

Character Education Provides Focus for Advisory

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Daniel Deitte

Ten character traits get emphasized in advisory: respect, perseverance, integrity, citizenship, trustworthiness, responsibility, compassion, honesty, self-discipline, and fairness.

When I was first hired as a middle school sixth grade teacher, I was thrilled. This was a position I had coveted for over four years. In my mind, the middle school was the best of all worlds for the following reasons: team planning time, individual preparation time, students are developmentally in a stage where they are willing to listen to their teachers, and the students' intellectual level appealed to me. Soon after I started, however, I realized that one piece was missing; we did not have a strong advisory program. Yes, we had a structured advisory period for 29 minutes at the end of every day, but there was very little focus to our advisory. Something needed to be done about the lack of interest and focus during that time.

As I spoke about this with several of my colleagues, something else became very apparent to me ... none of us had a clear picture of what was supposed to happen in a true advisory program. In our middle school, it had become a tradition to have one day a week of S.Q.U.I.R.T. (Super Quiet Uninterrupted ReadinG Time), three days of silent study hall, and one day of a planned activity. When we sat down to "plan" our activities, it was like pulling teeth without any Novocaine! Worse yet, most of the activities planned did not teach any objectives. For example, one activity had students look at a blank map of the school and fill in all of the areas that sixth graders used. To try to make the activity appealing, we made it into a contest. I can remember thinking that I would not have wanted to do this activity as a sixth grader myself. Many of the teachers were happy just to fill the schedule with any activity so it could be handed into the office and be done.

The worst part about running the advisory I described above was that I found myself dreading the last 29 minutes of each day. Inevitably, I had students who did not want to participate in S.Q.U.I.R.T, or who never had any homework to do. Additionally, somewhere, early in my first year of teaching, I had decided that my advisory time would be a quiet time with the students needing permission to speak. In order to achieve this, I found myself yelling and constantly getting frustrated with the students. They did not like this time, and it was apparent that I did not like it either. The part that I found the most troubling was that my job as an advisor was to be the one adult on whom my advisees could count, and even though this responsibility was appealing to me, it was not a reality. We had no unity at all. It was simply a time to show up, and when the clock hit 3:00, they would run to get out of the room as quickly as possible. After two years of drudging through my advisory in this fashion, I decided it was time to take some action and change its structure.



PREPARING TO MAKE A CHANGE

A few fortuitous events occurred that acted as catalysts to this needed change. First, as luck would have it, a teacher on the other sixth grade team took a year of leave, and my position was switched. In my new assignment, I would now be teaching all of the language classes. That meant every student in my advisory would also have me for at least one class. In prior years, I did not necessarily teach every student. This had caused a major problem because I did not have that “teaching connection” with all of my advisees. Secondly, I received administrative approval to conduct my advisory differently from all the others. This “open door approval” gave me confidence that the principal was supportive of me trying a new approach.

My first plan of action in making my change was to do some heavy research over the summer. I did not have a clear understanding of what an advisor’s role was. The Internet provided me with resources that would help me move toward this goal. My first task was to find a definition of an advisory that matched my beliefs. I found this definition to be the following: “An organizational structure in which one small group of students identifies with and belongs to one educator, who nurtures, advocates for, and shepherds through school the individual in that group” (Cole, 1992, p. 5). Furthermore, I found that, “Advisories should help students develop meaningful interpersonal relationships” (Dale, 1995, p. 3). Lastly, “Activities should be provided . . . that lead to the development of positive attitudes, values, and emotional control” (Connors, 1990, p. 165). These definitions clicked immediately with me. It was that affective domain that seemed to need the most work with middle school students. It did not take me long to realize that my focus for advisory would be character education, teamwork, and community building. My intuition led me to believe that the latter two would occur as a direct result of character education. As I delved deeper into my research, I found that out of 9,000 letters sent from middle school students to their U.S. Representatives, “Over 15% were concerned about their home and school environments” (Hoversten, Doda, & Lounsbury, 1991, p. 9). The question I formulated from all of my research, which would be the root of my year-long inquiry, was, “Will the development of character education, in the sixth grade advisory, create a strong sense of community, nurture teamwork, and help develop a sense of pride between each student and his/her fellow advisees?” This became my focus for the 2000-2001 school year.

With this research supporting and affirming the importance of developing an advisory, my next task was to figure out how I would go about facilitating the implementation of character education into this advisory. I knew I did not want it to be in a lecture format. The last thing I wanted was to conduct lectures, and then to require them to take notes. My feelings were that I would quickly lose the kids if I tried this type of structure. Then I found a book written by Tom Jackson that discussed the importance of “Active Learning.” Jackson wrote, “Active Learning has people participate in their own learning process by involving them in some type of activity where they physically become a part of the lesson” (Jackson, 1995, p. 2). I knew I had what I wanted; I would use Active Learning to foster character, teamwork, and community building. I remember feeling the excitement building inside of me after having found a place to begin.



Also in my research, I learned that, “Making sure the parents are aware of what their son or daughter will be experiencing in their advisory is vital” (Dale, 1995, p. 6). Before the school year began, I sent out a letter to my advisees and parents outlining who I was, what my role was as an advisor, the purpose of an advisory, and that character education would be the major theme. This was the first time I had ever sent such a letter. I also purchased different posters, banners, and bulletin board signs promoting character education. I felt that it was important to create the physical environment with these types of messages. That way, the students would be reminded of it regularly. I was especially happy with the bulletin board which displayed the ten character traits I would be emphasizing: respect, perseverance, integrity, citizenship, trustworthiness, responsibility, compassion, honesty, self-discipline, and fairness. Later, I discovered that I would often refer to the board during my advisory time and other class times as well.

INTRODUCING CHARACTER EDUCATION

Feeling confident that I was ready to take on this new challenge, I welcomed in the 2000-2001 school year. Immediately, I started to build a bond with my advisees. We started the year doing an activity I had learned from my Master’s of Education classes taken from Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota. The activity was called “Polaroid Pals.” I used a camera to take a picture of each advisee. Then I put each picture in a box, and the students picked their “Polaroid Pal.” Each pair received an interview sheet, and they asked each other questions that allowed them to get to know one another. The activity was a complete success. The tone of my advisory started out just the way I had hoped; we all shared things that were important to us. Another activity I implemented at the beginning of the year was using an “All About Me” board. On this board, students gave answers to the following statements: the best thing about me is, the names of my family members are, my favorite book is, my favorite color is, my favorite sport is, when I grow up I want to be, I’m special because, the place I’d most like to visit is, and my favorite food is. I was the first to be displayed, so the students had an opportunity to learn who I was. Then, in subsequent weeks, each advisee was scheduled to be on the board. (Editor’s Note: see pp. 17-19 for a discussion of First Amendment issues related to assignments like this.) Both of the activities described above contributed to a strong sense of community.

One very important item I included in the first week was to help the students set the weekly schedule for our advisory. I knew that Mondays were already designated as all-school S.Q.U.I.R.T. I believed very strongly that my advisees needed some study hall days, but not necessarily three times a week. Together we decided to make Tuesdays and Thursdays our study hall days. Wednesdays and Fridays became our activity days. I was sure to let the students make their own choices to promote ownership. Finally, we took a couple days to learn the character traits that were displayed on the bulletin board. I used mini-plays to help us discuss the ten traits. For example, I gave groups of three a mini-play, and each group then role played in front of the class. When the role playing was finished, we had a discussion about which traits were displayed. Through this process, the students became familiar with the ten areas. This, of course, was an essential piece. I had to be sure each advisee understood the meaning of each trait.



Since Active Learning requires students to participate physically, we found ourselves going outside or into the gym on most activity days. We began our first activity by forming a big circle. I provided a large piece of rope that was tied together. The students were to stand on the outside of the rope, hang on with their hands, and lean back. The idea was that if all the students leaned back at the same time, everyone would be supported. The first attempt was a total flop. We had students leaning, jumping, shouting, and just plain horsing around. I still remember looking at that scene and wondering how they were ever going to get anything accomplished. On the second attempt, the students did not fare much better, but more students did give it a valiant effort. After the second failed attempt, however, something interesting happened; one girl decided to set some rules on how to achieve this challenge. She led the others, explaining that everybody had to listen and lean at the same time on her count. It was utterly amazing! Within five seconds, all of the students were leaning in unison. The students held that position for over two minutes. I finally told them they could stop. We all returned to my classroom. Then we followed with one of the most important parts of the challenge—oral reflection.

I asked the students why they thought it had been so hard on the first and second attempts. Many felt that nobody had taken it seriously enough, and that everybody was doing their “own thing.” Then, we talked about why they were successful. One student raised his hand and said it was because they had all listened to Ashley. I asked the students if they could pick out some of the character traits that had been worked on with the activity. They decided that respect, perseverance, trustworthiness, responsibility, and self-discipline all played a big part in the success of the challenge. I was truly shocked at how perceptive the kids were. This one Active Learning challenge made me want to provide more. I’m sure the students could see the enthusiasm on my face.

Based on the rope activity described above, I decided this was definitely how I would conduct my advisory challenges for the rest of the year. We continued these challenges twice a week. Slowly, the students started to set rules to help them know how to act such as each person being responsible for holding up his or her end of the bargain. To me, that is what helps make character. This is not to say that you cannot be a team player, but good character says that it is up to the individual to make sound choices for how each should act.

I can also remember when we went into the gym to try the “human knot activity.” In this challenge, each student was to get into a human knot by crossing arms while interlocking a right hand to another’s left hand. After all the students were in the knot, they had to find a way out. They were not very successful, but they sure did try.

After about two minutes of trying with no avail, I stepped in at this time and directed them to start over. As in almost every other instance, a leader stepped forward. She explained how she thought they could complete the challenge activity. Attempt number two was tried, and, once again, it did not work. Kids were getting all twisted, falling down on the ground, and giving up.



By now, the time was slipping away from us, and I suggested that maybe we should stop and try the challenge again on a different day. Almost without missing a beat, everyone begged me to let them try one last time (the students' determination amazed me). The leader called out a few more instructions, and they did give it one last try. As you might have guessed, they were successful the third time. When the challenge had been completed, every student cheered and gave high fives to one another. A true sense of community was forming.

Because of time restraints, we did not discuss the challenge until the next day, but I was impressed with how the vocabulary of my advisees was increasing; many of their discussions incorporated the character traits without my interjecting them. Most of the students felt self-discipline and perseverance were two of the most important traits exhibited for the human knot challenge. After school dismissed for the day, I remember thinking to myself that there was no better way that I could have taught perseverance and self-discipline. This unique way of teaching the traits was not just working, but was working better than I could ever have imagined.

It is equally important to discuss what it was like the three other days we were not doing activities. The S.Q.U.I.R.T. time each Monday was not a problem for me. As I think back to prior years, this was the first time I could say that silent reading was not causing me any undue stress. The kids found themselves a book, and, for the most part, read without incident. As for the study hall days, most students came with work to do. Even though not everyone worked on homework, they buried themselves in quiet activities such as reading, helping me in the classroom, or helping out their fellow advisees with homework. I certainly did not find myself having to yell and scream for the students to behave. As I look back, not having to exhibit these behaviors made me feel like a much better person, advisor, and teacher. I was no longer trying to control the students' behaviors; they were exhibiting self-control, and this self-control got stronger as the year progressed.

NEW ADVISORY CHANGES STUDENTS

Another change from past years was the absence of put-downs being verbalized in my advisory. Students seemed to be respecting each other. Of course, I attribute this behavior to my work on building character, community, and teamwork.

One of my biggest transformational moments came in December of 2000. Daily, I had been observing the students in my advisory being respectful to each other and displaying many of the other character traits. During the last two weeks before the winter holiday break, I announced that we were going to have a holiday door decorating contest in the sixth grade. My advisees perked right up at the thought of doing this fun and challenging activity. In my mind, I anticipated this would be great for community building, but it would not specifically be working any of the character traits. To my surprise, on the next day, ten of my advisees came bursting through my classroom door. They had with them a card that had a Santa Claus in mid-air falling off of a cliff with his reindeer pulling as hard as they could to get him back to safety. This, however, was not what the kids were excited about. It was the single word on top of the card that these students wanted me to see—it read "TEAMWORK." They were so proud to have found an idea that promoted the very heart of what we had been working on all year. The most amazing part of it was that *they* had initiated the idea. We did decorate our door with the theme from the card, and everybody pitched in to make it the most amazingly decorated door I have ever seen. It was at this point that I knew,



without any doubt, that what we had been doing all year was working. It is hard for me to put into words the emotions I felt from this new realization.

Another observation I had, when comparing the way I used to run advisory to my new advisory structure, was how much better my advisees did on school-wide activities. Some activities, such as donating food to the local food shelf, went better for me this year compared to any other. We tripled the amount of food brought in by my advisory kids from prior years. Also, for the first time, we sponsored kids from a local agency for Christmas. This meant that we, as an advisory, pledged to buy presents for three young children so they would have items to open on Christmas Day. The outpouring of gifts and love from my advisory students was phenomenal. They went above and beyond what I had hoped. Personally, I do not believe this was a fluke. I attribute this to the class unity, character building, and teamwork, which helped bring our advisory together as one. When engaged in activities such as the ones described above, they reminded me of a finely-oiled machine. In prior years, I may have gotten some kids to participate but not more than 50%. This year, I can honestly say that nearly 100% of my advisees have participated in all of the activities offered to them.

I have not had the opportunity to talk about the other roles I played as the students' advisor. According to Dale (1995):

There are seven main goals of an advisory which assist students in understanding themselves and others, and they include the following items: developing self-concept and self-esteem, developing interpersonal skills, developing decision-making skills, providing students with an adult advocate, creating a sense of family within the school community, and monitoring students' academic programs and grades. (p. 4)

The days we were not doing an activity, I was monitoring each student's academic progress. I felt very strongly that an advisory needed to be balanced. At the beginning and midway points of the year, we did goal setting. I also answered questions the students had because they were new to the building and did many other housekeeping items that needed to be done throughout the school year. In no way was my advisory just activities. I stuck to my plan of having activities two days a week. Two of the other days were reserved for academic building, housekeeping items, and advisory celebrations.

In retrospect, I have already decided I would do some things differently next year. First, I never did get a baseline of my advisees at the beginning of the school year. Most of my "proof" that the students grew was through observations, actions of the students, and the students' own written reflections. In the first month of school I plan to keep track of the verbal use of the character traits, specific behaviors that do or do not exhibit good character, and how strong the classroom community is. Hopefully, this will give me a way to better measure growth throughout the year. The second change I plan to implement is to track my advisory better in their other classes. I would like to take the time to see how much of what they are learning in advisory has carried over into other areas. My goal would be to find if there is a pattern of behavior between advisory time and the rest of the day.



FINAL THOUGHTS

In summary, I implemented a new approach to my advisory program for the 2000-2001 school year. Instead of having a strict study hall as I had done in past years, I decided to incorporate character education, teamwork, and community building. My role as an advisor became that of a facilitator. Furthermore, I also knew that I did not want to use the standard teaching style of introducing a trait in isolation followed by lecture. Instead, I used the Active Learning model to teach character education whereby students actually participated in challenges to learn the traits. That way, in the reflective discussion afterwards, the students had real-life examples from which to draw. Finally, I have seen significant changes in my advisees from the beginning of the year; students respect each other more, use the character education traits both in their vocabulary and their actions, and have shown outstanding participation in school-wide outreach activities, such as the food drive. Without the changes implemented in my advisory, I am certain this would not have happened. Personally, I do not think I could ever go back to conducting my advisory the way I had the first two years. For the first time, I feel that my advisory has a clear purpose; to facilitate the affective, academic, and emotional growth in these young adults. What a great feeling it is to know that I am making a difference as an advisor.

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Daniel Deitte, a former middle school teacher in Litchfield, Minnesota, is principal of Milroy Public School, Milroy, Minnesota. E-mail: ddeitte@milroy.mntm.org

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