Groove Final Project
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Overall Narrative:

Having worked in education for nearly thirty years, I have developed many tools and techniques in working with students. Additionally, I have worked with hundreds of educators, as well. After all of this time, in a variety of situations, I find the most important factor in allowing the possibility of student success is the mindset of the educators with whom students interact. Life provides numerous challenges and exposes adults and our students to traumatic, often incomprehensible situations. However, a healthy learning environment retains space for growth when we choose to focus on possibilities while we work through the limitations and heal from traumatic events as they occur. When schools are situated in communities that struggle, some adults adopt a deficit-finding attitude under the guise of explaining why students are unsuccessful, which limits engagement. Several studies have been made that illustrate how adult expectations limit student achievement. A brief overview is made in the following blog (https://www.edutopia.org/blog/deficit-model-is-harming-students-janice-lombardi). Further, from my experience, adults who retain a focus on the positive are shunned by those within these systems and are seen as being *unrealistic* or too *pie in the sky*. Yet I choose to believe that seeking strengths in those around remains the only possible chance of allowing genuine engagement between students and adults in their learning communities.

This lesson plan is a simple introduction to the VIA Institute on Character, https://www.viacharacter.org/ . Materials to facilitate the adoption of a mindset that accompanies this resource, is available through other resources as well. For example, CliftonStrengths have been used in business and industry for nearly the past twenty years. https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/252137/home.aspx Members of the business community find this valuable as it allows a shift in culture that tends to improve morale and a sense of teamwork. In the world of education, this has been applied as one tool under the umbrella of socio-emotional learning. I see this lesson as a tip of the iceberg type of resource. It can be adopted by an individual who seeks to retain a positive approach to being an educator no matter what circumstance surrounds them. Or more ideally, it can be integrated into the daily work of educators throughout a school or district as one component of comprehensive trauma informed practices.

My lesson is a potential means of introducing VIA Character Strengths into a classroom. I find they dovetail nicely into indigenous frameworks, and I recommend Alaska educators familiarize these overlaps prior to integrating them. Further I recommend that any adult working with these strengths take the survey themselves and be very familiar to both the positives and limitations accompanying some strengths. For example, my top strength consistently emerges as Bravery. Frequently this requires me to temper my directness and lack of fear of consequence with the understanding that sometimes power disparities can result in unintended and unexpected consequences. I wish all who choose to engage in this process to be equally introspective and to trust the positive outcomes will outweigh the negatives, as we move forward in caring about others as our means of making a living.

Specifics:

This lesson introduces participants to the VIA Character Strengths survey, which is available in different forms for individuals of all ages. It is recommended that prior to implementation, a teacher engage in a dialogue with their supervisor to be sure if parental permission or participation is desired. I have worked in private school communities that used this survey as an enrollment requirement. This was of great benefit as families worked through the formal educational process. Interestingly, as parents and students began to focus on strengths, some of the behaviors previously considered defiant were reframed into a context of their potential power when used accordingly.

I have also created an additional document that is simply a listing of how these strengths can serve as underlying connections to an annual community event. In my school where this was implemented, we held an annual gathering with our families in grades 6-8. Each student spent considerable time researching an important character in history. We chose to have a list of available characters, and this evolved over time as students and families started generating ideas. On the evening of the culminating event, students dressed as their character and participated in activities that were specific to their grade level. Common planning time and the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) fit well in making this type of collaboration manageable.

- Sixth graders are scheduled to deliver a short oral presentation and an overview of their character for their parents. These scheduled performances allowed parents to engage with their specific student as well as those of family friends. They eat a community dinner when their student is not actively presenting.
- Seventh graders dress as their character and serve dinner to the community. Parents of all ages were involved in a matching game during dinner to guess the character each student who served dinner portrays. (Culinary arts students were involved in making dinner and were also able to be historical figures.)
- Eighth graders chose groups of characters who interact together and they write a short scene from a play that reenact as an important moment in history. These plays can get complex, involve time travel, a sound track, media developed by students or other creative elements.

Since I enjoy working collaboratively, and thinking in terms of interconnected curriculum, these ideas are only meant to provide food for thought as educators and communities customize them and fit them to their own learning environments.

Related Materials:

The following are other curriculum resources related to character strengths, virtues, and wise words and ideas:

The Virtues Project https://virtuesproject.com/

Project Wisdom https://www.projectwisdom.com/
Character Strong https://characterstrong.com/