Teachers as Role Models
Teaching Character and Moral Virtues

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Teachers are role models—but what are they modeling?

These are challenging times for education. The public holds schools and teachers more accountable for student learning, as demonstrated by everyone's expectations for stronger student performances on standardized tests and higher graduation rates. Unfortunately, the increased emphasis on reading, mathematics, and science to prepare students for a global, technological, and information-based marketplace seems to relegate the general well-being of students to a low educational priority.

When public schools were established in the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries, one of their stated missions was to teach moral virtues (Mondale & Patton, 2001; Mulkey, 1997). Teachers back then were expected to be morally upright individuals who displayed good character. They were expected to teach and discipline their students to be respectful of authority and responsible in completing their lessons. While maybe not as visibly emphasized today, these expectations remain essentially unchanged. Because of teachers' influential role in the lives of young people, the public still expects teachers to display behaviors reflective of moral virtues, such as fairness and honesty, and to adhere to professional codes of conduct.

A virtue is socially valued, while a moral virtue, such as honesty, is morally valued. According to Lickona (1991), schools and teachers should educate for character, especially through teaching respect and responsibility. As teachers interact with students, it is vital for them to serve as role models of character by making professional judgments and decisions based on societal and moral virtues.

A person of character has the wisdom to know right from wrong; is honest, trustworthy, fair, respectful, and responsible; admits and learns from mistakes; and commits to living according to these principles. Lickona (1991) suggests that character is a universal phenomenon descriptive of people who possess the courage and conviction to live by moral virtues. Character encompasses being good and doing right, while behaving unethically is the antithesis of displaying character. Whenever students get caught up in the emotion of a game and intentionally harm another person or cheat to win, they are not being good or doing right. Similarly, if students cheat on tests or plagiarize papers to get better grades, then their character lacks an essential moral foundation.

A national survey, *The Ethics of American Youth*, conducted by the Josephson Institute of Ethics (2006), compiled these self-reported behaviors of high school students within a period of 12 months:

- 82% admitted they lied to a parent, and 62% admitted they lied to a teacher about something significant.
- 33% copied an Internet document.
- 60% cheated during a test at school.
- 23% stole something from a parent or other relative, 19% stole something from a friend, and 28% stole something from a store.

It is also disconcerting that 27% of these students admitted that they lied in
answering at least one question on the survey. While these responses are not specific to teaching in the PERD fields, will these same students lie, cheat, and steal in their physical education, sport studies, or dance classes? Since the answer is obviously yes, the erosion of virtuous behaviors should be of concern to teachers in our disciplines.

These admissions of unethical behaviors by high school students, however, contrast dramatically with the importance that the students claim to place on character and trust:

- 98% say, “It’s important for me to be a person with good character.”
- 98% say, “Honesty and trust are essential in personal relationships.”
- 97% say, “It’s important to me that people trust me.”
- 83% say, “It’s not worth it to lie or cheat because it hurts your character.”

This “report card” concludes, “Widespread and deep youth cynicism often reflects itself in a rationalization process that nullifies ethical judgment and condones conduct that is contrary to stated moral convictions” (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2006). Thus, the same teenagers who claim that character is important also admit that they lie, cheat, and steal. While it is beyond the scope of this article to fully analyze all of the causal factors for this erosion in virtuous behaviors, this article suggests that teachers should teach and model virtuous behaviors.

The importance of developing character is emphasized in the national standards for physical education. Two of these state that students should exhibit “responsible personal and social behavior in physical activity settings” and choose “physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction” (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2004, p. 11). Physical education teachers can help students meet these standards by stressing the importance of character and moral virtues. While students are learning various sports, teachers can and should emphasize that taunting, gamesmanship, and violence are wrong and are the converse of displaying sportsmanlike behaviors and living by moral virtues.

Mediated sport at the professional level, and increasingly at the collegiate and scholastic levels, constantly bombards young people with the importance of winning. Television promotes taunting through the visual images it chooses to broadcast. Spectators, including impressionable youths, continually feed on a diet of unsportsmanlike and ethically questionable actions. Is it any wonder, then, that students transfer their intense desire to win into morally unacceptable behaviors?

In addition to the world of sports, the media reports on an unending stream of law-breaking actions. Young people read about and see dishonesty, corruption, lying, stealing, and cheating as the way that many people have chosen to get ahead and get rich. These unethical lessons are often adopted by youths who believe these behaviors to be the way they should live their life. What students need are lessons that teach and model just the opposite—moral virtues and character.

According to Gough (1998), the ultimate goal of character development occurs when each person reaches the point where doing “good” becomes automatic or habitual. Like learning a sports skill through sustained practice, morally appropriate actions become natural and consistent. Students need to imitate teachers who are effortlessly honest, trusting, fair, respectful, and responsible in their actions. Solomon (1997) concludes, “It is clear that recent research on character development in physical education demonstrated that the organized physical activity context is ripe for positive moral growth. Furthermore, evidence indicates that unless character development is directly addressed, the moral maturation process will not likely occur. Therefore, the physical educator has the responsibility and opportunity to create situations that will enhance the character development of children in their care.”

The theoretical construct of this article is that teachers can and should serve as role models who teach character and moral virtues (Kohlberg, 1981; Lickona, 1991; Noddings, 1992). The next section suggests that integrity is the bedrock value; it discusses the virtues of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility; and it provides applications that can guide the actions of teachers as they serve as role models teaching character and moral virtues. The succeeding section gives recommendations for teaching students how to reason morally, which will help teachers to model for students how to live a life of character based on moral virtues.

**Building on a Foundation of Integrity**

The epitome of living a values-based life is the fulfillment of moral obligations with consistent uprightness of character, or integrity. This description is true regardless of religion, culture, race, or ethnicity. A person of integrity behaves in virtuous ways, such as keeping promises and refraining from lying, cheating, and stealing. When held up to public scrutiny, teachers with integrity are viewed as morally sound models for young people to follow. For example, it is important for physical educators to demonstrate integrity by teaching fair play and sportsmanship and to serve as role models by respecting all students and treating everyone with kindness.

Teachers model integrity by choosing to do the right thing, even when no one is looking. Integrity means consistently doing what is right, even when it would be easier to do something that is personally more beneficial. Teachers who demonstrate integrity are accountable for providing academic
programs of quality and positive educational experiences. Parents, as well as the general public, expect educators to teach character and virtues that can help shape and mold young people into contributing members of society. Since teachers are entrusted with the safety, discipline, and instruction of P-12 youths for about half of their waking hours, the influence, instruction, and potential learning that occurs at school will be life-changing.

A teacher’s integrity, or lack thereof, is observed by students. Students evaluate the character of their teachers based on how they are treated and taught. Students know when their teachers are committed to their psychomotor, cognitive, and affective learning, and they can tell when their teachers genuinely care about them and are trustworthy, honest, and respectful. How teachers can serve as role models by teaching character and the moral virtues of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility is discussed below.

Honesty. Teachers display honesty by telling the truth and acting in an honorable way. Examples of honesty among teachers include complying with federal, state, and district rules and policies; managing school finances properly; and evaluating the work of students based on established grading rubrics. Honesty includes fulfilling promises and commitments, such as maintaining the confidentiality of student records. Honesty also includes not lying, cheating, or stealing as teachers fulfill their professional responsibilities.

Teachers should stop discussions or activities to emphasize what an honest person would say or do in a given situation, or to correct dishonest behaviors. For example, when the basketball is knocked out-of-bounds, the teacher can ask the students closest to the ball, “Who touched the ball making it go out?” If no one responds, the game is stopped. After reinforcing the value of honesty, the teacher can ask, “Who will be honest and acknowledge knocking the ball out-of-bounds?”

Teachers can explain and show that honesty means telling the truth about why an assignment was not submitted on time; honesty means completing a paper without copying from another’s work or from a web site; honesty means admitting that you touched the net during a volleyball game; honesty means being true to yourself in the quest to learn. As a role model for students, teachers consistently accept the moral obligation to be honest, regardless of the situation. Honesty serves as a prerequisite to trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility.

Trust. An honest person can be trusted. Trust is the belief in others that develops whenever people fulfill their promises and commitments. When a teacher establishes and upholds class expectations—such as providing and following guidelines for written assignments and grading rubrics—students learn that they can trust their teacher. The emergence of mutual trust is a vanguard of education.

Teachers should emphasize the importance of exercising self-control and restraint when challenged and of responding appropriately. Trust replaces apprehension or fear with confidence and openness. When students trust their teachers, an inevitable mistake is transformed from being a fear of failure into an opportunity to learn. For example, teachers can build trust by providing assistance or spotting when a student is learning a difficult gymnastics move or learning how to walk on a balance beam. Trust is nurtured when a student is not demeaned for having difficulty in learning a skill; instead, the teacher should provide additional assistance to facilitate the student’s learning. The teacher should also encourage students to keep trying, by saying, “You can do it” or “You are making good progress,” until the skill is mastered. Trust develops whenever students are told what the expectations are, meet them, and receive the promised rewards. Then students will demonstrate trust by continuing to try to learn a skill, even after repeated failures, because they have confidence in the teacher.

Trust is most effectively taught when it is lived. When students trust their teachers, they do not worry about being embarrassed during class, since they know that a misbehavior or mistake will be addressed individually and privately. Trust is nurtured when students turn to their teachers because they feel they will be listened to when they are struggling with interpersonal relationships, academic issues, or personal problems. Trust is also predicated on the assurance that when students reach out for help, their conversations will be held in strict confidence (unless a legal issue is involved). Trust builds self-confidence in students as they learn to depend on their teachers to help them grow and develop.

Fairness. Fairness is closely linked with trust as students quickly learn whether or not teachers discriminate against them or treat them disparately. Fairness requires that all students have the same opportunity to meet the standards on a written or skill test and receive an appropriate grade. Sometimes fairness may mean treating students differently because this is the right thing to do. For example, a teacher may choose to award a percentage of a grade for improvement, based on how much progress a student has made in learning a specific skill. In this case, the teacher is giving all students an equal opportunity to get a good grade for improvement, but since individuals have unique abilities and levels of experience, they might each receive a different grade.

Teachers should emphasize the importance of exercising self-control and restraint when challenged and of responding appropriately. Students who act fairly and justly do not bully others. If bullying does occur, students must be instructed on fairness, respect, and responsibility so they will know how to behave more appropriately toward others.

Teachers who are fair believe in each student’s ability to learn, and they encourage each person to achieve at the highest possible level. Teachers are fair when they give the high-

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est and lowest achieving students the same punishment for violating a classroom or gymnasium policy. In other words, the most athletically blessed or most intelligent student is punished for being late to class or for misbehaving in the same way that the least athletically blessed or intellectually gifted student is. One way that teachers can show fairness toward students is by showing respect for each student as a unique individual.

Respect. Developing a respectful sense of community within a class is vitally important. This process begins with teachers demonstrating respect for students, regardless of their ethnicity, race, gender, socioeconomic status, or individual characteristics or abilities. Teachers must be unbiased in how they respond to the various levels of skill and ability displayed by their students. Although it can be more challenging to teach a student with less innate abilities, the capability of each student should be developed to the fullest extent possible. Noddings (1992) advocated that moral education is based on teachers showing students that they care for them as unique individuals. Teachers who care show respect for their students by being sensitive to and considerate of their feeling. Civility inside and outside the classroom requires that teachers and students show respect for and care about others. Respect is earned through treating others the way you would like to be treated. When teachers treat students with respect, they receive respect in return.

Real respect requires that teachers care for those students toward whom they might not have a positive feeling. Teachers who model respect will always appreciate each individual student, even when the behaviors of some may be less than worthy of this respect. One way to teach and reinforce the importance of respect is to let others know that lives are enriched because of their unique characteristics.

Responsibility. Teachers demonstrate responsibility by being morally accountable for their actions and fulfilling their duties. When teachers create and sustain a positive learning environment and focus on providing educational services to students and society, they are acting responsibly. Teachers act responsibly by helping to optimally develop the psychomotor, cognitive, and affective abilities of their students. Responsible teachers are well prepared for each class and provide prompt and constructive feedback to students to help facilitate the learning process. Teachers also show the importance of responsibility when they model health-related physical fitness, good nutrition, and the absence of drug abuse.

Don Hellison’s (2003) approach to teaching responsibility through physical activity and sport has proven successful. He works with at-risk adolescents to help them learn to respect the rights and feelings of others, show self-discipline through their participation and effort, help others, and then to apply these behaviors in other aspects of their life. Hellison believes that teachers can encourage students to take greater personal and social responsibility for how they treat others.

Whenever a student fails to complete an assignment or misbehaves, the teacher could use the opportunity to teach students to accept responsibility for making a wrong choice and to make a better choice next time. For example, if students lash out verbally or physically when mistreated by others, teachers can help them to learn restraint and self-control, which lead to more positive and constructive responses. By showing a genuine interest in all students and nurturing a relationship with each of them, responsible teachers can get to know their students on an individual basis. This facilitates teachers’ understanding of how best to help each student grow and develop.

Teaching How to Reason Morally
The starting point for learning to reason morally is to learn moral principles. Principles are universal rules of conduct that identify what kinds of actions, intentions, and motives are valued (Lumpkin, Stoll, & Beller, 2003). These principles are based on moral virtues like honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. In deciding whether such things as lying, stealing, cheating, and failing to keep promises are unprincipled actions, each individual moves through a three-stage moral-reasoning process.

Moral reasoning is the systematic process of evaluating personal virtues and developing a consistent and impartial set of moral principles by which to live (Lumpkin et al., 2003). The first stage is moral knowing, which is the cognitive phase of learning about moral issues and how to resolve them. The second stage is moral valuing, which is the basis of what individuals believe about themselves and others. The third stage is moral acting, which is how people act based on what they know and value.

In teaching the moral-reasoning process, teachers must help students learn the difference between right and wrong. It is easy for students to rationalize their unprincipled actions by saying, “There is no rule against it,” “Everyone else does it,” “What I am doing is not unethical because no one will ever find out,” or “The situation causes me to act in this way.” It is essential that teachers educate students not to rationalize their unprincipled behaviors and instead to use the moral-reasoning process when making decisions.

Recently a student asked the author why a basketball player was permitted to “maul” (the term he used) an opposing player—who typically failed to score on his free throws—in the last seconds of the game just to get the clock stopped. He was bothered that such behaviors were permitted even though they violated the intent of the game. Many players and coaches rationalize that fouling to stop the clock is ethical because it is tactically permitted within the letter
of the rules. Conversely, even though no rule specifies that intentional fouling cannot occur at the end of the game, does such an action not violate the spirit of the rules?

Through course content, during class activities, and in one-on-one interactions with students, teachers must continually emphasize that moral knowing requires that individuals not justify wrong actions by trying to make them seem right. For example, even if the outcome of a game depends on which team has possession of the ball, should the teacher not help students understand that it is wrong to lie about whether you knocked the ball out-of-bounds?

An example of moving from moral knowing to moral valuing occurs in the movie Radio. A few adolescents showed their lack of moral knowing by trying up and taking advantage of an individual with special needs. Only when these adolescents learned to value the rights of this individual did they respect him for what he could do.

Teachers help students to internalize the moral virtues of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility by modeling and continually reinforcing what is right and good. For example, whenever teachers admit to their mistakes and correct them, they show that they themselves accept the consequences of their actions. Such modeling of moral valuing helps students learn that teachers not only talk about virtues, but have incorporated these into their day-to-day actions.

Sometimes moral acting takes courage because it requires a person to stand out from the crowd and be different. Teachers need to bolster students' willingness to make good choices even when faced with peer pressure to act unethically. In a physical education class, teachers can praise students who admit touching the net in volleyball or calling the lines fairly in tennis. If their classmates object, this is an opportunity to reinforce that making the correct call is the right thing to do. Teachers can also provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their commitment to acting morally, such as through self-reported scores on skill tests. Students who refuse to cheat on a test, lie about their age to get into a movie, or download copyrighted music show that they have learned that these activities are not morally justifiable.

Teachers can help students learn the importance of knowing right from wrong, personally valuing what is right, and acting based on knowing and valuing. Stoll and Beller (1998) emphasized,

Moral reasoning does not promise behavioral change, but it does promise individual soul searching and reflection on personal beliefs, values, and principles. Without this process, cognitive moral growth will not increase, behavior change will never occur, and the potential for consistent moral action becomes little more than a hit or miss proposition. (p. 24)

Summary
A teacher with character demonstrates that integrity is a prized possession. Teachers with character serve as role models for telling the truth, respecting others, accepting and fulfilling responsibilities, playing fair, earning and returning trust, and living a moral life. They should model the importance of engaging in a lifelong quest to do the harder right, rather than the easier wrong.

Teachers with character teach their students that individuals make morally principled decisions through the moral-reasoning process. They can help their students know what their values are, believe in these values as an integral part of who they are, and live their life in alignment with these values. Teachers can play an essential role in helping students learn and apply a moral-reasoning process.

Lessons learned inside the classroom and through teacher-student interactions outside of the classroom should be based on virtues. Integrity, honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility should characterize teachers in their relationships with students. Teachers with character deal honestly with students in a trustworthy manner, nurture mutual trust and respect with and among students, treat others respectfully by believing in the inherent dignity of every person, and execute their responsibilities in morally accountable ways. Society is best served when teachers teach and model, and students develop, character and moral virtues.

References


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