

DR. STIRLING MCDOWELL  
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# TEACHING AND LEARNING RESEARCH EXCHANGE

## Re/Viewing Character Education

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# The Project

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During a year-long character education initiative at École Victoria School in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, a group of teachers from the school critically viewed values and virtues instruction. The following document shares our questions, surveys, interviews, and reflections. Through a myriad of lenses, we have re/viewed character education.

## THE RESEARCH QUESTION(S)

We wished to know how character education is recognized both inside and outside of our classrooms, and in our communities. On the school premises, and in the daily lives of students, how are respect, responsibility, caring, and excellence internalized and modelled? As educators, what more can we do to ensure our character education initiatives are realized both within and beyond the confines of our classrooms? What should we as teachers do to enhance the character education of our students? How do we know that character education initiatives are helping our students and their families? Do we know when it is time to change character education instruction? What would such changes look like?

## PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Following the establishment of values [character] education in our school in 2001-2002, we wished to turn our sights to assess the outcomes of our early ideas and initiatives. We wished to consider both our struggles and successes. We were proud of the work we had already accomplished in the values and virtues education of our students, and yet we expected that there was much more we could learn. The study, “Re/viewing Character Education” is aptly named, because many of our staff members and students were well-versed in the area of character education. Other staff members and students, along with our larger school community of parents, caregivers, and our school support workers in health and social services, are coming to the idea in character education for the first time. They are viewing character education with new and different lenses. Our purpose was to first establish a group focus for character education in our school, and then move beyond our immediate physical surroundings, in order to create a community image for character education. We wished to communicate with each other about the things we are all doing to enhance moral development in our children’s lives. In the end, we hoped to re-dedicate ourselves to an important belief statement in our school: “...[we are] committed to a learning environment that fosters caring, respect, responsibility and excellence.” We hoped to adapt our teaching practices as necessary to fully accentuate this vision.

# BASIC METHODS AND ACTIVITIES USED IN DATA-GATHERING

We spoke formally and informally with teachers, students, and their caregivers to seek their perceptions of the character education initiatives in École Victoria School. Of the 32 staff members who received the Staff Survey in Appendix A, 13 completed and returned the survey form. Student focus group discussions were held with 25 individual students from Kindergarten through grade 8. One hundred families received the Parent/Caregiver Survey Form in Appendix A, and 23 completed survey forms were returned. We also spoke with our school social worker, Indian/Métis Education Worker, and public health nurse in order to gauge their reactions to character education initiatives at École Victoria School.

In addition to the surveys and interviews, we set aside professional development time at staff meetings to further discuss character education programs. Combining discussion groups, interviews, and surveys with teacher, student, school associates, and parent groups offered triangulation in our study. Our data-gathering occurred throughout the project as did our analysis of the data. As we released the results of our data-gathering, we sought evidence of teachers engaged in reflection about their practice. We adjusted and expanded our project, and regular staff discussions throughout the school year further directed our energies for character education.

## INNOVATIVE POINTS IN THE IDEAS, APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGIES

Within our school division, character education is a developing area of study. Recent keynote addresses, committees, and reports have focused on the topic. Further, in light of the community involvement and action research we completed, our study of character education offered reciprocal and tangential rewards for all those involved. Our newly-formed teacher/researcher group is just one example of the ways in which we were innovative through discussion and collaboration in our work. We have not had a teacher-researcher group at our school in recent memory.

Our research was also innovative and dynamic in the ways it called for community members (notably parents/caregivers and inter-agency support personnel), both inside and outside the school, to become part of the work.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the research time allowed us to think carefully about improvements to character education for our students and their families. We were able to ask what was needed, and were better able to shape our teaching practices as a result. As we learned, our community did also.

# RELEVANCE OF PROJECT FINDINGS TO TEACHING AND LEARNING

We believe that our character education study has had “ripple effects” in our school and community, and it may have affected the lives of our students in positive ways. In the absence of respect, responsibility, and care, little can be learned. We believe that a renewed emphasis on the aforementioned core values has heightened students’ and teachers’ and caregivers’ responses to all curriculum areas, as they deeply considered the messages our school has been promoting: messages of moral virtue. We hope to be able to say that as a result of this study and its emphasis on character education, some parts of our school lives and work have been enhanced and improved.

## WHAT WE DID...

Over the better part of four years (September, 2001 through June, 2004), teachers at École Victoria School engaged students in “character education”\* lessons, activities, assemblies, and hallway art displays. We discussed respect, responsibility, caring, joy, excellence, kindness, cooperation, and other values and virtues. In September of 2003, many of the teachers responsible for coordinating all school assemblies and “values” projects met to form a combined Planning and Stirling McDowell Character Education Research Group for our school.

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\* Please note: although we use the terms “character education” and “values and virtues education” somewhat interchangeably in this work, we realize that some educators, even some within our own research group, are sensitive about the way these descriptors are used. We hope that readers will forgive any blurring of the distinctions between the terms.

# Re/Viewing Character Education

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## THE STAFF SAID...

The character education planning and research groups connected regularly with teachers at staff meetings throughout the year. Everyone, whether a member of the character education committee and research group or not, indicated an interest in moving forward with character education initiatives. One teacher said of character education at École Victoria School:

My students use the vocabulary that I teach...they frequently use my teaching examples in their play and conversation with others. For example: two students developed a plan on how to cooperate with their locker partner. This plan was shared with the rest of the class. Within a day, others in the class had developed their own cooperation plans...we use values education all of the time and integrate the concepts every day in every class.

We asked a number of questions of all our staff members, including teacher associates, secretarial, and caretaking staff, during an informal survey in March, 2004 (see Appendix A for the questions). Their responses to character education initiatives in our school were overwhelmingly positive. In addition to requesting that the committee members continue on with assemblies, bulletin boards, teaching materials packages, and character education generally, the staff also made the following comments on their surveys:

- It's great to see visual results displayed.
- Keep it [the character education work] long term (the more we do the better the results).
- Common language is helpful.
- [We've heard] very positive feedback from parents.

It was helpful to receive staff feedback from the people not directly connected in planning character education initiatives for our school. One comment may have helped us to focus our energies in the year ahead: "[Character education] surveys, etc. should be sent out at the beginning of the year as part of the 'beginning of the year' package [for both parents and teachers]."

# THE STUDENTS SAID...

In early June, 2004, we interviewed small groups of students to gauge their reactions to character education in the school. The first set of focus groups was comprised of Kindergarten through grade three students, and another set of focus group interviews took in grade four through grade eight students. A sample of our focus group interview questions is included in Appendix A.

## **1. Have you noticed the values/character education focus in and around École Victoria School? What are we talking about here?**

To this first question, Kindergarten through grade three students reported that they had noticed character education at the school:

**Tina\***: There's assemblies, like about "joy"...

**Roger**: In our class we have meetings where we all sit around in a circle, and we talk about the values. We pass around a rock, and sometimes we talk about caring for other people.

**K.C.:** The teachers have been talking about it, like, really a lot.

**Adam**: My mom talks about it, and I hear lots of teachers talking about it.

**Eric**: Values education helps you to be a better person.

**Sheila**: You should spread joy to the world.

**Simon**: We talked about cooperation and made fish. We talked about conscience and made a sandwich. You should stop what you're doing and think. Right now we're learning about joy.

Although he had noticed character education initiatives, one grade three student could not agree that they were helping in all cases, and he felt it necessary to state this:

**Gary**: I see some people doing that [respecting one another], but some aren't. I think that half the school is doing the values and the other half aren't. Some people [the kids] still don't do anything except act mean.

Our older students in grades four through eight reported that they, too, had noticed the character education initiatives.

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\* All student names are pseudonyms

## **2. Do you like values/character education discussions? Lessons? Activities? Assemblies?**

The students' reactions to this question were mixed in the two Kindergarten through grade three focus groups. The first group responded:

**Tina:** Umm. Yeah. I think about what we learned at assemblies, and I try not to get in trouble.

**Sarah:** When there's assembly, I listen to it, and when there's art in the hallway, I look at it.

**K.C.:** I don't really know.

**Adam:** I think that when we talk about this stuff, I feel happy.

The reaction of the second group was similarly mixed:

**Nick:** It's pretty fun stuff.

**Gary:** Yeah, I like it. Except for when sometimes the audience members aren't listening. I think that's some of the grade fours.

When asked the same question, our grade four through eight focus groups said:

**Paul:** We like doing the activities...the assemblies are fun.

**Michael:** We see how others represent their ideas.

**Jill:** Assemblies are boring. You are more concerned about your sore bum!

## **3. Do you talk to your parents about the values/character education at school?**

This question regarding the home-school connection vis-à-vis character education produced one of our most interesting research finds. The younger students in one focus group responded:

**Tina:** Not much. We do talk about it when I get in trouble. And then I get no allowance.

**Roger:** Not me. Not at all.

**K.C.:** Sometimes.

**Sarah:** Yes. I talk to my parents about this stuff.

**Gary:** I talk to my parents about what I can improve. Like about what can be fixed when bad things happen.

In another Kindergarten through grade three focus group, we heard:

Eric: A little. Tell them the stuff we did like at the assemblies.

Sheila: I talk about it with my mom and my grandma and we come inside the classroom and I show her my fish and tell her what I was thinking about.

Nick: Yes. Well I used to. I'm thinking about soccer too much now.

Interviewer: Do you think you can apply what you've learned to soccer?

Nick: Yes. You have to play fair and stuff.

Our older students in grades four through eight told us that while they talk to their parents and caregivers about values and virtues, these talks are not necessarily connected to the lessons and activities going on in school.

Jill: I call those "parent talks."

Michael: I zone out while my mom talks.

Robin: I think it helps people to talk to people about values.

Morgan: Values especially help little kids in the beginning of their lives.

#### **4. Do values/character education ideas influence your behaviours or choices in any way?**

As teachers we often wonder what is "getting through" to our students. Although we did not get perfect agreement amongst the students, we were glad that they appeared to be working toward a better understanding of why we brought character and values education to their school in the first place. The younger students said:

**Tina:** It changes my behaviour because I go "Stop, Think, Act."

**Nick:** Yes, it makes me think about what they say.

**Gary:** Same with me.

**Paris:** It's part of everything I do anyway.

The grade four through grade eight students responded;

**Gina:** It teaches me how to be a friend.

**Morgan:** I don't think it helps the grade sevens and eights!

**Sam:** If we did not have values education at school we would have more fights. We would have more problems to deal with at school.

**John:** I'm sure that there is an unconscious use of values. I don't think about it.

Overwhelmingly, the younger students believed that we needed to continue talking about values and virtues in school. One of the most poignant comments came from a grade four student:

**Sarah:** I think we should have more assemblies, and "value-ation" things, because when people don't respect other people, we need to have more stuff about it. We need more communication. More conversation.

**Sarah:** I think the school should continue to talk about values until we get bored of it.

**Nick:** Yes, because people are still ignoring that sometimes.

**Gary:** Yes, same as "Nick" said, because some people still do bad stuff. Some people still push people around and stuff.

Another group of Kindergarten through grade three students responded:

**Eric:** It helps.

**Bonnie:** It just helps.

**Eric:** It helps you because you learn about stuff you should do instead of stuff you shouldn't do and stuff like that.

**Interviewer:** Why do you think it's important?

**Sheila:** It helps kids remember what's good and bad.

**Eric:** So when you grow up you won't turn out evil.

Older students thought the school could continue to engage in character education, with a few provisos in place:

**Paul:** The assemblies don't prove the value to me. I do like seeing others' creations and ideas, however.

**Morgan:** The assembly explains what the value is, so we figure it out there, or sometimes we don't get it...more discussion in the classroom would be better. In class it means more, and the teacher is two metres away, so we pay attention...we need more discussion and activities that appeal to older students.

**Gina:** Our school could operate without character education, but it would be a mess.

Students were asked if they had any other comments, or advice for the interview-team. A grade three student summed things up:

**Tina:** If you're going to do it [continue with character education initiatives], be careful about how you do it. Don't make people bored.

## INTERVIEWERS' REFLECTIONS

While interviewing these children I felt they were all learning to 'talk the talk' and that they felt quite positive about learning values at school. This is a good first step. I think this shows that we have done a good job defining values at our school and that it has been done in a positive manner. I am wondering if there is more we can do to help children internalize values and then put them to use. Interviewer 1.

The research group wondered whether students needed to spend more time practicing values in and around our school:

I feel next year we should focus on finding practical ways for students to experience and practice concepts taught through character education. Perhaps we can incorporate more times for students to work together at school and for our community. Maybe we can give ideas for role plays and situations where students can learn and practice values in the classroom. Values education needs to become a priority for all people involved with Victoria School. Interviewer 1.

If we look carefully at what the kids are saying, we can see that there is a willingness to proceed with character education. It is how we go about this that will be key – like "Tina" says, we don't want them to become bored. We will have to vary our approaches, and continue to seek the input of students, parents, and other staff members. Interviewer 2.

**How can we empower teachers and parents to take on a leadership role in ensuring character education gets the time and discussion it needs to flourish? How can we encourage student input and leadership?**

This switch in focus (from thinking about, to doing) would ensure that values would become part of the school climate here, incorporated into daily life. Ongoing discussion and debriefing will assist in the 'leadership' piece. Interviewers 1 and 2.

## PARENTS / CAREGIVERS SAID...

We initially spoke with our parent-group at a Home and School Association meeting in November. We connected with our parent / caregiver community throughout the year through regular updates on character education in school newsletters, and through print and visual displays at parent/teacher interviews. We followed up with a series of surveys in the school newsletter, and at another

Home and School meeting in March. Given below are some results from the surveys on character education:

**1. Have you noticed the values education information that we send in our newsletters?**

A unanimous “yes” was received in answer to this question.

**2. Does your child tell you about the values we are working on at school?**

Split results indicated that only some students talked to their adult caregivers about the “values education” going on at school.

**3. Does your child display more positive behaviour because of values education?**

Again, the results were split. Approximately half of our respondents indicated that their children “sometimes” displayed more positive behaviour, but many were unsure whether this was the result of school efforts or other factors.

**4. Do you feel we are making an impact in overall school climate at Victoria as a result of values education initiatives?**

Almost all surveys indicated “yes” in answer to this question. The following comments were included:

- The positive messages upheld in the school must have an impact.
- Frequent reminders to students – eventually some of it has to soak in!
- By giving students a positive language regarding positive behaviour (i.e. “That showed kindness.”), and by instructing students as to what positive behaviour is.
- Yes, I think my children are more knowledgeable and express themselves using proper definitions/language.
- My daughter will stop and analyze what she is doing, recite an applicable value, and use it in her decision-making progress.
- I don’t get here during the days, so can’t comment. I don’t hear many negative comments from my son.

**5. Do you believe that parents should work with the school in the enhancement of values education?**

- A unanimous “yes” was received.

**6. The values we have covered this year (2003 - 2004) so far have included: cooperation, conscience, and kindness. Which do you feel have made the strongest impact on your children?**

- Cooperation and conscience were mentioned most often. Additionally, respondents said the following:
- All are valuable information. They have all helped.
- Conscience – was a new concept, and therefore had more impact.
- All of these values have been emphasized before he came to school. I can not pick out one as being stronger than others.

**7. Please tell us if our focus on values education has made an impact in your home.**

Respondents indicated it was possible that the above had occurred:

- My child is more aware of others' feelings.
- Perhaps. Makes it easier to discuss similar issues at home, perhaps more interest by child, hearing from 2 sources.
- These are values we discuss in our own home anyway, so it is great for the same message to be getting out in both places.
- Minimal – some discussion.
- Every time values education is mentioned in newsletters, I use this as a prompt to converse with my child directly about how they have used or seen the value used.

**8. Do you think the school should continue to focus on integrating values into your child's experience?**

A unanimous "yes" was received from all respondents.

- I believe that this is of vital importance!!! With everyone's busy schedules, it is great to have children exposed to positive values from many directions.
- I believe children need to be exposed to values and morals from as many sources as possible. It is especially important in somewhere they spend a lot of time interacting with other individuals [i.e. in a school].
- Let's keep trying!! The above shows you are getting through. If you persist, they will know you and we (the parents) are serious. Merci! Thank you for all your great work in this area!!

# SCHOOL SUPPORT WORKERS SAID...

We interviewed our school social worker, our Indian/Métis education worker, and our school health nurse in order to gain their responses to character education initiatives within our school. This was part of an ongoing attempt to involve our wider school community in character education.

When asked whether our character education initiative had resonance for the students with whom our social worker worked, she said:

The character education that you do ties in directly with my work. I have opportunities to use the themes and concepts with students. I work with students to develop responsibility for their actions, the values of cooperating with other staff and peers, and problem-solving skills...there is a lot of direct teaching of values concepts in my sessions with the students...the [character education] program enhances what I do.

Our social worker went on to ask for continued updates of our work, and offered to share resources and lesson ideas with us.

Our Indian/Métis Education Worker, who is in our school every day, saw character education as vital:

I believe that direct instruction of values is necessary as well as integrated instruction. We often expect students to just know what is right without explaining it to them, and that is not enough. Schools are responsible for teaching values.

...I work with values directly and indirectly in the pull-out small groups that I see. The early skills training that I do teaches the same themes that are highlighted by the school's character education program. I believe that a continuity of instruction and the repetition of concepts and language help to make values become 'second nature' for kids.

Our IMED worker also indicated interest in continued updates from the character education committee, and offered to become part of the committee, as her schedule permitted.

Although our school health nurse applauded efforts to teach values and virtues in school, she was unable to say specifically if she had noticed any differences in our students as a result of these efforts, because she appeared in Ecole Victoria School only infrequently. She did, however, agree to adapt the health curriculum she had planned to teach our students in accordance with classroom teachers' requests to include discussions of values and virtues. For example, an anti-smoking campaign planned for February was enriched by discussions of "responsibility", and how it is the responsibility of adults to guard clean air for children.

# TEACHER-RESEARCHERS REACT TO THE PROMPT “WHAT HAVE I DONE?”

The following excerpts from the teacher-researchers' journal entries indicate their reactions to this prompt.

## RESEARCHER A:

- More self-reflective as a person
- More aware of the person (child) in everyday school events
- More aware that we as individuals are responsible for our own happiness
- The above comments have been my direction while working with children

## RESEARCHER B:

- Group presentation at Institute
- Involvement getting ready for kick-off and wrap-up assemblies; running the assemblies
- Classroom discussions/activities to promote values
- Stories and creative writing
- Rolling bulletin board displays

## RESEARCHER C:

- Classroom climate, “defining and doing!”
- Personal and professional goals in regards to character education have been created and some of them realized, ongoing...

## RESEARCHER D:

- I have attended character education meetings. Although I am not usually the most outspoken person in a discussion group, I have appreciated hearing the various views, and have tried to apply them in my classroom. Classroom meetings, discussions, art activities, and daily reminders in casual conversations with students are some of the ways I have found to practice the goals we have set as a character education committee.

## RESEARCHER E:

- I model acceptance for my students. I model caring relationships. I base my teaching on relationship development. My kids are not afraid to tell me they like me, to my face. I believe implicitly that each student has worth and reasons for their behaviour. Most of the time I respond to behaviour based on

that assumption. I have taught directly character education issues. I use values-based language with students all of the time. I have integrated values issues into the everyday life of our classroom. My classroom has a high level of peer support, acceptance, celebration of difference, and very little bullying. I believe that my students feel safe in my room.

## **RESEARCHER F:**

- I'm not sure what I've done...learned a lot, maybe...
- Used the knowledge to propel me to ask new questions
- Helped (somewhat) in communicating our initiatives to staff and community

## **RESEARCHER G**

- I have taken a passion and concept that I believe is very important for schools, shared my learnings, and invited others.
- I have encouraged my students to believe in themselves and develop a picture of the best person they can be!
- I have worked at creating a climate of safety and acceptance for values education to grow in my classroom and school.
- I have learned that this is a journey, not a destination.

# Conclusions and Future Possibilities

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Our teacher-research group identified a number of conclusions based on our own reflections, reactions to the surveys and interviews, and further professional reading. We also thought of some possibilities for future research.

Overwhelmingly, we were re-energized by the positive comments that came from our students, staff, parents/caregivers, and school support workers regarding character education. We can see the importance of including these “stakeholders” not only as supporters of character education, but as future planners for initiatives within and outside of the school.

We recognize that even with the best lessons, hallway art, and assemblies, it is the staff members themselves who prove to be the ongoing character role models in the building, every day they show up for work. We reaffirmed our commitment to be models of good character. That being said, we identified concerns about possible “burn-out” of character educators – this is hard work we are doing! Extra lesson-planning and activity-generation can take a toll.

Finally, we wonder about a “multi-faith” approach to values and virtues in our school, and whether gathering a variety of religious perspectives might be useful in future initiatives, or as a future research study. We believe that there are certain “universals” upheld in respect, responsibility, and caring, but we would like to know, from inter-religious perspectives, what other values and virtues could be mutually agreed upon.

# References

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As teacher-researchers, we realize that our knowledge stems from many sources. Often, we construct our frameworks for knowing via the families and the friends with which we surround ourselves, but we also recognize that the following books and authors have been influential in our character education work during this project:

Bodine, R.J. and D.K. Crawford. (1999). *Developing emotional intelligence: A guide to behavior management and conflict resolution in school*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Borba, M. (2001). *Building moral intelligence: The seven essential virtues that teach kids to do the right thing*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Good, P. (1997). *In pursuit of happiness*. Chapel Hill, NC: New View Publications.

Gossen, D.C. (1996). *Restitution: restructuring school discipline*. Chapel Hill, NC: New View Publications.

Lickona, T. (1991). *Educating for character: How our schools can teach respect and responsibility*. Toronto, ON: Bantam.

Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

# Appendix A: Survey Tools and Interview Questions

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## RE/VIEWING CHARACTER EDUCATION

### PARENT / CAREGIVER SURVEY

Dear Parents/Caregivers:

We are asking for your help. As you know, our school is committed to values education and instruction. We recognize that one of the important elements of an effective values education initiative is a strong home-school partnership. We are hoping that you will take a moment to complete the following survey (double-sided).

1. Have you noticed the values education information that we send in our newsletters?

Yes       No

2. Does your child tell you about the value we are working on at school (cooperation, conscience, kindness)?

Never       Sometimes       Frequently       Always

3. Does your child display more positive behaviour because of values education?

Never       Sometimes       Frequently       Always

4. Do you feel we are making an impact in overall school climate at Victoria as a result of values education initiatives?

Yes       No

How? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you believe that parents should work with the school in the enhancement of values education?

Yes       No

6. The values we have covered this year so far have included: cooperation, conscience, and kindness. Which do you feel have made the strongest impact on your children?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

7. Please tell us if our focus on values education has made an impact in your home.

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8. Do you think the school should continue to focus on integrating values into your child's experience?

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Thank you for taking time to share your thoughts with us.

FAMILY NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ (optional)

**RE/VIEWING CHARACTER EDUCATION  
STAFF SURVEY**

Dear Staff:

Your responses to the following questions will assist us in future planning for character education.

1. Do you wish to continue to receive character education teaching packages?

Yes       No

2. Do you wish to continue character education assemblies?

Yes       No

3. Do you wish to continue school-wide character education activities, such as making cooperation fish, conscience sandwiches, etc.?

Yes       No

4. Do you feel we are making an impact in overall school climate at Victoria?

Yes       No

Comments, if any:

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Name (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

04/03/04

**RE/VIEWING CHARACTER EDUCATION**  
**STUDENT FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**  
**JUNE 2004**

1. Have you noticed the values/character education focus in and around Ecole Victoria School? What are we talking about here?
2. Do you like values/character education discussions? Lessons? Activities? Assemblies?
3. Do you talk to your parents about the values/character education at school?
4. Do values/character education ideas influence your behaviours or choices in any way?
5. Do you think we should continue to talk about values/character education in school?



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