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Values: The Implicit Curriculum

A school's culture can help foster students' sense of personal and social responsibility.

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Whether teachers intend to or not, they teach values. Teachers' behaviors are, in fact, moral practices that are deeply embedded in the day-to-day functioning of the classroom (Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993). Likewise, a school's culture communicates values through the ways in which faculty, parents, and students treat one another and through school policies on such issues as discipline and decision making.

In his eight-year study of more than 1,000 classrooms, Goodlad found a "great hypocrisy" (1984, p. 241) in the differences between what schools espouse as values and what students experience. This disparity produces cynical students who don't take seriously what schools say about character (Postman & Weingartner, 1969).

At River School, a charter middle school of approximately 160 students, we work hard to develop an entire school culture that teaches character through the explicit curriculum of reading, writing, and arithmetic and through an implicit curriculum of values—what Adlerian psychologist Raymond Corsini called the implicit four Rs: responsibility, respect, resourcefulness, and responsiveness (Adler, 1927/1992; Ignas & Corsini, 1979). My introduction to this schoolwide approach to character education began 30 years ago when school director and Catholic nun Sr. Joan Madden, who was collaborating with Corsini in implementing what they called Individual Education, hired me as a teacher. She told me, "You are not teaching subjects. You are teaching who you are."

At River School, we rarely talk about character—nor do we have posters or pencils that trumpet values—because we know that the most effective character education is to model the values that we want to see in our students. We attempt to align every part of our school—from assessment to awards, from decision making to discipline—to encourage and foster students' character development. Our mission is to help students cultivate a strong sense of self through demonstrations of personal and social responsibility.

Fostering Personal Responsibility

We have barely spent a month in our school's new location when the fire alarm goes off. We have not yet established our safety protocols, and two of our students have pulled the fire



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alarm while horsing around, a typical middle school antic. Before I even get back to my office, the two students who pulled the alarm have voluntarily acknowledged the mistake that they made. They decide to “clean up their mistake” by apologizing to the affected people on campus, from the caretakers in the toddler program to the senior citizens in the Alzheimer's Center. One student voluntarily talks with the fire chief about her error. The mistake becomes an important lesson, as all mistakes should be.

These students are willing to be accountable for their actions. We view negative behavior as a sign of neediness, and we respond with positive contact, not just discipline of the behavior. Humans resist the diminution of spirit that comes with typical messages implying that they are “bad” or “wrong.” These students have instead heard a call to responsibility:

You made a mistake. To be human means making mistakes and learning from them.

What do you think you should do to clean up this mistake?

Teachers focus on creating an atmosphere in which it is emotionally safe to make mistakes. We acknowledge when we have made a mistake and work hard not to get angry at students' mistakes. Within this emotionally safe terrain, we hold students accountable for their actions, allowing them to experience appropriate and natural consequences. Parents know, for example, that they are not responsible for bringing their children's forgotten homework to school.

This view of responsibility is the essential notion of our systems approach to character and relates to our underlying assumption about human beings. Humans are self-determining creatures; we have free will to make choices. Because of our ability to think, discern, and reflect, we want to make our own choices.

If humans have free will and the capacity to choose, then experiencing the consequences of “good” or “poor” choices is how humans learn to make choices. At the River School, we organize our school's curriculum and culture to provide many age-appropriate choices so that students learn, through trial and error, what works and what doesn't work for growing as independent learners and human beings.

The middle school years are about testing limits and shedding the old skin of the elementary school years, and we expect our students to cross boundaries as a way to learn about choice, consequences, freedom, and responsibility. Students say that they notice that our discipline system is different because we treat them like adults, even when they don't act like adults. We trust in our students' innate ability to make good decisions for themselves—with practice over time.

We define responsibility as an attitude that reflects a willingness to see oneself as cause, instead of victim. Students who see themselves as active rather than passive don't blame others. They see the mistake or the situation as the result of the choices that they have made. If the situation is out of their control, they see their responses to the situation as their own choice to be positive or to be negative.

This approach lessens extrinsic control, nurtures our students' intrinsic motivation to learn, and

increases their self-confidence to meet and overcome challenges.

Fostering Social Responsibility

Self-determination is one side of human need; a sense of community and belonging is the other. Our vision of students developing fully as individuals cannot occur without the community being a safe place that accepts the different qualities of each individual. Particularly in middle school, we see students struggling to meet these two needs. They desperately want to belong, so they assume the external trappings and mannerisms of their peer group. At the same time, they try to break away from traditions and develop their individual identities.

To grow as individuals, students must believe that the school community accepts individual differences. One test of a school's effectiveness in teaching social responsibility is how well students treat those who are socially inept on the playground. Most of the time, our students respect one another. When they do not, the school community has opportunities to learn about making our school safe for everyone.

Last year, for example, students were picking on a classmate who we suspected had a mild form of autism. With the student's consent, we devoted several team meetings to helping the school community understand why he sometimes stared at others or made odd noises. As a result of these conversations, students began to include him at lunch tables, lessened the teasing considerably, and defended him when teasing occasionally occurred. Such open conversations help each student become aware of how he or she makes a difference to every other student in school.

How do we teach *responsiveness*, this value of being responsible for one another? We begin with the recognition that we need to fulfill our students' needs for significance ("I matter") and for belonging (being part of a community) by structuring the school's culture so that we listen to students, take their concerns seriously, and depend on them.

We organize students into homeroom advisories in which the homeroom teacher is their advocate. The homeroom groups further divide into smaller "listening groups" that meet every other week with their teachers to share concerns and acknowledge successes. These meetings provide one of the ways in which we allow students to participate in solving problems in the school.

In one case, for example, someone was trashing the boys' bathroom. Student advisories discussed the problem, and one homeroom class volunteered to monitor the bathrooms throughout the day. Instead of the unspoken code of silence often practiced by middle schoolers, students reported the boy involved because they trusted that he would be treated with respect in the discipline process. In another case, students disliked some features of the dress code that had been developed by the student council and teachers. Students presented a proposal for changes at a staff meeting and did such an outstanding job of responding to the purposes of the dress code that the changes were approved.

We also take time to listen to students' ideas and questions as we develop the school's curriculum, modeling responsiveness by taking their concerns seriously. We follow the

approach of the National Middle School Association (2002) to curriculum integration by asking students to develop their own questions for dealing with particular standards. The student question "What do you wish you could say but don't have the courage to say?" was the impetus for a unit last year that studied the First Amendment; various positions on evolution; and Galileo, Gandhi, Susan B. Anthony, and other figures who dared to take an unpopular stand.

If a student has problems with a teacher, he or she can call on a facilitator to mediate a conference. The purpose of a facilitating conference with a teacher is not to question his or her authority or to find out who is wrong and who is right. The goal of the conference is common understanding; the teacher works to understand the student's point of view and the student works to understand the teacher's point of view. Earlier this year, for example, a student felt picked on by his teacher and asked for a conference. Following the protocol of the facilitating conference, the teacher began with an "invitation" and asked, "What do you want to say to me?" After the student spoke, the teacher rephrased what the student said, and after the teacher spoke, the student rephrased what the teacher said. Through this active listening format, each came to a better understanding of the reasons for the other's behavior, and their relationship and classroom interactions improved.

We use this same conference format with students, faculty, and parents. Facilitators for conflicts are usually the advisors or the principal, with new teachers learning these communication skills primarily through observation and special training during faculty meetings. In some situations, students facilitate their own conflicts in listening groups, or they ask teachers to allow them time to do so. Last year, for example, two students began harassing each other on Halloween, when one laughed at the other's costume. When their conflict came to a head four months later, a facilitating conference helped them come to a resolution. They apologized to each other without being asked to and were friendly for the rest of the year.

Once understanding occurs, both sides can reach a solution together. Conflicts in the community become opportunities to learn how to deal with differences, to learn how to listen and solve problems. In this way, we empower our students to voice their beliefs and opinions more effectively. Whether expressing their beliefs and opinions about personal relationships, the dress code, or the First Amendment, students have to think through the logic and rationale of their position. This active engagement results in improved critical thinking skills, and the students develop a sense of responsibility for their community and their learning.

Students also learn that the community depends on them as they perform community chores, offer community service, and plan school meetings and events. When the school's environment meets students' needs for significance and belonging, students are more likely to cooperate with others and look toward the common good.

Throughout our school, the implicit message is clear: We deeply respect our students, not just because they are our students, but because all human beings have the right to be respected in these ways. The seminal ideas of our program are not new. We have simply translated them into practical, day-to-day applications embedded in the school setting so that the entire school's culture becomes our implicit curriculum. Everything that we do and say teaches

character.

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