

A Case for Character Education in Our Schools

Student Success, regardless of the education system, is the ultimate goal of any school. But what is the true expression of student success? We all want our children to succeed academically, and we also just as much want our children to be virtuous young people, ready to contribute in a positive way to their community. We collectively share a belief in the need to develop and support character education programmes in our schools to prepare our students to be engaged, constructive and responsible persons.

Late one Friday afternoon recently, a Pre-U student, who wished to remain anonymous, presented a found wallet to my office. In her presence I opened the wallet and inside was RM150 and identification. One phone call and 5 minutes later the owner was reunited with his lost property including cash, bank card, ID, and bus pass; which he needed to get home that afternoon. This seemingly small gesture of kindness made me think more deeply about our school's character education programme; its effectiveness and impact on all stakeholders in the school including students, staff and parents/guardians.

When this young lady handed in the found wallet to the Director, she was not only aware of virtuous character, but she also acted on virtues such as honesty, integrity, and kindness. In the case of the wallet, our young lady was aware of the difference between right and wrong, and she also had the capacity to act upon it. At times, we know what we should do; yet we fail to use our moral compass to do right. In this way, character education includes the notion of both cognitive and behavioral traits.

In Education for the 21st Century, UNESCO states, "There is every reason to place renewed emphasis on the moral and cultural dimensions of education..."

The Organization is the only United Nations agency with the responsibility for all aspects of education leading to the 2030 Global Education Agenda. Virtues such as empathy, optimism, courtesy, unity, courage, acceptance, generosity, justice and equality are universal. As today's schools are graduating tomorrow's leaders, character



CHARACTER Development

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education is not only a priority but a sound investment.

The case for character education is clear. A quality education should be an education of the mind and of the heart - it is whole student learning that includes the cognitive, affective and behavioral domains of learning. Quality education means preparing young people to be concerned global citizens who have respect for others in our increasingly interdependent world. Giving students opportunities to understand what it means to be a global citizen through character development is a worthy goal for all schools. Our graduates want to take with them strong ethics that include virtues like understanding, loyalty, risk-taking, perseverance and integrity to their future places of work. To ignore character development risks a disservice to our future selves.

With student success always at the center of our work, the foundation of an effective character education programme is based on the notion that it is a shared responsibility by all school stakeholders. Quality character development programmes are so much more than a virtue of the week advertised on a bulletin board. Oftentimes schools use character education to respond to a behavior problem and this alone falls short, as students typically will not respond to this passive kind of top down, moment in time programme. To be effective, character development is embedded into school life through its policies and practices. It becomes part of the culture with safe and respectful language at all levels that promotes inclusive learning.

The development of virtues such as loyalty and gratitude provides us a framework for positive language and behavior. But it is important to note that quality character development is larger than just the added on extraneous teaching of such virtues - character development must permeate all of school life - from inclusion in classroom curriculum, to participation in sports and extracurricular activities, to how the school itself values its academic climate and discipline standards. Modeling respect at all levels, student recognition celebrating high ethical stand-

ards, a vibrant school spirit with healthy competition, and a focus on volunteerism and service are all at the core of a school with strong character programming. Students, parents and staff and administration ideally have an equal voice in the development of the school's character education culture.

Research demonstrates that robust character development and student engagement in school life boosts academic achievement. When an exemplary teacher creates and sustains a student-centered classroom environment that is welcoming and safe for students to ask informed questions, participate without fear of embarrassment and take risks with their learning - students will indeed thrive and reach their academic potential. Students will know that they belong in this classroom. A 42-country student engagement study by the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment found that one in four students have a low sense of belonging at school. This is concerning and impedes academic achievement. Such data underscores the importance of fostering the relationship between character education, student engagement and academic achievement.

We must remember that intelligence alone is not enough. Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of a true education. - Martin Luther King Jr.

We believe in our students and in their success today and for the future. A robust and relevant character education programme will help them to be responsible members of our communities who will not only maintain but also build upon universal values that we hold dear. Welcoming and safe schools model healthy human relationships where students learn about and act on virtues such as honesty, gratitude, integrity and empathy. Such character development builds upon positive interpersonal qualities that business leaders identify as essential for valued future employees. **E**