



QUDWA 2017

EXPERT MASTERCLASS

Strategies that Effective Character Teachers Use in the Classroom

Sunday October 8th, 2017

Speaker

Dr. Michele Borba, Educational Psychologist, Michele Borba Inc., USA

Summary Paragraph/Key Points

One of the single most important things that teachers can do today is to teach character to their students. But even more important than that is to question and truly understand why we should do this. In a rousing call to action to teachers, Dr. Borba encourages each one to ask: “What is the value of teaching character?”

Sharing global character youth trends, Dr. Borba reveals the following hierarchy:

1. Aggression
2. Narcissism
3. Bullying
4. Incivility
5. Hate Crimes
6. Cheating
7. Weak Integrity
8. Stress and Anxiety
9. Intolerance





قودوا
Q U D W A

10. Depression

Faced with these facts, it is imperative that we prioritise three simple character-building practices across our faculties:

1. Reading / book clubs - Dr. Borba insists that no matter how busy teachers are, it is imperative that we keep reading and discussing books.
2. Google alerts / research - in particular we need to follow the latest research on character education and share it with our colleagues.
3. Ongoing research - our enquiry needs to be ongoing, so we can encourage our students in a continual pursuit of their own character building.

Dr. Borba quotes one commonality across schools that are character-driven, and revealed her own experience: **“I have identified - as a teacher - what my core beliefs or touchstones are.** Once you’ve identified these, it will make or break your entire life,” she claims.

Core to any educational setting are “moral and performance virtues”. Successful schools have a “moral mantra” - a definition of what they stand for. The mantra should be embedded into the fabric of the school, and learned by heart by the children themselves.

“The best schools are culture-driven with their virtues.” But it is not enough to simply define a virtue, as our children often do not know what respect, tolerance or perseverance are. It is our job, as educators, to describe it for them. For example, Dr. Borba says we should explain what respect looks like, sounds like and actually feels like in the terminology of the students themselves. We should then “embed” this into our daily learning, for example an English literature teacher could ask whether Hamlet demonstrates these virtues.

Returning to the topic of character, one of the most important questions teachers can ask themselves is: “What sort of people do I want my students to become?”

Dr. Borba also cites the importance of sharing strong **moral examples**. Aristotle taught us to teach by example, and this worked well in recent history when American children used to want to be a “helper” (such as a doctor or a teacher). Now children are exposed to examples that are less morally sound, as seen on reality TV, and now the majority simply want to be famous. She points out that we have to start showing children living and inspiring examples from history, to help them to understand values such as respect and fairness. She implores teachers to find someone who we can identify as a hero from history, to teach our children to “dig deeper”, and discover that these heroes are actually real. One example is that of Irena Sendler, who a particular class discovered to have convinced parents to smuggle children with her in a suitcase to save them from the Holocaust. The children in the class realised that Sendler was a real person when they saw an inspiring picture of all the children she helped. She quotes Norm Conard, in saying that the single most important thing you can do is to





قودوا
Q U D W A

make sure your children have examples of real, inspiring children that they can look up to.

“Empathy is best elevated with inspiring images. Our kids are seeing images of terror. Show them positive images”, explains Dr. Borba.

So how do you teach character? Dr. Borba shares “The Donut Method”, which has a subject at the centre, an inner ring of virtue and an outer ring of an activity or lesson to develop the virtue. She gives an example of Martin Luther King, as a hero subject, his virtues of equality and empathy, and the associated activity of writing an autobiography or a first-person essay. She explains that – as teachers – you can “boost empathy” with a first-person essay, requiring an expression of specific feelings and words.

She emphasizes the importance of reading literary fiction: “Literary fiction is now clearly correlated to elevate empathy.” Teachers should “weave” the teaching of texts of classic novels with the virtues they emulate, for example *The Diary of Anne Frank* teaches respect, *To Kill a Mockingbird* teaches kindness and *Animal Farm* teaches fairness.

It is critical that teachers help students to develop ethical mindsets. Dr. Borba points out that you can develop a caring mindset in a child, if they realise that they can become more caring or empathetic. She warns that we should be careful with rewards, as they “reduce altruism”. In their place, we can simply use words, such as: “I appreciate how kind or helpful you were.”

Moral discussions are also critical. Narcissism is rising at an alarming level within teenagers. We need to help our children to tune in and develop character, by actually naming virtues. But how do we get our children to increase their moral reasoning?

“We need to get them discussing moral dilemmas from films and books. We should be asking them whether something was right or wrong,” states Dr. Borba. “A brilliant teacher doesn’t give the answers, but stretches the children.”

We need to help children develop moral habits. To do this, we can take the virtues that we think matter most and develop those into habits. If we “walk the walk” it will in turn ensure that our children act more morally.

Dr. Borba quotes Aristotle’s Tenet:

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act, but a habit.”

She demonstrates how we should weave habits into character, and cites examples of “gold standard” schools who teach self-control to their children. This is recognized not as a program but as a process for children, in teaching them how to regulate their thoughts and actions so they act in a way that they know is right.

Referencing “Quiet Time”, Dr. Borba cites this practical and evidence-based approach to reduce stress and dramatically improve academic performance, which is delivering





قودوا
Q U D W A

ground-breaking results across schools in the US.

(<https://www.davidlynchfoundation.org/schools.html>). With proven improvement in test scores, improved teacher retention and a 65% reduction in violent conflict over two years, “Quiet Time” has been described as one of the most powerful and effective school programs in recent times.

Dr. Borba encourages all teachers to implement their own version of this with a simple habit every day. Whether it is taking a deep breath, or a longer period of guided meditation, the results will be tangible. The program has even more impact if children are taught to practice it over a period of 21 days, so that they understand how to form a habit.

Dr. Borba’s key takeaway and conclusion is her TEACH model. In her words:

T = Target - “decide what you want to work on”

E = Exemplify - “tune it up in yourself or bring in examples from newspapers”

A = Accentuate - “weave it in, make it more meaningful”

C = Catch them in the act - “say thank you to the student for displaying the behavior”

H = Highlight - “remind the student of why they should be behaving in this way”

MAIN TAKEAWAY: To help counteract negative examples of modern culture and violence, it is critical that teachers teach morals, ethics and character to children, particularly through literary fiction that has been proven to elevate levels of empathy.

