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The effects of character education on the behavior of 5th grade students

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THE EFFECTS OF CHARACTER EDUCATION ON THE BEHAVIOR OF 5TH GRADE STUDENTS

by
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An Action Research Thesis

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ABSTRACT

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THE EFFECTS OF CHARACTER EDUCATION ON THE BEHAVIOR OF 5TH
GRADE STUDENTS
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Dr. Robin Haskell McBee
Master of Science in Teaching

The purposes of this study were to determine the effects of using character education

lessons to (a) decrease negative behaviors and (b) increase positive behaviors. Three

character education lessons were taught over the period of one school week. Students

completed reading, writing, and listening activities both collaboratively and

independently. The focuses of these lessons were: listening to others, understanding

point of view, and controlling anger. The informants for this study included the whole

class (14 students) as well as three focus students who often exhibited bullying behavior.

Observations were recorded and surveys were completed both prior to the lessons and

following the lessons. Interviews were additionally used for the focus group. Data was

analyzed through the use of coding in which five codes emerged: aggressive behavior,

refusal to cooperate, name-calling, social isolation, and helping others. The frequencies

of these behaviors in the three sources of data were compared from before the

implementation of the lessons to after. The results of this study have shown that the use

of character education lessons in a classroom during a one week period can decrease

negative behavior and increase positive behavior.

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Introduction

The Story

I began the action research process by exploring areas of interest within my core interests and beliefs about teaching and learning. I pondered concerns and challenges I faced in teaching and how I wanted to approach and potentially overcome these issues. After spending time observing in my classroom, I noticed students often verbally and physically bullying one another as well as showing disrespect toward the teacher. I found this behavior harmful to the students and to the classroom environment. Students spend the better part of their day in school, surrounded by their teachers and peers. Their social interactions throughout the day greatly affect their classroom experience. Most importantly, student-to-student interaction can significantly impact a student's life. When students in a classroom do not get along, it may result in many negative outcomes such as physical and verbal bullying and social isolation. This topic is important to me because it is difficult to teach in a classroom when students are distracted by classroom disputes.

I felt a personal connection to this issue in that I had similar experiences in my childhood years. As a student, I have witnessed and experienced student-to-student bullying, both verbal and physical. As I witnessed it, I felt terrible for my peers and always wished that there was something I could do. I could not understand why my peers wanted to treat each other in such inhumane ways. Telling an adult might extinguish the situation for the day, but it would start all over again the next day. These experiences as a child have encouraged me to make a difference as an adult. Beginning my experience

as a classroom teacher, I feel it is the opportune time to make an impact on young people today. If students can learn to respect each other and see one another as individuals with feelings, I believe classrooms can adopt a more positive environment.

The Problem

As I observed students over the first few weeks of school during my clinical internship experience, I noticed how students disrespected both each other and the teacher. Students exhibited defiant behavior such as talking back to the teacher and not completing tasks that they were asked to do. Through my observations, I also witnessed verbal and physical bullying within the classroom. Students called each other names and made negative comments towards one another. This happened frequently throughout the day. Physical interaction also frequently occurred in the classroom between students. They often punched, hit, and kicked each other while entering and exiting the classroom.

These issues are found not only in my fifth grade classroom but in schools throughout the country. Many researchers have noted that with our rapidly changing society, there is an increasing need to address these concerns. Sanchez (2005) states that, "our society is suffering from severe social and moral problems which are most visibly reflected by youth" (p. 108). Character education battles this problem by developing qualities of good character which enforce the necessary maturation and development in children. Bullying and confrontation within the classroom also lead to the students feeling as though the environment is unsupportive of learning, thus affecting learning outcomes (Peterson & Skiba, 2001). "[N]egative feelings such as concern, fear, frustration, and loneliness would negatively affect learning and behavior" (p. 167).

My hope was that teaching character education would build respect and maturity in my students. They did not seem to respect and see each other as human beings with feelings. They also did not show any remorse or regret for the actions they had taken when they were disciplined for it. If a student began crying because of being made fun of, other children would not comfort him or her. They either ignored it or just looked at the student. I felt that if the bullying and confrontations decreased within the classroom, it would lead to more effective learning and a healthier classroom environment.

Critical Question

What happens when I implement character education lessons with my fifth grade students?

Sub-question.

What happens when I implement character education lessons with three of my fifth grade students who tend to bully others?

Integrated Action

In my action research project, I applied a variety of character building strategies. My goal was to increase respect and decrease confrontation between students. The strategy I used included three lessons which were implemented over the course of one week, or five school days. The topics of the lessons included understanding another's point of view, how to be a good listener, and how to handle anger in a positive way. Students completed activities through writing, reading, and listening activities. Students worked collaboratively on some activities, as well.

In the first lesson, understanding another's point of view, I first discussed with the class concepts of point of view. I then used an example that centered on the popular

television show *Hannah Montana*. I took a vote on how many students liked the program and how many disliked the show, which was tallied on the board. I also asked students to give reasons as to why they liked or disliked the show, which were also listed on the board. Some students responded that they thought they show was interesting while others responded that they found the show boring. I explained to the class that they all watched the same show, saw or liked different things, and therefore had different points of view. I proceeded by reciting the original version of *The Three Little Pigs*. We discussed issues such as who the "bad guy" was and who the victims were. Next, I read the book, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, as told by the wolf's point of view. The wolf portrays himself as the victim and the pigs as the bad guys. We then discussed the two viewpoints expressed in the two stories. Students were then asked to be an author by writing a story from a different point of view than that of the original author.

The second lesson implemented was how to be a good listener. As a class, we discussed good listening strategies that could be used both inside and outside of the classroom. These strategies were listed on chart paper and hung in the classroom for students to view. I modeled these strategies in front of the class. I asked a volunteer to tell me about their favorite sport or activity. I used the listening strategies while the student was speaking as well as when the student was finished. Then I asked students to tell ways that showed I was a good listener. Two more volunteers were used to complete the same activity in front of the class. The goal was for the students to use the listening strategies with each other. All the students then participated in the activity with a partner at their desks. Next, I conducted a direct art lesson in which students were given a blank piece of paper and a pencil. I described step-by-step how to draw a simple scene.

Students drew as I gave each instruction. At the completion of the activity, students held up their drawings and compared them to a given sample of what the drawing should look like, which I posted in the front of room at the completion of the activity. This allowed me and the students to see who was being a good listener. Finally, students completed the same activity in groups. One person described the picture that they envisioned in their mind while the others listened and drew it.

The third lesson focused on how to control anger in a positive way. I began by having students identify ways in which they handle their anger. These were then identified as either positive or negative ways. Responses such as walking the anger off and talking it out with an adult were labeled as positive while responses such as hitting a person or object were labeled as negative ways. I then discussed with the class the steps to handling anger: stop and count to ten or take a deep breath, use your words to say what's wrong, and tell what you would like to have happen. These steps were listed on chart paper and hung in the room for students' reference. Next, I taught students a deep breathing technique that they could use when they feel themselves getting angry. The technique was modeled and then practiced as a class. Next, I asked students to role play situations that create anger and show how they would react in each situation. For example, the students role played how they would react if a friend teased them about their new hairstyle. It was then discussed how controlling their anger could change the situation. After the discussion, the situation was role played once again using the strategies discussed. Finally, each student created a poster that could remind him or her of positive ways to deal with anger.

From this integrated action, I was hoping for behavioral changes in my students. I was looking to find a decrease in negative behaviors, such as physical aggression, name-calling, social isolation, and refusal to cooperate and an increase in positive behaviors, such as helping others. I measured these changes by analyzing my three sources of data: observations, surveys, and interviews. I compared the data from prior to the character education lessons to the data taken following the lessons. I examined whether the behaviors increased, decreased, or stayed the same.

<div align="center">Context</div>

School and Community

I only experience and know the inside of my classroom, but this is only a part of what my students encounter throughout the day. In order to more fully understand my students, I felt it important to find out information about the population of the school. My placement was in a Pre-K through eighth grade public school located in the suburbs of southern New Jersey. There are 506 students in the school, 51% of which are male students and 49% female students. Of the 506 students, 67% are Caucasian; 25% are African American; 4% are Hispanic; 3% are Asian, and 1% is unknown. The first language spoken at home is primarily English, encompassing 99.2% of students, followed by 0.4% speaking Vietnamese, 0.2% speaking Spanish, and 0.2% speaking Urdu. Also, 21% of students are eligible for free lunch and 8% eligible for reduced lunch. The total percentage of students with an Individualized Education Program is 20.6%. The students' rate of attendance for last school year was 95.1%, and the percentage of students who entered and left during the school year was 9.1%. The school also has made Adequate Yearly Progress and is not classified as in need of improvement. There

are 40 teachers in the school. There are currently two kindergarten classes, three first-grade classes, two second-grade classes, three third-grade classes, four fourth-grade classes, two fifth-grade classes, two sixth-grade classes, two seventh-grade classes, and three eighth-grade classes. The teacher to student ratio is 1 to 13. Only 2.3% of the teachers are teaching with emergency or conditional certificates. Out of the rest of the teachers, 70.7% hold a BA/BS degree and 29.3% hold a MA/MS degree (*Great Schools: The Parents Guide to K-12 Success*, 2008). Insight into the dynamics of the school allowed me to get a sense of what students have experienced and are experiencing in the school but outside of our classroom.

After school has ended for the day, most students return to their homes or an establishment within the neighborhood. With this, I found it important for me to understand the background of the community, as well as the school. In the community, there are approximately 5,427 people. About 67% of the population is Caucasian, 25% African American, 4% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 1% represent other races and ethnicities. The average age of the population is 37 years old. Eighteen percent of people 25 years or older hold a college degree. The average household size is 2.6 persons. There is an average of 5.7 rooms per household. The median age of housing structure in the area is 50 years old. The median household income is $46, 250. Families (non-single residences) represent 68% of the population. These statistics for this community significantly differ from the New Jersey average in the areas of percent with a college degree and median household income. For the New Jersey average, 35% of people 25 years or older hold a college degree and the median household income is $55,551 (*Public*

School Review, 2008). Students' experiences outside of school can have a significant impact on their behavior.

Classroom

I was placed in a 5th grade classroom with a cooperating teacher, Mrs. Jones. In this school, the 5th grade is departmentalized. I was responsible for teaching language arts, reading, and social studies. My grade level teaching partner was responsible for teaching math and science. Midway through the semester, I taught one week of mathematics and one week of science. These lessons were taught in the other fifth grade classroom, which was located next door. The teacher of this classroom was Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith and Mrs. Jones had different sets of expectations about behavior in their classrooms. Mrs. Jones held a formal atmosphere in her classroom while Mr. Smith held a more relaxed atmosphere in his classroom. Mrs. Jones limited off task behavior by insisting on students staying in their seats and staying quiet while working. Calling-out was also not permitted. Students were required to raise their hands to ask a question or make a comment. Students were also expected to ask permission to sharpen their pencils or to use the bathroom. Students were not assigned classroom jobs. Mrs. Jones passed out and collected all papers that were distributed. Mr. Smith allowed conversational buzz while students were working. If it became too loud or off-task, he would intervene. Students were also allowed to sharpen their pencils or use the bathroom without asking for permission. Calling-out during lessons was tolerated as long as the questions or comments made were on-topic. Students were assigned classroom jobs including clean-up crew, messenger, and operator. The clean-up crew swept the floor at the end of the day while the messenger sent and received notices from the office and other classrooms.

The operator's job was to answer Mr. Smith's telephone when it rang, even if it was during a lesson. Although I taught math and science lessons in Mr. Smith's classroom, the character education lessons were implemented in Mrs. Jones' classroom.

Participants

The participants of the study included 14 students: 9 male and 5 female. I both observed and surveyed these students prior to and following the character education lessons. As a group, I noticed an overwhelming amount of disruptive behavior. There were several instances of students hitting and kicking each other both inside and outside of the classroom. Name-calling was also prominent in this group of students. Words such as "dork" and "stupid" were often heard on a daily basis in the classroom. Students showed disrespect to the teacher by refusing to cooperate with what was asked. When students were prompted to quiet down before beginning a lesson, it often took several attempts before they complied. Social isolation was another behavior that stood out to me. The students in the class seemed to form social circles and stick within those groups. Students were resistant to letting "outsiders" in their group and they were very verbal about it. They would say out loud why they did not like a certain classmate and that they did not want to associate with him or her.

The focus group of the study included three students: Billy, Christy, and Liz. I chose these three students by looking for students who were often involved in conflicts with others in the class. I also searched for students who handled confrontation in inappropriate ways such as through name calling, put-downs, or physical retaliation.

Billy is a male student who often used physical aggression to handle his anger. For example, he knocked a desk over when he was not happy with what his classmates

were saying to him. Female classmates have also complained on several occasions of Billy calling them names.

Christy is a female student who exhibited disruptive behavior such as name-calling, physical aggression, and refusal to cooperate. She got angry quickly, and I often saw physical aggression accompanied by name-calling. Once Christy got upset or angry, she would refuse to cooperate with requests from teachers or peers. For example, after Christy got in trouble for kicking her classmate, she sat at her desk and refused to begin a writing assignment. When confronted by the teacher, she ignored her and would not respond.

Liz is another female student that demonstrated disruptive behaviors. She often put down her classmates through the use of name-calling and social isolation. Liz would outcast students she did not like by calling them names like "weird" and excluding them from social situations. Liz would take actions such as moving her seat away from a person or refusing to let that person play with her at recess to show her dislike for him or her.

<div align="center">Review of Relevant Literature</div>

Character education began as the main focus of American schools during the pre-World War II era. Many philosophers, such as John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Herbert Spencer felt that character education should be a main goal of schooling because it would help decrease unfavorable behavior present in school-aged students (Sanchez, 2005). However, as the post-World War II era unfolded, society became less concerned with teaching values and placed more emphasis on academics. With the separation of church and state, character education became even less evident in schools, despite the public's

concern. Consequently, teachers discontinued character education in order to avoid legal repercussion and to allow more time and effort to be put into academic teaching.

Over the past two decades, there has been a renewed interest in character education. Many definitions of character education have since been developed. Peterson & Skiba (2001) describe character education as "the general curriculum and organizational features of schools that promote the development of fundamental values in children" (pg. 169). Through my research, the definition I found most relevant states character education as "strategic instruction that promotes social and personal responsibility and the development of good character traits and moral virtues" (Nicholson & Pearson, 2000, p. 243.) With society rapidly changing, the need for character education in schools is on the rise. There are many social and moral problems present in our society that ultimately are mirrored in our children (Sanchez, 2005). Character education battles this problem by focusing on qualities of good character which enforce the necessary maturity and development in children. Character education programs also make schools more conducive to learning by fostering caring communities that promote and glorify the values of character education (Sanchez, 2005). When students learn and practice values, such as respect and caring for one another, it may create a more favorable environment for learning. Students may feel a better sense of safety and value in school which also adds to a more desirable learning experience. I agree with Sanchez's assertion about the importance of character education because "it is paramount to the task of building a moral society and perpetuating the democratic system" (p. 108). Implementing character education would benefit our youth, schools, and society through the use of multiple strategies.

The Rise of Bullying

There is an increasing need to address violence in the school setting. With school violence incidents on the rise, we must look into the students involved. Often, students implementing the violence are victims of bullying. For instance, "the two students who were involved in the Columbine High School shooting were often subjected to teasing" (Bulach, 2002, p. 79). There was also an incident in Paducah, Kentucky in which a middle school student killed fellow classmates. According to Bulach (2002), he was also "subjected to frequent teasing by his peers" (p. 79). Bullying behavior is a major cause of school violence. Bullying is defined as "being exposed, repeatedly over time, to intentional injury or discomfort inflicted by one or more other students" (Peterson & Skiba, 2001, p. 173). This may range from inappropriate gestures to physical or verbal abuse. Any type of bullying could have a negative impact on the victim such as depression, self-pity, or even thoughts of suicide.

Bullying also leads to negative feelings towards school climates. School climate is defined as "the feelings that students and staff have about the school environment over a period of time" (Peterson & Skiba, 2001, p. 167). When students feel uncomfortable or unsafe at school, due to the threat of bullying, they build negative feelings about their school. This also leads to the students feeling as though the environment is unsupportive of learning, thus affecting learning outcomes. "As violence within our nation increases it will continue to filter into the (young) adult and juvenile population(s), with an inevitable increase within the lower grades among children" (Bennett-Johnson & Earnestine, 2004, p. 199). When students have negative feelings about their school environment, it can lead to unfavorable effects on learning and behavior (Peterson & Skiba, 2001).

Given that children are not born with values, it is important for these values to be taught and reinforced at a young age. Since students spend the majority of their day and their childhood in school, it makes good sense to make teaching civil and moral behaviors part of their school day. Our schools must not only be concerned with academics but also prepare children to be successful and adaptable in a rapidly changing society (Wiley, 2000).

Children may not have been taught respect or how to properly handle a conflict with another person. Character education lessons on such topics would teach students ways to positively interact with each other. These programs include incorporating worksheets, role play, and relevant literature into curriculum.

Character education programs are worthwhile to improve student behaviors. According to Peterson and Skiba (2001), such programs have "been shown to reduce general antisocial behavior such as fighting, vandalism, and truancy while increasing satisfaction with their school" (p.174). One program reported success in decreasing bullying by 50% and reducing the intensity of bullying incidents by incorporating character education into the classroom (Ibid). According to Bulach (2002), character education programs can help to reduce bullying and violent behavior by teaching students tolerance, sympathy, and compassion.

Storytelling

There are many ways to integrate character education throughout the school day to influence students' behaviors. Some ways are more challenging and time-consuming than others. Since literature is such a major part of curriculum, it would be easy to incorporate the lessons through books that students read. The mere memorization of

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words and their definitions is not enough for students to truly understand the importance and impact of good character. Although this can be effective, it should be supplemented with another strategy. It has been suggested that the use of both non-fiction stories of actual men and women and fictional children's literature are effective strategies.

There are many historical figures whose stories demonstrate acts of respect, responsibility, and empathy. Sanchez and Stewart (2006) note that "true historical stories involving dramatic moments of moral conflict are especially useful in engaging students to reflect upon values" (p. 14). The figures from these stories serve as role models who have used these character traits to better themselves and the people surrounding them. We must choose from the many figures and focus on those that demonstrate characteristics and values that are important to our children and society. Their stories ultimately promote ethical and moral standards for which our society stands. Once students understand and appreciate these values, they can then integrate them into their own lives.

Children's stories also provide good role models of appropriate and desired behaviors. Teachers must choose worthwhile books and focus on analyzing and understanding the story and its characters rather than focusing on the students' literal understanding. The books should include appealing but believable characters about the same age as the students. This will help students feel as if they can relate to a character. The books should also include both boy and girl lead characters who reflect a broad range of cultures (O'Sullivan, 2004). In a well-chosen book, "the characters will probably display many different traits worth emulating and will apply these traits in situations young readers can understand" (O'Sullivan, 2004, p. 641).

Stimulating the Moral Imagination

The best way to influence young people's decisions is by 'stimulating the moral imagination' (Martinson, 2003). One can achieve this by identifying ethical issues and teaching them to students, as well as how to act appropriately when encountering such issues. It is also important to bring ethics to a level at which students can relate. Martinson used an example of driving within posted speed limits with his high school students. He suggested that an ethical person drives within the speed limits and respects the lives of others. On the other hand, an egocentric driver focuses on getting from one point to another as quickly as possible with disregard to others' safety. Although students in the class became agitated while attempting to justify speeding, "the teacher accomplished the important goal of stimulating the moral imagination" (Martinson, 2003, p.16).

Another way to stimulate the moral imagination is through the use of role-play. Role-play refers to "the process of imagining that you are someone else, seeing the world through his or her eyes, and behaving as he or she would" (Upright, 2002, p. 17). Role-playing can be implemented in different forms. When a teacher asks a student how he would feel if someone took his pencil, the teacher is asking him to role play. He is directed to think about the situation and play it out in his mind. Another technique is for students to write a story from a different point of view. This allows the student to think critically about another person's perspective on an issue. Finally, students can role-play by verbally and physically acting out another's point of view.

Moral imagination can also be developed through children's literature. A developed moral imagination "requires exercising an ability to think oneself into the lives

of others, including people with very different life experience from one's own"

(Matthews, 2003, p. 3). Matthews uses the example of the story, *The Hundred Dresses,*

in which a poor Polish girl is teased for wearing the same dress to school each day. After

the girl moves away, and the class receives a letter from her father about the teasing, they

begin to feel remorseful for their actions and send her a letter of apology. This story

captivates the audience and promotes the development of moral imagination through

feelings such as sympathy and empathy. Reading and discussing this story helps to

develop the moral imagination (Matthews, 2003).

When character education programs are successful, bullying behavior and

incidents of violence should decrease because students will be more sympathetic,

tolerant, kind, and compassionate. There are many different ways to implement character

education. Children's stories provide good role models of appropriate and desired

behaviors. The use of both non-fiction stories and fictional children's literature are

effective character education strategies. It is also important to stimulate the moral

imagination by identifying ethical issues and bringing ethics to a level at which students

can relate. Through the use of these strategies, bullying behavior should decrease within

the classroom.

<center>Research Methods</center>

Overview of the Action Research Process

After spending time observing and listening to the students in classroom, I was

concerned about the students' bullying behavior. I transformed this concern into an

appropriate question for study: What happens when I implement character education

lessons with my fifth grade students?

I researched on the internet for ideas and suggestions for my character education lessons. I looked for lessons that focused on building skills and giving strategies that I found the students lacked. Out of this, I created three lessons which would take place over the time period of five 48- minute class periods. The focuses of the three lessons were: understanding point of view, how to be a good listener, and how to control anger.

Next, I thought about what data I would collect which would respond to my critical question: What happens when I implement character education lessons with my fifth grade students? I determined that I would utilize observations, surveys, and interviews. I chose these forms of data collection because the insight into behavior came from two sources: myself and my students.

From this, I was able to compare the data from my observations to the data from the students' surveys and interviews. In this data, I looked at the frequency of behaviors over a period of time. The behaviors were: aggressive behavior, refusal to cooperate, social isolation, name-calling, and helping others. I analyzed the data by coding these behaviors in the observations, surveys, and interviews and then looking at their change in frequency over time. I utilized coding in order to reduce my data to a manageable form and then to find patterns and meaning.

Data Collection

Prior to collecting the data, I obtained proper permission by distributing student and parent consent forms. I only used data from the students who agreed to the study and whose parents agreed for their children to participate in the study. According to Carr and Phillips (2006), to observe as a student teacher/researcher is to "critically and deliberately watch as a participant in the classroom" (p. 68). I used observations as my

primary source of data because they provided powerful insights through watching

students "in action." I began observing the class at various times throughout the day.

After a week, I reviewed the observations and noted the behaviors that raised concern.

From this, I created a survey and interview questions to find out more information

from my students. To interview is "to inquire, to ask questions of students… connected

with your project in order to hear from another side, version, or angle of the story" (Carr

& Phillips, 2006, p. 69). The interviews were helpful to me in that the students'

responses accounted for behaviors that I may not have had the opportunity to observe,

such as behaviors that occurred at lunch or recess. I interviewed three students from the

class. I chose these three students because they frequently participated in bullying

behavior. The data from each of the three categories: observations, surveys, and

interviews, would ensure multiple perspectives and voices.

I first distributed the surveys the week prior to the character education lessons.

The surveys consisted of selected response questions such as: What has your experience

been with name-calling at school in the past week? Students were given five responses to

select from which were: never, 1-2 times, 3-4 times, and more than 4 times. The surveys

were completed at the beginning of eighth period, before social studies class. This was

the most convenient time for both my cooperating teacher and me to take the time to do

this. After passing out the surveys, I explained each question and possible answers to

ensure the students' understanding. I also allowed time for students to ask questions if

they were confused. The students completed the surveys at their desks and were

encouraged to use a folder as a barrier so that other students could not see their answers.

I asked for students to put their names on the surveys but assured them that I would keep

their identities confidential. They were not given a time limit and were asked to put thought into their answers. I collected the surveys from each student, individually, when they were completed.

The interviews were also conducted prior to the completion of the character education lessons. Interviews were completed individually with each of my three focus students. I discussed with the students when the best time to talk to them would be. They all agreed that they would come in during lunch. I set up the days ahead of time with each student. Each student came on a different day to ensure that I had the entire lunch period and was not limited in time. After the students ate their lunch, they came back to the classroom. My cooperating teacher was not present for the interviews. I completed the interviews during this time. The interview format consisted of open-ended questions such as: how often has someone been left out of activities in the past week and how often has name-calling occurred at school in the past week? I chose these types of questions so that they would be similar to the questions on the surveys. With this, I was able to compare the data from each.

The week following the implementation of the character education lessons, I distributed the same surveys to the class and conducted the same interviews with the three students. Both the surveys and interviews consisted of the similar questions. This allowed me to compare the results from before the lessons to the results after the lessons to see if any change happened. I also continued observations of the class throughout each day.

Analysis

I analyzed the three pieces of data that I collected. The observations served as my primary source of data. I searched for common themes and categories throughout the observations. I utilized the process of coding which is defined as "the process of trying to find patterns and meaning in data collected through the use of surveys, interviews, and questionnaires" (Mills, 2007, p. 124). The five codes that emerged were aggressive behavior, refusal to cooperate, social isolation, name-calling, and helping others. I analyzed and coded both the observations conducted before the character education lessons and the observations taken after the lessons. I highlighted each code, in a different color, for each observation. I then looked at the occurrence of codes in each set as well as changes that occurred. I synthesized the data by tallying the number of occurrences of each code and forming a chart. The chart included each of the five codes and the number of times each occurred, in the pre- and post-observations separately. This allowed me to see what changes occurred and whether the numbers increased, decreased, or stayed the same between the two sets of data.

The surveys and interviews served as my secondary sources of data. The surveys were distributed to the entire class, while the interviews were conducted with the three focus students. With these, I analyzed three common categories which were coded as aggressive behavior, name-calling, and social isolation. I compared the number of occurrences of each, according to what the students reported, from the period prior to the character education lessons to the period following the implementation of the character education lessons. I looked at whether the numbers increased, decreased, or remained the

same. The observations, surveys, and interviews served as the triangulation of my study in order to construct a rich and varied data set.

Trustworthiness: Validity

According to Guba (1981), the four characteristics that establish validity for qualitative research are credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (pp. 75-91). I established credibility by completing persistent observations in order to identify prominent qualities as well as rare qualities. I also used a critical friend who listened to and reflected upon the insights presented in order to build credibility. My critical friend was a peer who was also student teaching and completing her action research project. She was placed in a similar setting to mine and experienced similar behaviors with her students. Her action research topic also focused on ways to decrease and change students' undesirable behaviors. Throughout the process, we were able to discuss strategies and bounce ideas off of each other. We compared notes and listened to each other's advice in order to improve our research. The use of my critical friend also built dependability. She examined my processes of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. She helped to analyze my observations, surveys, and interviews in order to see the data from another perspective. This also helped to overcome any bias that may have been present.

My research is transferable to other settings because of the prominence of bullying throughout the country. Bullying is not just an issue in my student teaching placement, but in many schools. In the United States, about 20% of students are bullied (Peterson & Skiba, 2001).

The use of triangulation created confirmability for my study. The three pieces of data used: observations, surveys, and interviews, allow for each to be compared to one another in order to cross-check data.

Trustworthiness: Potential for Bias

Before beginning my study, I learned that people hold assumptions that can affect their research. As stated by McLean and Mohr (1999), as researchers you need to "identify your attitudes and assumptions on a regular basis, reminding yourself that you are an integral and intimate part of your classroom and your research" (p. 129). Through self-reflection, I was able to acknowledge my own beliefs and assumptions that may have acted as a "bias" in my study.

I have many strong beliefs about how behavior should be handled. I feel that students should receive immediate consequences for their behavior, and misbehavior should not be taken lightly. If students do not receive acknowledgement or consequences for their actions, whether they are positive or negative, then the undesired behavior will continue or the desired behavior will disappear. In this school, students' misconduct was often unattended by authority, and consequences were rarely rendered. My beliefs may have caused me to be hypersensitive to any misbehaviors.

It is also difficult to avoid making generalizations about groups of students. From past experiences, I've formed the generalization that physical aggression is more prominent with boys while behaviors such as name-calling and social isolation are more prominent with girls. This may have affected my research in that I may have been looking for this in my students. I looked for and expected the boys to exhibit physical

aggression and girls to exhibit name-calling and social isolation. With the focus on these issues, I may have missed other important behaviors that were occurring.

Since I have had personal experience with bullying in the past, I have negative feelings towards it which may also have added to my bias. In witnessing and experiencing bullying as a child, I saw the bullies as "mean" people who took delight in other people's misery. I felt bad for myself and those students who also were bullied. As an adult, I still find myself sympathizing with victims of bullying. Due to this, I may have had less tolerance for the behaviors of students who carried out bullying.

A personal belief that I hold about teaching methods is that students should be given choice and flexibility within their learning in order to promote motivation. I believe that when students feel that they are being forced to learn, they will be more resistant to learning and engage in disruptive behavior. In holding this belief, I may have concluded that misbehavior occurred due to lack of motivation before even looking into other possible influences. After identifying these beliefs, I understood how it might affect my research and act as a possible "bias" in my study.

Trustworthiness: Limitations

At the start of my action research project, I understood that limitations would be present. In making my observations, it was difficult to catch all behaviors that were occurring. In the beginning of my student teaching experience, I observed the teacher and the class because I was not yet teaching full-time. This allowed me more time to catch and write observations while behaviors were occurring. By the completion of the character education lessons, I was teaching the class full-time. This limited the amount of time that I had to make and record observations. While teaching, my focus was on the

teaching duties at hand. I only had enough time to write down quick notes during the day. Only at the end of the day would I be able to write a detailed description of the behaviors or incidents that I observed throughout the day. By the end of the day, I forgot some of the details of the incidents and was not able to make as specific observations as I would have liked.

Another limitation was that since I was teaching in two different classrooms, I observed the behaviors in two different settings. Since these two teachers had different classroom expectations, it ultimately affected how the students behaved in each classroom. Mr. Smith tended to allow more conversation in the classroom which sometimes led to confrontation between students. Mrs. Jones tended to limit students' freedom in their actions which led to general frustration in school as well as frustration with the teacher, herself.

<div align="center">Findings and Interpretations</div>

Defining Codes

In implementing character education lessons, I intended for change in behaviors to occur in my students. Since the students were frequently exhibiting undesirable behaviors, I was looking for these to decrease. These behaviors included aggressive behavior, refusal to cooperate, social isolation, and name-calling. I also noticed the lack of positive behaviors occurring. I hoped that favorable behaviors, such as helping others, would increase in the time following the character education lessons.

Aggressive behaviors consisted of hostile and forceful behavior towards another person or object. This included physical contact towards a person or object. Aggressive behaviors often occurred in the form of physical contact. When students began a verbal

argument, it often resulted in hitting or kicking. One student punched his classmate in the arm because he was accusing him of stealing his pencil. Another incident of this type was when one student kicked another student's leg because she was accusing her of writing mean things about her in the bathroom stall.

Refusal to cooperate included when students were asked to do something by a teacher and they refused to do it. Students' refusal to cooperate with their peers was not included in this study. On many occasions, I found that students verbally refuted a request given. For example, when two students were caught calling their classmate mean names, the teacher asked them to apologize to the student. The two girls said that they did not call her names and refused to give her an apology. Other students also responded by ignoring the request. In one instance, students were laughing and yelling loudly at the beginning of class. I turned the lights off to attempt to quiet the class, and the students did not respond. I then used my non-verbal hand signal for quiet, and this was unsuccessful as well. The students ignored the several attempts I made.

Social isolation included instances when a student or group of students refused communication or cooperation with another student, specifically in social situations. Social isolation occurred both inside and outside of the classroom. Such situations included playing at recess, choosing groups and teams, and conversing during free time. For example, during spirit week, there was a twin day in which students were allowed to dress up like one another. Two classmates were discussing what they were going to wear when another student walked up and asked if she could join them to make triplets. The girls told her that they didn't want her to dress up like them and that she should find someone else to copy.

In my study, name-calling refers to the use of insulting names or words used to belittle or humiliate another person. This included an exchange of such actions between two students or groups of students as well as student comments directed towards a teacher or an adult. This was not limited to students and teachers within our classroom but also students and teachers within the school. Name-calling often occurred between students. For example, one student was wearing new socks that played music. Although she liked them, other students in the class did not. They called her a "dork" and "annoying" because of the socks she was wearing. Another instance occurred when a student came to school with a new, shorter haircut. Students called her a "mushroom head" and told her that she looked like a boy.

Helping others refers to students assisting, aiding, befriending, supporting, or easing another peer or teacher. Through my observations, I noticed students helping one another. When a student began crying because she was being made fun of, another student told her to ignore them and assisted her to the bathroom to help her wash her face and calm her down. Another example was when a group of students refused to let another student play in their softball game. The student appeared upset and walked away. After seeing what happened, a group of students that were playing kickball called that student over to join their game. She smiled at their offer and joined the group.

Observations: Whole Class

In seeking changes within the behaviors of the whole class, I used observations and surveys as sources of data. In my observations, I compared the data from before the character education lessons to after the character education lessons. I noticed that there was a general decrease in negative behavior. The largest decrease occurred in name-

calling and refusal to cooperate. These behaviors began at the highest frequency. Name-calling occurred 6 times before the lessons and then decreased to 4 times after the lessons while refusal to cooperate dropped from 7 times to only 3 times. There was also a decrease in the frequency of social isolation from 2 occurrences to none. Although there was no change found in instances of aggressive behavior, the frequency of this behavior remained low. Overall, there was 50% decrease in negative behaviors. The total declined from 18 incidents to 9. There was also a significant increase in the frequency of the positive behavior of helping others. Helping others was not observed at all in the time prior to the character education lessons. However, it increased to 7 times following the lessons.

Table 1: Whole Class Changes in Frequency over Time in Observations (N=14)

	Before	After
Aggressive Behavior	1	1
Social Isolation	2	0
Name-Calling	6	3
Refusal to Cooperate	7	4
Subtotal	16	8
Helping Others	0	7
Subtotal	0	7

Surveys: Whole Class

Students individually completed a survey on the frequency of bullying behaviors. The questions on the survey inquired as to how many times a certain behavior has occurred in the past week. They were asked to report the number of times they had experienced, witnessed, or carried out behaviors such as name-calling, aggressive behavior, and social isolation. Under each individual behavior, there were three categories which were experienced it, witnessed it, and carried it out. For each category,

students were to check off one of the following choices: never, 1-2 times, 3-4 times, or more than 4 times. In analyzing the results of the surveys, I added up all the number of responses for each choice (never, 1-2 times, 3-4 times, and more than 4 times) under each behavior (aggressive behavior, social isolation and name-calling), as shown in Tables 2 and 3.

In the results of the whole class, I found a decrease in frequency of behaviors. I analyzed the results of the surveys completed prior to the character education lessons and compared them to the results of the surveys completed following the lessons, as shown in table 4. In analyzing these responses, it is desirable for responses in the "never" and "1-2 times" to increase and the responses in "3-4 times" and "more than 4 times" category to decrease. The number of students' responses under the "never" category increased from 23 responses to 42 responses. This indicates that these students did not see any instances of a given behavior within a week. There was also an increase in responses in the "1-2 times" category. The number of responses increased from 35 to 48. This is an indication that the frequency of behaviors has decreased. The number of responses decreased from 38 to 21 in the "3-4 times" category. This is another indication that bullying behavior has decreased. The largest change in frequency of responses was in the "more than 4 times" category in which the decrease was 50%.

Table 2: Whole Class Frequency of Behaviors as Reported by Students through Surveys Prior to Character Education Lessons (N=14)

	Never	1-2 times	3-4 times	More than 4 times
Aggressive Behavior	8	11	14	9
Social Isolation	6	14	12	10
Name-Calling	9	10	12	11
Total	23	35	38	30

Table 3: Whole Class Frequency of Behaviors as Reported by Students through Surveys following the Character Education Lessons (N=14)

	Never	1-2 times	3-4 times	More than 4 times
Aggressive Behavior	16	15	7	4
Social Isolation	13	17	7	5
Name-Calling	13	16	7	6
Total	42	48	21	15

Table 4: Whole Class Changes in Frequency of Bullying Behaviors over Time as Reported by Students through Surveys (N=14)

	Never: Before	Never: After	1-2 times: Before	1-2 times: After	3-4 times: Before	3-4 times: After	More than 4 times: Before	More than 4 times: After
Total Bullying Behavior	23	42	35	48	38	21	30	15

Observations: Focus Group

I also recorded my own notes on the behaviors that I observed of the three focus students, who I found often exhibiting bullying behaviors. In analyzing the results of observations focusing on these three focus students, I noticed a significant decrease in negative behaviors. In comparing the data from before the character education lessons to after, the largest decrease occurred in the frequency of aggressive behavior and refusal to cooperate. These behaviors decreased from 7 occurrences to 3 and 6 to 2, respectively. However, incidents of both name-calling and social isolation remained the same. In total, the negative behaviors decreased from 18 incidents to 10. Helping others was another behavior found in the observations. I did not observe any of the three students helping

others prior to the character education lessons. However, I observed three instances of these students helping others following the lessons.

Table 5: Focus Group Changes in Frequency over Time in Observations (N=3)

	Before	After
Aggressive Behavior	7	3
Social Isolation	1	1
Name-Calling	4	4
Refusal to Cooperate	6	2
Subtotal	18	10
Helping Others	0	3
Subtotal	0	3

I also broke down the data in my observations by looking at the change of behaviors in each of the three students individually. Prior to the lessons, I observed Billy engaging in aggressive behavior one time. He was unhappy with what his peers were saying to him so he stood up and forcefully pushed his desk over, falling on a classmate's foot. When asked why he pushed his desk over, he responded with, "You know I get really mad." Billy often refused to cooperate as well. I noted 4 instances of this in my observations prior to the character education lessons. When Billy was talking to his classmates during a lesson, he often ignored the teacher's attempt at redirection. After given a detention, he told the teacher that she could not make him go and that he was not going to show up.

Christy exhibited 6 instances of aggressive behavior prior to the lessons. When she was frustrated with an assignment, she would act aggressively instead of asking for help. She would slam her fists and kick the desk. I also observed two instances of name-calling and refusal to cooperate in which Christy was involved. When Christy got angry

that the teacher accused her of kicking a classmate, she refused to begin an assignment that the class was working on.

Liz engaged in an instance of social isolation when students were assigned groups with which to work. When the students met with their groups, Liz said, "I'm not working with Jill. She is weird." Then Liz stood up and moved her seat away from her. She refused to talk to Jill during her group's discussion. I also observed 2 incidents of name-calling.

After analyzing my observations following the character education lessons, there was a change in behaviors in each of the students. Billy engaged in one instance of both name-calling and aggressive behavior. However, I also observed Billy helping others. Billy had been arguing with a peer for a few days. One day, he came into school and apologized to his classmate for how he was acting and asked him to play softball with him at recess. The classmate appeared pleased.

Christy's occurrences of name-calling and refusal to cooperate remained the same at 2 each. Although these behaviors remained the same, aggressive behavior decreased from 6 to 2.

In my observations of Liz, I noticed that frequency of social isolation remained the same while name-calling decreased from 2 times to 1. I also observed one instance of helping others. A classmate, Janet, brought in a whiteboard to hang on her desk. Janet was unhappy with how she was writing her name and what she was drawing. Liz noticed her frustration and offered to help her. Liz wrote Janet's name and drew a picture of a dog on the board. Janet smiled widely and thanked Liz for her help.

Surveys: Focus Group

The survey completed by the three focus students was the same as the survey completed by the whole class. They were also asked to report the number of times they had experienced, witnessed, or carried out behaviors such as name-calling, aggressive behavior, and social isolation in the past week. The same process was used in analyzing the surveys of these three students as was for the whole class. In comparing the results of the two sets of surveys of the focus group, I also found a decrease in frequency of negative behaviors. It is desirable for responses in the "never" and "1-2 times" to increase and the responses in "3-4 times" and "more than 4 times" category to decrease. The number of these students' responses under the "never" category increased from 2 responses to 15 responses. This indicates that these students did not see any instances of a given behavior within a week. There was a slight decrease in the "1-2 times" category from 12 to 11. The responses in this section remained close in numbers. There was a significant decrease in frequency in the "3-4 times" and "more than 4 times" categories. The responses declined from 6 to 1 and 7 to 0, respectively. These data indicate that there was a desired decrease in frequency of bullying behavior.

Interviews: Focus Group

The focus group was also interviewed and asked similar questions to the surveys. The questions were open-ended and inquired about the frequency of behaviors such as name-calling, aggressive behavior, and social isolation in the past week. These responses were from the students' perspectives, and they were asked to include incidents that they observed, experienced, and participated in. Although students were not given the choices, I was able to categorize their responses into the same four categories as the

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surveys (never, 1-2 times, 3-4 times, and more than 4 times). Again, it is encouraging to find the responses in the "never" and "1-2 times" increased and the responses in "3-4 times" and "more than 4 times" category decreased. In the interviews prior to the character education lessons, there were no responses under the "never" category. However, in the interviews following the lessons, students responded 3 times that bullying behavior never occurred in the week prior. In the "1-2 times" category, the responses increased from 1 prior to the lessons to 5 following the lessons. There was a decrease in responses in the "3-4 times" category from 4 to 1, and in the "more than 4 times" category there was a decrease from 4 responses to 0. These data suggest that name-calling, aggressive behavior, and social isolation occurred less often after the implementation of the character education lessons.

<div align="center">Conclusions and New Understandings</div>

The data collected showed a decrease in the behaviors studied in the observations and surveys for the whole class as well as the observations, surveys, and interviews for the focus group. These results indicate that integration of three focused character education lessons in a fourth grade working class suburban classroom is a worthwhile cause. By including character education lessons in one week of instruction, it seemed to have made enough impact during the timeframe of this project to change students' negative behaviors and lead them to treat each other with more sympathy and compassion. It also appeared to lead to an increase in the positive behavior of helping others in which students showed a newfound concern and respect for one another.

It is important to note, however, that I do not know how long these positive changes would have been sustained beyond the integrated action of this study since my

study only observed, surveyed, and interviewed at the end of the week I taught the lesson. I do not know, for example, if the changes would have been sustained without continued character education lessons for an additional week, if there would be any positive residue three weeks later, and so forth.

I have learned that taking the time to deviate from academic instruction to include character education can influence students' behavior and initiate the change that we as a society seek in our youth. The more that students view each other as human beings with real feelings, the less bullying behavior will occur. Students will feel more sympathy, compassion, and kindness toward one another (Bulach, 2002, p. 79). When students get along and are able to work cooperatively, it makes for a more desirable and environment conducive to learning for both the teachers and the class. When they feel comfortable and supported in their classroom, it makes for "effective and efficient learning and teaching as well as positive student behavior and attitudes" (Peterson & Skiba, 2001, p. 167). Also, a teacher can more effectively teach in such an environment. More can get done in a lesson when students are not arguing or interrupting the class.

In the future, as a teacher, I would integrate character education into my classroom. I would start the lessons early in the year and integrate them into our curriculum. The lessons would continue throughout the year in order to consistently expose the students to character education. I believe that this would make a significant difference in the effectiveness of my classroom.

Implications, New Directions, and New Questions

This research implies that there would be more positive results if character education was implemented more in the future. Since these lessons took place over the

period of only one week, I believe there would be an even more significant change if lessons were implemented over a longer period of time. However, there is the potential for repetitiveness to cause the idea to "get old" for the students. For future studies, I would suggest allowing more time to study the subjects and collect data in order to strengthen the study's findings. By studying the students for a longer period of time, it would allow the researcher to observe students in different settings displaying different behaviors.

I also believe that more extensive interviews with students would lead to more conclusive results. The more insight into the students, the better you can understand their behaviors, why they occur, and how to influence them. To study the effects of character education more thoroughly, it would be beneficial to continue data collection in the many weeks following the lesson. This would allow the researcher to identify whether the effects will strengthen, weaken, or stay the same over time.

I believe that this research applies to other teaching situations. Bullying behavior is typical of students at a pre-adolescent/adolescent age. About 40-60% of these students are involved in bullying incidents (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). They are dealing with different emotions and feelings and handle them in different ways. I feel that this research would be useful to other teachers who also encounter this behavior. Since bullying is not as prominent in the lower grades, parts of this research may not be applicable to teachers in the primary classrooms. It is unlikely that these students would be found acting aggressively and name-calling as often as in the upper grades. However, refusal to cooperate and helping others are more likely to be observed in younger students.

The motivation behind students' behavior did not appear to be racially or economic-status motivated. Most of the students were of the same race and economic status. I also did not hear students making comments or remarks referring to these. However, some students were made fun of because they got the best grades. Often students covered up or even threw away papers that were returned to them if they had received a good grade, in fear of being picked on.

I believe that character education is an effective way to mold our youth into functioning adults. Not only would I integrate character education into my classroom, I would also advocate it for the entire school. It is important for it to be spread around the school in order to touch all students. I would also work to act as a positive role model, exhibiting the qualities that I wish to see in the students. Students seem to be affected by the negative ways of our society. If we wish to see a positive change in our youth, we need to take the necessary steps to do model the changes we want and give our children opportunities to practice making those changes. I believe that character education is a big step in the right direction.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Parent Consent Form

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I am a graduate student in the Master of Science in Teaching program at Rowan University. I will be conducting a research project as part of my master's thesis and I am requesting permission for your child to participate in this research. The study will allow me discover teaching techniques that work best for the class. As part of the research, I may utilize videotape, audiotape, and/or photography to collect data. These recordings may be used to support data in my written findings. I will retain these recordings at the conclusion of the study. To preserve each child's confidentiality, only pseudonym names will be used to identify individuals. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate in this study will have absolutely no effect on your child's standing in his/her class. If you have any questions or concerns please contact me at (609) 405-2945. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Lisa Oxenberg

Please indicate whether or not you wish to have your child participate in this study by checking the appropriate statement below and returning this letter to your child's teacher by Feb.

____ I grant permission for my child _____ to participate in this study.

____ I do not grant permission for my child _____ to participate in this study.

_____   _____

(Parent/Guardian signature)   (Date)

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Appendix B

Student Consent Form

Dear Student:

I am doing a study to learn more about your class and my own teaching styles. I am asking for your help because I do not know very much about kids your age. If you agree to be in my study, I may ask you some questions or ask how you feel about something. I may also try different teaching techniques to see what works best for you.

You can ask questions at any time that you might have about this study. Also, if you decide at any time not to finish, you may stop whenever you want. Remember, this study is only to help me get to know you and to teach you better.

Signing this paper means that you have read this or had it read to you and that you want to be in the study. If you don't want to be in the study, don't sign the paper. Remember, being in the study is up to you, and no one will be mad if you don't sign this paper or even if you change your mind later.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Signature of Investigator _____ Date _____

Appendix C

Survey

1. What has your experience been with teasing or name-calling at school in the past week?

I have experienced it: ___ never ___ 1-2 times ___ 3-4 times ___ more than 4 times
I have witnessed it: ___ never ___ 1-2 times ___ 3-4 times ___ more than 4 times
I have carried it out: ___ never ___ 1-2 times ___ 3-4 times ___ more than 4 times

2. How often has physical bullying (being hit, kicked, punched, tripped, etc.) occurred at school in the past week?

I have experienced it: ___ never ___ 1-2 times ___ 3-4 times ___ more than 4 times
I have witnessed it: ___ never ___ 1-2 times ___ 3-4 times ___ more than 4 times
I have carried it out: ___ never ___ 1-2 times ___ 3-4 times ___ more than 4 times

3. How often has someone been left out of activities or have others refused to socialize with someone at school in the past week?

I have experienced it: ___ never ___ 1-2 times ___ 3-4 times ___ more than 4 times
I have witnessed it: ___ never ___ 1-2 times ___ 3-4 times ___ more than 4 times
I have carried it out: ___ never ___ 1-2 times ___ 3-4 times ___ more than 4 times

Appendix D

Interview

Interview Questions

1. How often has teasing or name-calling occurred at school in the past week?

3. How often has physical bullying (being hit, kicked, punched, tripped, etc.) occurred at school in the past week?

5. How often has someone been left out of activities or have others refused to socialize with someone at school in the past week?