

Character Education in Public Schools

Written by Judith Legerton

Tuesday, 22 October 2013 16:55



Ever since I was in first grade I wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to share with my students the joy and adventure of learning; of becoming a productive, caring, and moral person; and of always reaching for the stars for themselves and others. My dream came true when I began teaching in 1968. I spent my career teaching elementary school in California—the majority in second grade—and retired in 2010, having lived my dream. Along the way, I hope that I instilled in my students the desire to keep learning, to treat others with dignity and respect, to be a valuable member of their community, and to give back to others.

Character education is an important part of every child's growth and development. Ideally it is taught in the home with the parents as role models and guides. Often this is not the case, so schools need to teach our students how to become moral, ethical people who are contributing members of their communities both locally and nationally.

Today, character education is taught more formally than it was when I began teaching. There are many programs that deal with specific topics such as drugs, bullying, being safe and avoiding “stranger danger,” as well as more general programs that address etiquette, manners, being truthful, and so on. There are specific programs written for each grade level and a specific number of minutes allotted each week, as mandated by the California State Board of Education.



In recent years, though, there has been increasing emphasis on higher scores on yearly state exams, which leads school districts and teachers to stress the subjects that are tested at the expense of other valuable topics such as character education. Although a certain number of minutes are mandated for character education and programs are available, it is often difficult to fit in the required minutes while preparing for the standardized tests, so character education is often shortchanged.

In my experience, teachers respond to this in a variety of ways. The first step usually starts on the first day of school. The teacher begins by having games and activities for the children to get acquainted and learn about each other to start building a community where it is safe to learn and grow as a person. The safer the community, the more learning will take place.

For example, one year one of my second-grade students had prosthetic legs from the knees down. On the first day of school we introduced ourselves and talked about ourselves. This young man told his classmates about his legs and how he dealt with them, giving an example of a mule ride he took to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. The other students asked many questions which he answered honestly and forthrightly. He was very independent and expected to be treated that way. This led to a great discussion on how we are all different and how we want to be treated by others. We brainstormed ways to be of assistance to him and to each

Character Education in Public Schools

Written by Judith Legerton

Tuesday, 22 October 2013 16:55

other, role-played them, and practiced them. Through these exercises, the students became more aware of and kinder to each other.

One day, one of the young man's prosthetic legs came off during recess. The other students retrieved it, gave it to him, and got a yard duty teacher to help him. They were protective of him and did not allow any other students to tease him. As this boy progressed in school, the students continued their close friendship with him, and no one teased or bothered him.

There are many other examples of how teachers deal with character education in the classroom. There are certain topics, such as bullying, that are more prevalent at school, so teachers will focus more on these issues that affect their students on a daily basis. They grab "teachable moments"—such as instances of bullying, stealing, or littering during recess and lunch—to engage in role-playing, show videos, do problem-solving exercises, have small group and whole class discussions, make posters to encourage and promote a desired behavior, hold hands-on activities to solve problems, and so on.



One time, I had a student who was bullied during lunch. After lunch, the whole class brainstormed together on how we could each help the student, the ways that the student could help himself, and what other students could do when they witnessed bullying. We made a poster of ways to help and put it up in front of the classroom, students wrote down the things they could do to help and pasted them on their desks, and they role-played what to do when certain situations arose—situations that they thought of themselves. We reviewed the list over the weeks that followed and reported back real-life success stories: how they either stood up for themselves, helped someone else, or reported the situation to a teacher when it was too big for them to handle on their own. So, although character education may not always be handled formally, it is taught through teachable moments and lessons that address what the students are facing at a given point in time.

In addition, I thought it was important that my students not only know how to respond to negative situations, but also how to create and appreciate positive ones. "Random Acts of Kindness" are rarely recognized, but I found that highlighting these acts was a good tool to encourage students to look for good in others and to motivate them to do good for others. At the beginning of the year, I would show my class a gold-colored coin and tell them that I would give it to someone who completed a "Random Act of Kindness," such as picking up trash, helping a fellow student on the yard, or helping a classmate with class work. When I saw a student doing such a good deed, I would give that student the coin in front of the entire class and tell everyone what that student did to earn it. Then that student would be in charge of the coin. When he or she found a classmate doing a good deed, he or she would have a few minutes to tell the class about the good deed and then give the coin to the deserving student.

Character Education in Public Schools

Written by Judith Legerton

Tuesday, 22 October 2013 16:55



~~Copyright © 2013 by Judith Legerton. All rights reserved. This document is for personal use only. No part of this document may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the author.~~