How to Build a 36-Week Character Education Curriculum

Support K-12 Social Emotional Learning through a Critical Thinking Lens

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The Research Behind Character Education

Introduction

In the age of high-stakes testing and increasing academic expectations, the pressure placed on students, teachers, and school leaders to perform is significant. For students, this added pressure comes at a time during which they are already experiencing the pressures that come with childhood and adolescent development (Dumas, Ellis, & Wolfe, 2012; Killen, Rutland, Abrams, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2012). Academic progress and achievement often suffers during these foundational years as it is impacted by the emotional and social issues children and adolescents experience as these areas often overlap (Suldo, Gormley, DuPaul, & Anderson-Butcher, 2013). In efforts to address the needs of the whole child, educational goals have incorporated ideas of social and emotional learning to create "learning environments that optimize the social, emotional, physical, intellectual, and moral development of children" (Payton, Wardlaw, Graczyk, Bloodowrth, Tompsett, & Weissberg, 2000, p. 179). Because social emotional learning pays close attention to how students view and treat others, including themselves, to develop skills in relationships, problem solving and

working with others, ethical motivation to support these skills is necessary. Including an ethics component makes social emotional learning meaningful (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017). In addition, many of the skills associated with social emotional learning overlap with those of critical thinking, and can be reinforced at the same time. Research has shown that they positively influence one another and both serve to increase learning, achievement, college and career readiness, and other important twenty-first century skills (Arslan & Demirtas, 2016; Dymnicki, Samboldt, & Kidron, 2013; Varela, Kelcey, Reyes, Gould, & Sklar, 2013). By using critical thinking in a character education program to support social emotional learning, educators can address the social and emotional needs of students while building higher-level thinking skills. This type of program not only helps develop well-rounded individuals, but also helps improve learning, achievement, motivation, and behaviors toward themselves and others.

Social Emotional Learning

Social emotional learning is defined as the "process through which children and

adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, 2017). The idea is that in learning to understand and regulate their own emotions and feelings, while being mindful of the impact of their behavior, students will become better equipped to work individually and with others (Varela, Kelcey, Reyes, Gould, & Sklar, 2013; Zins & Elias, 2007). The term social emotional learning (SEL) was popularized in the 1990s, particularly with the formation of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (CASEL, 2017). SEL has implications for students, educators, classrooms, and schools. Though it is technically a non-academic area of competency, research shows that it positively impacts academic success in a wide variety of situations. Gifted students can benefit from SEL to help them interact with peers while learning to manage and balance their academic needs and their need to fit in with others their age (Clark, 2013). A study conducted at twenty-four high-risk elementary schools showed increases in math, reading, and writing skills at schools that implemented an SEL program. This occurred even though those areas were not specifically targeted (Schonfeld, et al., 2014). SEL has also been shown to improve the school environment by decreasing aggression in elementary students while simultaneously increasing their engagement (American Psychological Association, 2010).

The five competencies of SEL—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making—are supported from various theoretical vantage points (CASEL, 2017). Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory recognizes that zones of proximal development contain emotional elements, that these contribute to learning, and that when a child has positive emotional functioning, school performance improves (Miller, 2016). According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, security and safety must be in place to be able to belong, fulfill needs of esteem, then finally reach the place where an individual can achieve self-awareness, and realize his or her potential (Maslow, 1943). The competencies of SEL can be described by the interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences from Gardner's Multiple Intelligences. These address the abilities to "detect and respond appropriately to the moods, motivations, and desires of others...[and the ability to be] self-aware and in tune with inner feelings, values, beliefs, and thinking processes" (Northern Illinois University, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center, n.d., p. 1). The self-awareness competency of SEL includes confidence, optimism, and self-efficacy (CASEL, 2017). These are grounded in Bandura's Social Learning

Theory, which posits that self-efficacy (the belief that an individual can accomplish a desired goal set by oneself) and agency (the idea that an individual can impact one's surroundings), are vital for healthy cognitive development (Bandura, 1997; Bandura, 2006; Miller, 2016). The other competencies of SEL contain similar elements. Self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making relate to the observational learning facet of Social Learning theory in that by interaction and observation, individuals learn how to control their behaviors and interact with one another to meet societal expectations and achieve acceptance (CASEL, 2017; Miller, 2016).

As students gain proficiency in these areas, the opportunity to improve the school climate and culture is evident. A school culture where these traits are prominent is the kind of culture needed for critical thinking to grow and thrive, since SEL and critical thinking are interrelated.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking traces its roots back to Socrates when he introduced his methods of questioning, reasoning, and supporting arguments (Schneider, 2013). It has endured over time as a vital element of academic success, but has garnered increased attention in recent years as more rigorous educational standards have been introduced (Facione, 1990; Gromley, 2017). Critical thinking has acquired prominence as a vital twenty-first century skill that involves analyzing, questioning, and evaluating problems, solutions, and perspectives (Jenkins & Andenoro, 2016; Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2015). These higher-order thinking skills involved in critical thinking help students perform better and are vital for college and career readiness (Barnett & Francis, 2011; Lombardi, Kowitt, & Staples, 2014).

In efforts to develop critical thinking skills in students, educators focus on teaching students to view a problem from multiple perspectives and explain why an answer is reasonable or why a specific process makes sense (Butera et al., 2014). Questions that promote critical thinking are those that require reflection and depth of thought. An important goal of incorporating critical thinking–based questions is to solicit responses that include justification for a solution or position. Further questions should prompt students to consider the implications of their responses (Maina, Maina, & Hunt, 2016). By articulating potential implications, students connect the problem or situation to their own knowledge and experience, adding a crucial real-world application with relevance. Research shows that when students understand how a concept applies to them, they become more engaged and retain what is learned to a much greater degree than otherwise (Freeman & Wash, 2013).

Character Education

Critical thinking–based character education uses the techniques involved in the critical thinking process to explore traits that align with the goals of SEL for individuals and school culture. By incorporating this type of character education, students and educators can apply higher-order thinking in daily classroom activities. This provides an opportunity to create a culture in which character traits are thoughtfully considered and applied to students' lives. As these critical thinking skills are practiced within character education, SEL goals can be achieved.

Character education that uses critical thinking assists in developing the potential of the whole child. It helps students learn to positively interact with others and constructively respond to life situations while building reasoning and thinking skills and promoting deeper understanding. Applying the principles of critical thinking to character education affords students, teachers, and leaders opportunities to gain greater insight into important character traits. Building up these character traits offers benefits to individual students and the school culture while supporting SEL.

The Department of Education defines character education as "a learning process that enables students and adults in a school community to understand, care about and act on core ethical values such as respect, justice, civic virtue and citizenship, and responsibility for self and others. Upon such core values, we form the attitudes and actions that are the hallmark of safe, healthy and informed communities that serve as the foundation of our society" (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Character education can have positive implications in the classroom as well as in the lives of students. Educational research shows that the inclusion of character education into the curriculum can reduce negative classroom behaviors (Snyder, Acock, Vuchinich, Beets, Eashburn, & Flay, 2013), increase academic achievement, and promote social emotional well-being (Bavarian et al., 2013). Further research indicates that character education is an important contributor to college and career readiness (Souder & Seider, 2013).

The insight gained and skills learned from a critical thinking–based approach to character education can help students take ownership in their personal character development as well as lay a foundation for academic and future career success as critical thinkers. The suggested activities that follow offer simple, yet effective means to engage student thinking, promote discussion and collaboration, encourage creativity, and allow students to use a critical lens in applying the character traits in the classroom and daily lives.

Build Your Own Character Education Program

Customize a year-long character education program for your classroom or school using these lists of suggested traits and activities. Consider that an effective character education program:

- Focuses on character education as a school-wide initiative that includes parents and the community

- Allocates time and resources for training and planning for school faculty and staff to develop an integrated character education plan

- Extends into extra-curricular events and seeks support from local businesses, government, media, and community members

Adapt for Your School and Classroom

- Choose one character trait to focus on each week.

- Incorporate character trait lessons into daily classroom activities.

- Partner with other teachers to promote grade-level and school-wide collaboration.

- Include the weekly character trait in school functions, such as assemblies, concerts, and pep-rallies.

36 Character Traits to Teach Students

This list contains suggested traits from which teachers and school leaders may choose to meet the needs of their students and educational programs. There are many other traits not on this list that may also be part of a character education program. Depending on the allotted focus time per trait, not all traits will be used and some may be used in combination.

1. Accountability
2. Bravery
3. Care
4. Collaboration
5. Commitment
6. Compassion
7. Creativity
8. Dedication
9. Determination
10. Discipline
11. Encouragement
12. Empathy
13. Enthusiasm
14. Ethicality
15. Fairness
16. Faithfulness
17. Friendliness
18. Generosity
19. Genuineness
20. Gratitude
21. Hard Work
22. Honesty
23. Honorableness
24. Integrity
25. Intentionality
26. Joy
27. Kindness
28. Love
29. Perseverance
30. Politeness
31. Productivity
32. Responsibility
33. Serving others
34. Sincerity
35. Trustworthiness
36. Willingness

36 Suggested Activities and Projects

Suggested activities can be adapted for various grade levels and address multiple learning styles and preferences. These activities may encompass one or more character traits. Individual and small group activities are included and may be modified to meet individual student needs. The time frame and duration of each activity can be customized to meet the educational goals and standards of each school, grade-level, and classroom.

Blog About It

Each student writes a blog post that uses his or her own words to define and describe the character trait and includes examples of how the character trait can be demonstrated. Blog posts may be posted online on a teacher-created blog, or on paper as part of a wall mural in the classroom or school.

Just Tweet It

Each student composes a 140-character "tweet" with advice on how to exhibit the character trait in and out of class. "Tweets" may be posted digitally with teacher discretion, as part of a slide show to display in class, or as sticky notes posted on the classroom door.

Poster Campaign

Students work in small groups to create a poster campaign to raise awareness for the designated character trait. Posters define and describe the character trait and explain its importance. Posters may be displayed in the classroom or around the school.

Mini-Documentaries

Students work in small groups to create 5-minute "mini-documentaries" that are educational in nature to teach the meaning of and the importance of the character trait. These may be recorded or presented in-person in front of a class.

Acrostic

Students use each letter of the character trait to form a word or phrase that relates to or demonstrates the character trait. Students create posters or digital displays of their acrostics. These may be displayed and presented in the classroom or around the school.

Live Action Demos

Students work with partners or in small groups to create live action demonstrations of the character trait. Students present their demonstrations to the class.

📚 Literary Character

Each student chooses a literary character* who exemplifies the character trait. Students write a short essay describing how the literary character exhibits the trait using specific examples from the text. The essays may be shared with the class, and displayed, if desired.

*Option: The teacher may provide a list of literary texts from which students choose their literary characters. This can support current instructional goals and objectives.

🏛 Historical Figure

Students work individually or with partners to select a historical figure* who exemplifies the character trait. Students create a presentation (poster, tri-fold board, or multi-media) or compose an essay that explains how the chosen historical figure demonstrates the character trait, citing specific examples.

*Option: To support current instruction, the teacher may select a specific historical event or time period from which students choose historical figures.

👥 Someone You Know

Students work individually or with partners to select someone they know who personifies this character trait. Students design posters or multi-media presentations that introduce their chosen individual* and explain, with examples, how this person demonstrates the given character trait. Students present their work to the class.

*Option: In addition, students create character awards to be presented to the chosen individuals.

👩‍🏫 Character Experiment

Students work in small groups to design an experiment that observes and records the results of exemplifying the character trait in real life. For example, groups select one or two members to perform random acts of kindness while the other students observe and record responses from the recipients. After the experiment, students organize and report their findings. Students answer probing questions such as:

- What do the results of your experiment tell you about the impact of exhibiting this character trait? Explain.
- What would happen if this character trait was demonstrated daily in our school? Why?

❓ Survey

Students work in small groups to conduct a survey explaining what the character trait means to students. Groups create 1–3 multiple-choice questions to poll other students. The findings of the survey may be presented in charts, graphs, or dot plots.

⚙ Act on It

The teacher and students discuss the character trait and its meaning. Students write an essay or journal response to the prompt: *Now that you know about this character trait, what are you going to do about it?*

🦁 Character Tale

Students write a story in which the main character or characters embodies this trait. The story should include the consequences of the main character or characters demonstrating the trait.

💬 Imagine

What would the world be like if this character trait were nonexistent? Students work individually, with partners, or in small groups to brainstorm, discuss, and describe how the world might be if the character trait was nonexistent or ceased to exist. Students present their ideas to the class for further discussion.

🤔 Reflection

In personal journals, students write a reflection and self-evaluation on how they do or do not demonstrate the chosen character trait. As part of the reflection, students identify some ideas for personal growth in this area.

🖼️ Art

Students create works of art representing the chosen character trait. Paintings, drawings, sculptures, photography compositions, or music may be included with teacher approval. Students display their work in an art show.

📝 Exposition

Each student composes an expository essay on the character trait. The essay should explain the meaning of the character trait and how it may be exemplified. Three outside resources should be used and cited.

💡 Application

Students work individually, with partners, or in small groups to brainstorm ways to apply the chosen character trait in mathematics (or another specified subject). Students share and discuss their ideas with the class.

👉 Caught Showing Character

Each student nominates a classmate who exemplifies the chosen character trait. The nomination should include specific examples of how this student demonstrates the trait. The teacher posts nominations in the classroom or hallway.

☑️ To Do List

As a class, students brainstorm ways to bring the chosen character trait to life in the classroom. With guidance from the teacher, students discuss and refine the ideas, and create a "to do" list to post in class or in the hallway.

🌈 Imagine If

Students work in small groups to brainstorm an imaginary chain reaction scenario about what could happen if everyone exhibited this character trait. Groups share their ideas with the class.

🙋 Community Service

Students work in small groups to generate ideas for community service projects to put the chosen character trait into action. Groups share their ideas with the class. Guided by the teacher, the class chooses a project to implement. After the project is completed, students write essays describing how the demonstrating the character trait in the community had a positive impact.

📰 Newsworthy

Students write letters to the editor of the local newspaper describing a specific trait, its importance, and how they plan to develop the character trait.

🎬 Movie Characters

Students work in small groups to create a movie trailer for the focus character trait. The trailer should define and demonstrate the trait. Groups present their movie trailers at a classroom red-carpet style premier event.

💻 Go Digital

As a class, start a school e-zine or webpage for a chosen character trait with its description, its importance, and tips on demonstrating the trait in everyday life. The e-zine or webpage may be continued to include previous and subsequent traits. Students contribute blog articles, artwork, and other items to publish.

🎼 Music

Students work individually, with partners, or in small groups to create and perform a song or rap about a specified trait.

📓 Poetry

Students compose poems about a selected character trait. The poems may be compiled to create a book (print or online). Students share their poems at a poetry reading.

📖 Dictionary

Students compile a character trait dictionary. Students create dictionary entries for each character trait that include a definition, an example, and an illustration. The teacher compiles the entries into a class dictionary that can be displayed in the classroom.

📺 Breaking News

Students work in small groups to produce and present a live or recorded newscast that covers the focus character trait. The newscasts may be aired on a class or school website.

🔍 Etymology

Students research the etymology of the name of the chosen character trait. Students write an essay or journal entry on the origins of the trait's name, how it has or has not changed over time, and what the character trait personally means.

🃏 Game Night

Students work with partners or in small groups to create a board game using a focus character trait and other focus character traits. Students include a set of rules with their games. The class hosts a game event in which students play each other's games.

💥 Super Character

Students create a superhero character that personifies a selected character trait. Students include a drawing or digitally created image, and explain how the appearance and behavior of the cartoon character demonstrate the character trait. Students display their superheroes in the class.

👕 T-Shirt Campaign

Conduct a class project to design a t-shirt that promotes a chosen character trait. The class selects one or more designs to be printed on t-shirts. The shirts may be worn as a class.

Recipe for Character

Students work individually or with partners to create a "recipe" for a chosen character trait. The recipe includes a description of each ingredient and its amount. The teacher may compile the recipes into a classroom recipe book.

Comic Strip Character

Students work with partners to design a comic strip that demonstrates the chosen character trait. The comic strips are displayed in the classroom or in the hallway.

Graffiti Wall

The teacher designates a graffiti wall using butcher paper to cover a large wall space, either in the classroom or in the hallway. Students create graffiti art depicting the character trait. This may remain on the wall to include other character traits, if desired.

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