The 4 KEYS to Excellence and Ethics

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Teacher A wants her sixth-graders to take more responsibility for their grades. She would like them to see their grades as something they earn rather than as something she "gives" them. Simply exhorting them to do so hasn't made much of a difference.

Teacher B, in an effort to inspire his students to care about the quality of their work and the way they treat others, begins each of this grade 8 health education classes with a "character quotation." (Example: "Everything can be taken from us except one thing—the freedom to choose our attitude in any set of circumstances."—Viktor Frankl.) He asks students to write the daily quote in their notebooks and encourages them to "keep it in mind as you go through your day." But he wonders whether they really do.

During his tenure as a high school principal, Principal A has seen a steady deterioration in students' language. Profanity is increasingly common on the schoolyard, in corridors, and even in classrooms. Some parents have complained about the inappropriate language they hear when they come to the school, and many faculty feel that such language detracts from the learning environment and is disrespectful toward those who don't wish to hear it. However, students, when confronted about their inappropriate language, typically say, "That's just the way we talk." Reminders during morning announcements about "using our best language" have had no noticeable effect. There is a rule in the School Handbook that officially prohibits vulgar and profane language in school or on school grounds, but it hasn't been enforced for years. The principal wonders what, if anything, can be done about this problem.

Each of these educators faces a character-based challenge. Character-based challenges call for character-based solutions. All three educators, in their own ways, have attempted to influence students' character, but not as effectively as they would like. Their interventions need more power.

Booker T. Washington said, "Character is power." We believe that the power of character comes from the integration of excellence and ethics. To become a person of character means to become the best person we can be. That involves doing our best work (the pursuit of excellence) and doing the right thing in our relationships (the pursuit of ethical behavior).

Educating for both excellence and ethics is not a new idea. Throughout history and in cultures around the world, education rightly conceived has had two great goals: to help students become smart and to help them become good. They need character for both. They need "performance character"—qualities such as self-discipline, confidence, diligence, and determination—in order to develop their talents, strive for excellence, and succeed in school and beyond. They need "moral character"—qualities such as integrity, respect, justice, and compassion—in order to behave ethically, live and work with others, and assume the responsibilities of citizenship.

A Paradigm Shift

Although teaching students to be both smart and good is the school's oldest mission and highest calling, most contemporary education falls short of that ideal. In reality, focusing on the integration of excellence and ethics as a central "power source" for school success and human flourishing represents a paradigm shift for the field of character education and school reform in general.

At least in the United States, character education in recent decades has focused primarily on moral character (doing the right thing) to the neglect of performance character (doing our best work). By contrast, general school reform efforts typically have a different deficiency; they focus largely on increasing academic achievement (often narrowly defined as higher test scores) while neglecting the development of moral character.

What we call "Smart and Good Schools" focus equally on performance character and moral character—best work and best behavior. And they do so in an integrated way. For example, when they teach students to do good (as in a service learning project), they teach them to do good *well* (planning and executing the project in the most effective way possible). When they help students learn an academic subject or skill, they do so in a way that simultaneously develops performance character and moral character (for example, by helping students understand the importance of academic honesty, through collaborative projects that teach teamwork, and by group critique sessions in which students, with the teacher's guidance, learn to give each other suggestions for revising a piece of work to a higher level of excellence).

Using the 4 Keys to Maximize the Power of Any Character Education Practice

How can this big idea of integrating excellence and ethics, performance character and moral character, help us gain more power in our character education efforts? Our work with high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools has helped us identify "4 KEYS" to developing performance character and moral character. Over time we have developed these 4 KEYS into a master strategy we believe has the potential to increase the power of any educational practice. They are:

1. *An Ethical Learning Community (ELC)*: Developing a community that supports and challenges by building group relationships, shared values that encompass excellence and ethics, and mutual expectations that support, challenge, and hold all group members accountable to doing their best work and being their best ethical selves. An ELC can be group of any scale (a classroom, club, youth group, school, family, or community).

2. *Self-Study*: Assessing, with respect to both performance character and moral character, our strengths and areas for improvement, then setting goals and monitoring progress.

3. *Other-Study:* Analyzing the positive and negative examples of other people—how they have achieved, or failed to achieve, excellence and ethics—and applying lessons learned from them to our own efforts to develop moral and performance character and to succeed in school and life.

4. *Public Presentation:* Sharing our goals, progress toward achieving them, and the products of our work with a wider audience (classmates, schoolmates, parents, outside experts, the larger community).

The 4 KEYS can be used in any order. What matters most is the educator's strategic

rationale for choosing a particular KEY or combination of KEYS. For example, a teacher who wants to develop students' self-discipline (being prepared for class, getting work in on time, etc.) might choose to begin with Self-Study, having students do a self-inventory of their current work habits, then set one specific goal for improving, and make a plan for pursuing that in the coming week. The teacher might make this choice to begin with Self-Study in the belief that students first need a sense of their own current state of self-discipline before they will become interested in strategies for improving their self-discipline.

Alternatively, a teacher could choose to begin with Other-Study. Students could analyze an exemplar such as Thomas Edison, whose work habits were central to his success, and write an essay on the question, "What specific lessons regarding self-discipline from Edison's life and character can I identify and put into practice?" Or the teacher could choose to begin with strengthening the Ethical Learning Community by developing, with students, a Classroom Compact for Excellence consisting of "Rules for Doing Our Best Work" and "Rules for Treating Each Other With Respect and Care" (see Lickona & Davidson, 2005, *Smart & Good High Schools*, pp. 150-151) and by having a class meeting to brainstorm successful strategies for developing self-discipline habits such as being prepared for class, completing assignments in a timely manner, and so on . Whatever the strategic sequence in which the 4 KEYS are used, they are most powerful used in combination (as we explain in the next section).

Elsewhere (Davidson, Lickona, & Khmelkov, 2008) we elaborate on the psychological and educational theory and research supporting the efficacy of the 4 KEYS. In the remainder of this essay, we return to the three character-based challenges described at the beginning of the chapter in order to see how the 4 KEYS can be used in each case to increase the power of the character education intervention.

Helping Students Taking Responsibility for Their Grades

Teacher A wants her sixth-grade students to see their grades as something they *earn* rather than something she "gives" them—and to take responsibility for striving to improve their grades. She has already taken a step at the start of the year to build an Ethical Learning Community by guiding her children in creating a Student Pledge around six character traits, including responsibility (defined as, "I will come prepared for class" and "I will complete and turn in assignments on time") (Brown, 2003). But their ELC needs more power; it isn't yet strong enough to foster the level of academic responsibility she wants.

To get additional power, she engages her students in a Self-Study. On the day she was to give out report cards, she first hands students a worksheet on goal-setting. Before giving out the report cards, she instructs the class: "For each subject, write the grade you earned in the previous marking period. Then, for each subject, write the grade you think you have earned for this marking period."

She then passes out the report cards and gives students time to look them over. Then she asks students to record the grades they actually earned for this grading period, indicating whether their grades went up or down.

The fourth step asks students to do the following: "For each subject, circle the effort you made: 1—Little or no effort; 2—Some effort; 3—Great effort. For each subject, circle how much you learned: 1—Little or no learning; 2—Some learning; 3—Great learning." The teacher's objective here is to get students to consider how the effort they made in a given subject affected how much they learned and ultimately the grade they earned.

The fifth step led students to create a plan for the future. The teacher gave these instructions:

> Create a SMART Goal (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) for the next grading period to improve your effort and work habits in each subject   What work habits will help you do better in those subjects where you want to improve?

> Identify a person who would be a good role model for you in reaching your goal. Your role model can be an historical figure, a person in this class or school, a teammate, a family member, etc.

> Identify a person who is willing and able to support and challenge you as you strive to reach your goals. This person could be a friend, classmate, sibling, parent, coach, etc.; it might even be the same person you choose as your role model. Share your goals with this person and establish a way (daily email, weekly phone call, conversation at lunch, etc.) for this person to help hold you accountable to your goals.

By doing this goal-setting activity together as a class, the teacher has created a simple but powerful process. The teacher began strategically with a Self-Study, one that focused students on the critical elements of effort and work habits. The process also had students identify a role-model to emulate (Other-Study). Students then made their goals public to the class and to an accountability partner, providing two levels of Public Presentation. In all these ways, this shared activity had students establishing a community to support and challenge them in meeting their goals (Ethical Learning Community).

The entire process also integrates performance character and moral character. Students are striving for their personal best but simultaneously working together to do their best. Done with fidelity, this goal-setting process can maximize the power of character and culture needed for optimal teaching and learning.

Maximizing the Power of Character Quotations

Teacher B wanted his grade 8 health education students to think about, and be guided by, the character quotation he shared at the start of each class. Many character educators use character quotations. Some simply post them on the classroom or corridor walls. Some schools, to begin the day, have an adult or student read over the public address system a quote from a published manual, with prepared commentary on the quote's meaning and importance. Most character educators employing these strategies would likely concede that their discernible impact is limited. How can the 4 KEYS be used to gain more power from character quotes?

The health teacher might have begun by seeking to strengthen the Ethical Learning Community. He could have cultivated a shared sense of purpose by setting the following expectation for the course:

> Each day, we're going to start with a quotation. Sometimes it will relate to the general content of the course, sometimes to the particular content of that day's lesson. Health education is about making wise choices. Quotations are a source of wisdom that can help us make good choices. They come from people past and present and from cultures around the world. They're an important part of what I'm going to share with you. I'll ask you to reflect on their meaning and importance—and even put them into practice in your

own lives.

The teacher might also have strengthened his use of Other Study by providing at least some biographical information about the source of a given quote. An inspiring quotation such as Viktor Frankl's about choosing our own attitude no matter what our circumstances becomes more meaningful when coupled with a glimpse into the life of character that lies behind the statement. When we have used the Frankl quote with educators, we have briefly told his story—how, along with millions of fellow Jews. Poles, and others, he was swept up by the Nazi Holocaust; how he lost his young wife and his parents to the death camps; how he spent two years in Auschwitz but maintained his spirit and dignity no matter what the Nazis did to him; and how, after the war, he spent the rest of his life as a psychiatrist helping others "find meaning in their lives through loving another person, through their work, through their suffering, and by serving God" (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999). Audiences are invariably moved by the story of this remarkable man.

Following this enhanced Other-Study, the teacher would have done well to engage his students in Self-Study. He might have asked them to reflect or write in their journals in response to questions such as, "In what areas of my life do I currently put Frankl's quote into practice? In what areas of my life could I do so more consistently?" Students could then have set personal goals for acting on the quote during the rest of the day and week.

Public Presentation would have added still more power: "Share your goal and plan with a partner. Before you go to bed tonight, reflect on how well you did in choosing your attitude in all the circumstances you encountered today. Tomorrow, I'll give you each a minute at the beginning of class to share with your partner how well you think you did."

Using the 4 KEYS to Improve Student Language

Principal A was at a loss as to what to do in the face of students' habitual use of profanity in the school environment. Consider the range of strategies the 4 KEYS would offer in dealing with this character challenge.

To build an Ethical Learning Community with respect to this issue, one could ask faculty to: (1) conduct a class meeting to engage their students in reflecting more deeply on language and its social impact ("Would you think differently about me as your teacher if I constantly used swear words?", "Why are some people offended by swear words?", and "What do you reveal about yourself when you swear a lot?"); and (2) have students create a class compact, including rules for best language; a motto reminding everyone of the goal; and a visual or verbal signal to remind others when they are not using their best language.

To further strengthen whole-school norms regarding language, students and faculty could create and post signs such this one used with good results by one middle school: YOUR VOCABULARY IS A REFLECTION OF YOUR INTELLIGENCE. ("It's helped," says one teacher. "Kids don't want to be considered stupid.")

Faculty could also agree to respond consistently when they hear a student use inappropriate language. One middle school, for example, found that student profanity declined sharply after faculty and staff adopted a uniform response: going up to any student who used unacceptable language; saying respectfully, "We don't talk that way here"; and then walking away. Finally, accountability to expectations regarding language could be strengthened by meaningful consequences for a student's repeated use of bad language. For example: "Write a

letter to (or call) your parents stating the swear words you used, where and when you spoke them, and why that was not acceptable behavior." Or, "Give a talk in a younger grade about why profanity in the school environment is not respectful of self or others."

As a Self-Study around language, students and teachers could: (1) keep count, during a single day, of the number of times they hear or use foul language, noting where and when it occurred; (2) write in response to and discuss such questions as, "Who is someone you wouldn't like to hear swearing? Why not?" and "Who is someone you wouldn't want to hear *you* swearing? Why not?"; (3) record best personal strategies for avoiding using bad language.

The entire school could also conduct a Self-Study (which can examine a group as well as an individual) by doing a written survey asking students and staff how often they think students use various kinds of bad language and what severity of consequence such behavior deserves. One middle school student council did exactly that in order to raise everyone's consciousness about bad language and later found, on a follow-up survey, that most students and faculty thought that the frequency of inappropriate language had declined.

There are also possibilities for Other-Study. For example, the school could have students: (1) interview an adult staff member, asking, "How do you think foul language affects our learning environment?"; (2) interview, individually or as a class, an adult who is known not to swear in public and ask, "Why do you avoid using such language? How did you develop that habit? Was it difficult?"

Here, as in other cases, Public Presentation would add to the effectiveness of the other KEYS. Students could be asked to: (1) share the results of their Self-Studies and Other-Studies, what they learned, and what they intend to do to reduce bad language in the future ("I commit to the goal of . . ."); and (2) share what they have experienced as the benefits of their effort to curb swearing. (One high school teacher who challenged his students to set goals in this area says that a number of students later came up to him and said they gained greater self-respect as a result of the self-discipline they exercised in swearing less.)

Conclusion

We wish to conclude by emphasizing that we see the 4 KEYS as synergistic, each gaining power from the others. In our experience, many educators, without naming the KEYS, use them individually but rarely combine them. When they do not, we believe, power is lost.

As a case in point, consider another contemporary character challenge where only modest inroads have been made: cheating. Surveys find that up to three-quarters of secondary students say they have cheated on a major assignment or test in the past year (Lickona & Davidson, 2005). Honor codes, which attempt to build an ELC norm of academic integrity by having students pledge not to "lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate such behavior in my presence," are being used by growing numbers of schools to combat the rising tide of academic dishonesty. But the research (see Lickona & Davidson, 2005) finds that Honor Codes reduce self-admitted cheating only slightly (about 10% in high schools). We would predict significantly greater reductions of cheating if all 4 KEYS, including Self-Study (for example, developing a personal plan for avoiding cheating) and Public Presentation (sharing one's academic integrity plan and holding each other accountable), were systematically applied to this character challenge.

The 4 KEYS can be used across grades and subject areas, co-curricular activities, advisories, remedial assistance, youth development programs, and school and classroom

discipline. With schools that are part of our current Smart & Good Schools Initiative (www.cortland.edu/character), we are training faculty and school leaders to make consistent use of the 4 KEYS in all areas of school life. We will also be conducting research on the conditions that maximize effective use of the 4 KEYS.

The ancient Greeks reminded us that "character is destiny." But capitalizing as educators on the power of character to shape our destiny in positive ways requires good theory and good practice. We offer the Smart & Good Schools vision of the integration of excellence and ethics—developing performance character and moral character—as a broader, more powerful theory than the one that has guided our own previous work and most of the field. And we offer the 4 KEYS as a promising pedagogy for maximizing the power of any character development practice aimed at helping students do their best work and do the right thing.

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