time that they are born. We know from everyday observations that students frequently do not act according to what they have been told, even

when they know they should. Instead of a lecture from me about right and wrong, my students learned about the character traits for themselves with me as their facilitator. They were able to find them in the people around them and experience the feelings that were associated. In the process I learned from my students: what concepts they understood, internalized, and acted upon, as well as the areas where they needed assistance. I realize that my students are young adults who need knowledge of the concepts along with the reasoning and problem solving skills to reflect on future issues. The use of action research allowed me to do that by providing a system for understanding the students and frequent opportunities for gathering feedback from the students. Their feedback throughout this project assured me that the character traits were clear in their minds. Many times throughout this year, I have heard my students discuss the character traits that they have read about in the literature we have studied. The action research approach extended the learning experience for my students and helped them to grasp the concepts, gain a newfound sense of independence, and a lasting interest in the topic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, action research is a process. Baseline information must be gathered first. This will enable a teacher to confirm or clarify intuition about the levels of knowledge already possessed by his or her students. Practitioners can then use that information to initiate activities that will address the needs of the students detected in the baseline information. What must never be forgotten is reflection. Teachers must constantly reflect on lessons and activities to be sure that the students profited from the lessons and that the objectives were met. From each valuable reflection, modifications can be made in future planning to either clarify past confusions or progress to the next appropriate lesson that will build on their newfound knowledge. Teachers must be dedicated to character education and be willing to commit to the action research process if they truly hope to address their students' character development needs. One must realize that character education is not a program designed to "fix" children and their behaviors. Character education helps students to understand their actions and how they affect themselves and others. I want my students to enjoy my class and enjoy the person they become after leaving my classroom, goals that I share for myself. In order to achieve this both students and teachers must be committed to a systematic process of reflection and action, a process I will continue with this year's class and the classes in the future.

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