

A School of Fish: A Lesson in Character Development

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The public appears to support the desire of many educators for a return to the teaching of ethics. This support is demonstrated by the resounding success of books related to values and ethics, such as Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*,¹ Bennett's *A Children's Book of Virtues*, Edelman's *The Measure of Our Success*, and Taulbert's *Eight Habits of the Heart*, to name a few.² Incidents such as the shootings in Littleton, Colorado, and other similar events alert us to the importance of helping students develop ethics in their lives. In many school districts, teachers are strongly encouraged to teach character education, yet many wonder how they can squeeze this admittedly important item into an already overloaded curriculum. How can we get a handle on the huge task of helping our students develop good character?

Character Education and the School Curriculum

Educators across the nation, from Missouri to Arizona, are using Stephen Covey's rather comprehensive model of ethics as described in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* as the basis for lessons on good character traits. Briefly, the model suggests that one can become effective by developing one's own personal strength or sense of integrity and then expanding one's influence outward to develop trust in interpersonal relationships, empowerment in managerial relationships (fostering interdependence and mutual growth), and alignment among the formal and informal groups and organizations in which one participates (for example, family, clubs, and community groups). Because it organizes cohesively several different ideas, this model provides ready access to beliefs and practices that correlate with responsibility and freedom, equality, community, and teamwork—values that are regularly taught in many homes and religious organizations.

Covey's model, however, is not tied specifically to any one religious practice, but embraces values and principles at the heart of all of the world's major moral systems. Consequently, the model could be described as multicultural in origin. When I taught the 7 Habits as the "Secrets of Success" over a ten-week period of time to 2nd, 3rd, and 4th graders, I heard no objection to the content among families in the multicultural neighborhood of Charles J. Carver Elementary School in Cerritos, California. The ideas appear to be acceptable to individuals of good will from diverse backgrounds.

A Less-Formal Approach

Students could be taught essential character traits in a formal curriculum of study,³ but my approach is more informal: I encourage students to discuss the traits and to find them reflected in literature and history during weekly one-hour sessions. Research on this later approach seems to show it to be effective. For example, results from surveys that I sent to the students' families at the end of the informal course revealed that most parents or guardians considered their children to be more serious about school, more tolerant of others, and more willing to stick with a difficult situation after these sessions than they had been before the course.⁴ Moreover, some parents said to me that their children generally demonstrated a more positive and happy overall attitude than they had before the study. Interviews with their teachers confirmed the parent observations of more positive characteristics among the children and revealed that the students exhibited genuine pride about learning such "adult" material.

