The Development of Compassion in a Basic School:

A Qualitative Study

Mari L. Hauf

Education 483 – Senior Seminar

Gayle Luck, Ph. D

December 14, 2007

Abstract

Character development is important in order to create responsible, successful, compassionate citizens. The Basic School philosophy, which Weber Elementary has adopted, supports educating the child intellectually, socially, and ethically. Core Virtues have been established within Weber to support character education. Research has shown that a strong school community supports an effective character education program. Weber Elementary has established this strong sense of community as a Basic School, however, further development of its character development program may be necessary.

The Development of Compassion in a Basic School:

A Qualitative Study

Irving B. Weber Elementary is a well-kept building serving an affluent neighborhood of Iowa City, Iowa. It is a mid-sized school enrolling 492 students. The population of the school is predominantly Caucasian at 67%.The second largest ethnic population is Asian at 21%. The remaining 12% of the student population is a representation of African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students. With the University of Iowa nearby, many parents of Weber students are professors or graduate students. The support that university-affiliated parents provide in their homes creates an expectation that students at Weber Elementary will be academically successful. However, there is more to a child than just academic success! Teachers need to be able to educate their students intellectually, socially and ethically, so they may become successful citizens within their country.

Weber Elementary is founded on the philosophy of the Basic School. The Basic School concept is based on research by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; Ernest L. Boyer, lead researcher. The Basic School philosophy supports educating the entire child (intellectually, socially and ethically) and creating excellence for all by focusing on four priorities for an effective education. The Weber Community of students, staff, and parents labeled these priorities as the 4 C's, which are to connect people to create *community*, connect curriculum to achieve *coherence*, connect classrooms and resources to enrich the *climate*, and connect learning to life to build *character*. In order to follow the fourth priority and build students' character, the Weber faculty is encouraged to support instruction and continuous practice of "core virtues" which were stated by Boyer. These core virtues include respect, perseverance, honesty,

responsibility, self-discipline, giving, and compassion. Teachers post the core virtues in their classroom and discuss what the virtues mean with students during the first weeks of school.

It is my belief that the core virtue compassion is difficult to observe in the world. It is hard to believe that our own children demonstrate so much violence and lack of caring for others. The fact that media messages portray, and often glorify, violent actions and negative behavior for children may provide reasons for children's violence and lack of caring. This can be seen both in this generation of children as well as to other generations within our country. Many Americans are self-centered and would not think twice about ignoring their neighbors or other citizens who may be in need. In a world of warfare, poverty, homelessness, and a lack of community commitment, the development of compassion in the human soul is a necessity that takes an essential role within a moral and democratic education for students. *How does the Basic School philosophy support character education and the development of compassion as a core virtue in its children?*

Literature Review

An explanation of the philosophy of the Basic School in regard to character development, how to develop character education, and what defines compassion in our culture are important to the research in this paper.

The Basic School philosophy is founded on the following four priorities: connect people to create community, connect curriculum to achieve coherence, connect classrooms and resources to enrich the climate, and connect learning to life to build character. One priority stated by Ernest L. Boyer in his book, <u>The Basic School: A Community for Learning</u> (1995), is a "Commitment to Character" in order to support students' discovery of themselves as well as their social and ethical responsibilities. Boyer (1995) believes that without the moral and character education from the Basic Schools, children will grow up to express "information without knowledge, knowledge

without wisdom, [and] competence without conscience" (p. 176). The Basic School philosophy supports a heightened responsibility to educate the whole child. The Basic School helps to develop children academically, but it also believes the responsibility to "help children develop the capacity to live responsibly and judge wisely in matters of life and conduct" (Boyer, 1995, p. 176).

The Basic School is a community for living, "where everyone comes together to promote learning. Every classroom itself is a community" (Boyer, 1995, p. 15). The vision of the basic school, as stated by Boyer, is a shared sense of community that can be seen by the connective and collaborative classrooms. In order for this sense of community to be successful, a Basic School needs to establish a "*sense of place*- a facility that is functional and aesthetically appealing." It must also be organized around the people who make up the community, as well as "around relationships and ideas" (Boyer, 1995, p. 17). To determine if a Basic School has established an effective community, Boyer (1995) suggests six key conditions: "*purposeful* place, a *communicative* place, a *just* place, a *disciplined* place, a *caring* place, and a *celebrative* place" (p. 18). Good schools help to teach and ensure the values of the community.

Boyer (1996) suggests in his article "The Commitment to Character: A Basic Priority for Every School" from the journal *Update on Law-Related Education* that if students do not acquire knowledgeable values such as "commitment to learning, objectivity, respect for the truth, and humility in the face of facts" then "critical-thinking strategies will only amount to one more gimmick in the curriculum" (p. 6). The basic values established within schools come from the community, and even though this may be difficult to define, are necessary. National organizations such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and the Character Education Partnership are dedicated to defining these values for education. The mission statement

from the Character Education Partnership demonstrates dedication to this work: "develop civic virtue and moral character in our youth for a more compassionate and responsible society" (Boyer, 1996, p. 7). The Basic School is "concerned with the ethical and moral dimensions of a child's life…Seven core virtues…are emphasized to guide the Basic School as it promotes excellence in living, as well as learning" (Boyer, 1995, p. 173).

Pedro Ortega Ruiz and Ramon Minguez Vallejos (1999), authors of the article entitled "The Role of Compassion in Moral Education" claim that moral education includes beliefs and values that need to be taught and practiced by students "so that a greater self-sufficiency in moral judgment is developed along with… responsible and mature behavior" (p. 6). Researchers Schaps, Battistich, and Solomon in their chapter from Alex Molnar's book The Construction of Children's Character (1997), take the stance that students may become "caring, principled, and self-disciplined" when their needs for "belonging, autonomy, and competence…are met through membership in a school community [where] they are likely to become affectively bonded with and committed to the school" (ed. Molner, 1997, p. 127). When students develop loyalty to the school community they develop the values established by the school. Schaps, Battistich, and Solomon worked with educators in elementary schools on the Child Development Project and observed that the values acquired from the school for successful learning "help[ed] to solidify children's commitments to community values," which further perpetuates the good that comes from the school community (ed. Molner, 1997, p. 131).

In order for a school to encourage a student's intellectual, social and ethical development, a system of character education is necessary. Ruiz and Vallejos (1999) declare that a mature student who developed as a result of effective character education should be able to reflect on a moral problem as well as be able to make a moral judgment about the problem. Schaps, Battistich,

and Solomon claim when students are able to accept and practice such moral values as democracy, learning, self-motivation, and self-control they are more likely to become adults with similar ethical and intellectual standards who are "thoughtful and reflective, make rational and informed decisions…[and who are] concerned for and respectful of others" (ed. Molnar, 1997, p. 131).

Sharon Vincz Andrews, author of <u>Teaching Kids to Care</u> (1994), states that democratic actions must occur and be modeled in order for a teacher to teach values within the classroom. A well-developed school community can be an environment for this democratic teaching, in which group collaboration and participation by all are encouraged. The importance of appropriate decision making within a classroom is discussed in Andrews' book. In order for students to make successful decisions in the classroom, they must be able to understand the differences between "right and wrong" decisions. Andrews also discusses the importance of collaboration and teamwork in regards to conflict resolution for students. Decision making, collaboration and teamwork support the idea that an effective community is necessary in order to provide students with successful character education.

Simply *talking* about community, however, is not enough. In their article "Rousseau Revisited: Compassion as an Essential Element in Democratic Education" from the journal *Education* Mitchell Masters and Mitch Holifield (1996) explain that students need to be taught *how* to develop a democratic community, and in doing so students begin to "understand one's social self in addition to one's personal self; [and learn] how to work with others" (p. 559).

One element of character education discussed within the literature is compassion. Ruiz and Vallejos (1999) describe compassion as "a feeling affected by reason" (p. 6). They declare that "to educate in compassion is to educate for a moral life," and in doing so students gather an enriched

and fulfilled education (p. 5). Boyer describes compassion as "each person is considerate and caring. There is a recognition that everyone, from time to time, feels hurt, confused, angry, or sad. Instead of ignoring such conditions, people reach out to one another. In the case of conflict, members of the community seek reconciliation and try to understand each other, even forgive" (Boyer, 1995, p. 184). For students to recognize feelings within themselves, to share these with each other, and establish empathy for one another cannot be, as Ruiz and Vallejos (1999) put it, "the result of an exclusively intellectual exercise but also of the will, which involves affection and passion, [and] feeling" (p. 14). In order for students to obtain an understanding of compassion toward others, Ruiz and Vallejos (1999) suggest that students should have an opportunity to observe difficult situations such as discomfort and suffering from social injustice in which the victims are similar to themselves such as friends, relatives, or children of similar ages. A successful approach in advancing empathy and moral feelings is to obtain an understanding of differentiated feelings, especially in situations of suffering injustice. Understanding the way another person feels can be supported by role-plays with different points of view as well as by having teachers encourage social discussion and reasoning in a variety of contexts.

Research Findings

Biases towards the qualitative research collected at Weber Elementary include my reasoning for asking the question about compassion. With actual photos of war, violence, killing, and profanity in the media, I have developed a pessimistic view of the world. Our children need to be aware of these global issues and be taught responsible values in our schools. The development of character education in schools is an opportunity to successfully develop citizens and their compassion toward others.

Irving B. Weber Elementary adopted the Basic School philosophy in 1994 and takes pride in being a Basic School. This pride can be seen when visiting the school's website (http://www.iccsd.k12.ia.us/Schools/Weber) as well as the first in-service day of the school year. The school's website gives parents and community members a brief look at the Basic School philosophy as well as Weber's philosophy in connection to that philosophy. During the first in-service all teachers were given handouts presenting the Basic School philosophy. The Basic School handout included an outline of Boyer's four priorities; Weber Elementary calls these priorities the 4 C's, which made up the second handout that discussed the school's mission. The emphasis that Weber places on the Basic School philosophy was also observed during other in-services, where teachers were expected to interact and socialize with each other. One in-service after school started included a collaborative task that asked teachers to summarize a journal article and put the information in context to Weber. Teachers were able to use personal experiences from the school to relate to the information gained from the article. The principal of Weber worked diligently to develop a sense of community with the entire staff. She sent out weekly notes and updates about the school. These notes often contained encouraging quotations, thank you notes for hard work, or upcoming information.

The priority of the school as a community can be seen throughout Weber in a multitude of ways. Architecturally, the building lends itself to community development and enhancement. The school has five wings that extend out from the centralized Media Center and Main Office. Located within these wings are "teams" of students with kindergarten; first and second grade in the same wing, third and fourth grade together and fifth and six grade together in their own wing. The fifth hallway houses the art and music classrooms and the gymnasium. There is also a multi-purpose community room that was open to community members outside of Weber for groups such as Boy

Scouts and Girl Scouts. The design of the classroom allows for the walls to open, with accordion doors, so that interactions make take place between different classrooms.

Opportunities for student-student interaction are important at Weber. Students interacted with other classes from their team during lunch and recess times as well at programmed events that occur weekly and monthly. Team 2, the first and second graders, had oral literature each week to integrate students from different homerooms. Students from each of the eight classrooms were joined together in one classroom at the end of the day for read-aloud time. Each teacher had every other teacher's students for approximately 30 minutes to present one or two different books. These books were chosen based on monthly focus themes such as author studies, poetry, and fall. There were also monthly social gatherings, which brought together all classes from Team 2 into the Media Center. Here, a pair of teachers lead sing-along songs for approximately 30 minutes. This opportunity allowed students to participate in a joint singing experience once-a-month with children other than their classmates from homeroom.

There were also times that the four teams had opportunities for collaboration. This allowed students, at an assortment of ages, to interact with each other to develop, mentor, create and support the community-style learning. The teams from Weber have a "buddy system" where each class was paired with a class from a different team. This allowed for interactions to occur between younger and older students. Every other week, the students from Team 2 would meet their buddies from a Team 4 class, usually in the Team 4 classroom. There, they read stories, shared projects, and created posters for United Nations Day. There was one day where the Team 4 buddies joined the Team 2 buddies outside to help plant tulip bulbs for the Team 2 butterfly garden. Other occasions when students throughout the school came together were school assemblies. In the first week of school, there was a school-wide pride assembly. There, the students gathered to chant a

saying for each team. During United Nations Day, the school came together once again, to sing a collaborative song together and to celebrate in the festivities.

The development of community within Weber Elementary is visible. The character education that Weber applies under the four priorities is Boyer's seven core virtues. Although Weber has a successful community environment, it is difficult to notice the core virtues being actively taught throughout the school.

Teachers are expected to post in their classrooms the core virtues as well as teach them. Teaching the core virtues can be seen as a difficult task for teachers of younger students; the core virtues are large, abstract concepts. Therefore, one Team 2 teacher took it upon herself to teach the core virtues by example. She used examples from her life, as well as examples of students exhibiting the core virtues in action within her classroom. This way, students were able to make a meaningful connection to what they might otherwise have seen as mere words. There were also times during the day when she would survey students on whether or not a particular action was a good example of the use of core virtues. For example, one child was not able to keep his/her hands to him/herself during a group setting. Given this situation, students were able to grasp an understanding of the differences between good and poor examples of "self-discipline" as a core virtue. Some core virtues were discussed and presented more than others. The core virtue of compassion was rarely discussed or exemplified, in comparison to the other virtues. This leads me to believe that it is the most difficult virtue to teach, though I view it as one of the most important. This experience has heightened my awareness of the lack of compassion within Weber Elementary.

Part of Weber's behavior plan included the core virtues. If a student acted in a way determined inappropriate by the teacher or the school, a "Core Virtue Plan" was written. This plan

included a section where the writer could circle the core virtue that wasn't being demonstrated; the determination of the core virtue was at the discretion of the writer. For example, if a student hit another student, the possible core virtues compassion, self-discipline, and respect could be circled. This allowed the student and parents to see what core virtues needed "work." The student would then explain how he/she could act more appropriately in the future, sign the slip, and bring a copy home for his/her parents to review. Parents would keep one copy, and send a signed copy back to school to be kept in a file. Core Virtue Plans were not written often, however, they were a concrete method used to promote awareness of the core virtues in the school. One critique of the effectiveness of a Core Virtue Plan is the plan is not a proactive form of behavior management. These plans were only written as a negative consequence to poor expressions of the core virtues.

How is it that we ask our children and citizens to be compassionate toward one another, when very few of them understand what that entails? Yes, a sense of community is important to the development of character education. However, the positive community climate can only go so far if the character education within the community-based school isn't thoroughly developed. There is no question that Weber has established a firm community. Now the school could work on further developing its character education. The school could possibly incorporate professional development for teachers around successful practices for teaching character education. Weber Elementary has made a step towards teaching compassion to its students with its strong school community; however further work can be done to strengthen the character education and individual development of the core virtues that it stands by.

References

Andrews, S. V. (1994). In Lewis W. (Ed.), *Teaching Kids to Care*. Bloomington, IN: EDINFO Press.

Boyer, E. L. (1995). *The Basic School: A Community for Learning*. Princeton, NJ: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Boyer, E. L. (1996). "The Commitment to Character: A Basic Priority for Every School". *Update on Law-Related Education, 20*(1)

Masters, M. M., & Holifield, M. (1996). "Rousseau Revisited: Compassion as an Essential Element in Democratic Education". *Education, 116*(4)

Ruiz, P. O., & Vallegos, R. M. (1999). "The Role of Compassion in Moral Education". *Journal of Moral Education, 28*(1)

Schaps, E., Battistich, V., & Solomon, D. (1997). "School as a Caring Community: A Key to Character Education". In A. Molnar (Ed.), *The Construction of Children's Character*. Chicago, IL: The National Society for the Study of Education.