

Executive Summary

Can character education activities improve classroom climate and academic performance of students?

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Sub questions

Do I observe more positive student behavior within and outside of the homeroom classroom?

Do I observe improved group cohesiveness when completing assignments?

Do I observe individual improvements in students' self image?

Rationale

I had learned through conversations with colleagues that these particular 7th graders as a whole had consistently exhibited many discipline problems and a lack of motivation to succeed in school since they were in the first grade. Although these students had been regrouped in separate classrooms over the years with experienced teachers, I and my other seventh grade colleagues, continually received dire warnings of "Wait until you get this group next year." However, we hoped that our integrating a set of "home-grown" character education activities that focused on enhancing our students' self concepts and creating a cooperative and collaborative environment inside and between our classrooms throughout the year would help those students see the value of mutual respect for not only their social well being, but for their academic endeavors as well.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection Tools	Analysis
<i>Student Responses</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• In class discussion• Interviews• Surveys• Reflections	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most of the activities improved class climate• 78% preferred working cooperatively• Most preferred a voice & choice in how the class was run• The assigned activities motivated them to try harder in school• They better liked and understood their classmates better in 7th grade than in 6th grade
<i>Teacher responses</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teacher observations/journals• Interviews with Colleagues	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Initially, classroom climate was positive, however as the year progressed, there was an increase in number of discipline problems and number of missed assignments• Students were not always honest in their responses of how they felt about classroom climate.• Consistent teacher follow up and debriefing after activities was needed• Teacher collaboration was an effective component in implementation

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Auxiliary staff was helpful in implementing an anti-bullying program
<p><i>Academic & Discipline Statistics</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of discipline infractions over three quarters • Grade averages 	<p><i>1st -3rd Quarter:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic grade average of the students in all three classrooms was at about a 70% (C/D range) • There was an average of 9.3 missing assignments per student. • By the end of the second quarter, there was no significant change in student grade averages or in the number of missing assignments • 10.3% of 7th graders had received an average of 1 suspension over all three quarters

Limitations

The major limitation in this type of study is that there is no way to prove or disprove whether these activities caused students to become more positive in their interactions with one another or to improve their academics. Although there were fewer incidences of disruptive behavior, a number of other factors (such as student maturity and teacher classroom management styles) could have had just as much an effect on them as the character education activities.

Policy Recommendations

1. It is incumbent for teachers to provide *consistent* opportunities for students to regularly interact with each other for the purpose of expanding their knowledge of one another within the classroom as part of the regular curriculum, not just during lunch or other extra curricular activities. If students are to learn to treat each other with respect, they must learn to better know and understand one another.
2. Teachers must provide a consistent forum for them to express how they feel about the atmosphere in the classroom and allow them to have a say in making improvements to the classroom community.
3. Bullying is a major impediment to creating a positive classroom community. Oftentimes, teachers are unaware of the problem because middle school students tend not to reveal instances of bullying for fear of reprisal from the bullies or being seen by their peers as “snitches” or tattlers. Finding ways to empower both victims and bystanders to take an active role in curbing or eliminating bullying altogether will aid in making the classroom an environment of mutual respect and understanding.
4. Character education programs are not a “one size fits all” solution. Each year students come to teachers with their own “class personality” and history. What worked with previous classes may not necessarily work with current students. Constant student feedback, careful observation and teacher reflection will help teachers find and implement strategies to help the students build a positive classroom community. Other school personnel (not necessarily school administration) whom the students trust and respect can be helpful in implementing character education activities in *conjunction* with the classroom teacher. Teacher collaboration serves as a positive model for students to learn how to get along with others.