

# COMING FULL CIRCLE: Teacher Leaders Modeling Good Character

by  
Phyl Burger  
Woodbury, MN

*The values we impart to our children today, consciously and unconsciously, will have a major impact on society tomorrow. If we continue to leave the teaching of values to chance, we as a nation, risk losing an integral piece of our culture altogether.*

*Pam Schiller and Tamera Bryant  
"The Values Book"*

## *Introduction*

**E**ighteen-year-old Raymond was bewildered. He couldn't think of three good things to say about himself. "You know Miss Burger, I just can't think of one good thing about me," he stammered awkwardly. Raymond was just one of 18 students I encountered my first year of teaching. My assignment was to provide vocational job placement for students with mental and physical disabilities. To broaden their self-awareness, one day I asked my students to share three good things about themselves. To this day the image of Raymond struggling to name his good qualities lingers in my memory.

Possibly he was never explicitly told he had good qualities, at least not often enough for him to believe it and articulate them. Day by day, year by year his low self esteem may have been underscored by powerful

yet subtle messages sent via awkward stares, opportunities not offered and a host of other exclusionary gestures. Fortunately, Raymond's story has a happy ending. Like many of his resilient colleagues and despite his limitations, he graduated that year, a confident and contributing citizen of his community taking on a full time job with UPS. Unfortunately, not every story has this happy ending.

## *Practicing What We Preach*

While the majority of Americans say they respect fundamental values—honesty, compassion, justice, courage, perseverance and the like—our students regularly receive mixed messages from an all too complex and troubled society where the public and private actions of politicians, entertainers and sports figures fall far short of these values. The challenge then is to provide our youth with the models of self-esteem, the social skills, and emotional support they need to survive socially, to be successful in relationships, to develop into strong, competent, caring, and responsible citizens.

## *Everyone Knows a Bully*

My career path has led me from the classroom, to educational administration, to corporate America and back to teaching. I have come full circle. But the same principles of good citizenship did not change as I moved from one work place to another. We still need to model for students today how to develop self-awareness, acquire effective communication skills, and learn to resolve conflict if we aim to populate our communities and work places with responsible citizens. As I work with educational organizations and a host of non-profit and corporate businesses to build strong partnerships both within and between organizations, I have come to believe that the partnering skills foundational to success in the classroom are the same skills students will need to succeed in the work place.

Every adult can put a personal face on the name "Bully," drawn straight from their own playground memories. More than just the "flavor of the month," bullying today is a focus of media attention as parents, teachers and administrators regularly express angst regarding school violence and the lack of character among students. Researchers have discovered that some children and teens are particularly drawn to

bullying as a particular strategy for attention getting, as a means to garner respect, or as a source of social power (Noll, 1999). To the extent bullying delivers these perceived social benefits, the behaviors tend to grow and become a pattern. If not checked, this pattern will follow the student from the classroom to the corporation. The result—bad character and bullying in the classroom today, bad character and bullying in the workplace tomorrow.

Researchers have also found that as adults, bullies are more sophisticated, covert and subtle in their approach. Unlike their counterparts on the playground, adult bullies network with each other, display a charming face in the presence of authority figures, and use an array of techniques to discredit their targets and isolate their victims. In the workplace, bullies abuse others to gain power and promotion and to keep potential competitors from replacing them. Today, bad character and bullying have become a workplace hazard.

## *Six Critical Attributes of Character*

I believe a core of six critical attributes of character can be identified, modeled for students and targeted for instruction in order that our students will be successful in the classroom as well as the corporation.

- 1) **Communication – (giving and receiving)**—Helping students to ask for what they need and give others helpful feedback is challenging, particularly at an age with they strive to ‘fit in’ with their peers. Being accepted and belonging is important no matter what our age. We need to model for students how to apply self-disclosure, to assert themselves in respectful ways that help them get their needs met while not alienating themselves from others. Being able to give feedback empowers students to understand their own feelings and share them with others in a constructive manner.
- 2) **Trust**—Perhaps no other attribute is as important for students to master as building trust. Whether with their parents, peers, teammates or friends, the ability to foster trust with others is a hallmark of healthy relationships.
- 3) **Resolving conflicts productively**—Modeling for students conflict resolution skills may be the most important task of our time. We must help students recognize the need for strong interpersonal

skills to build meaningful relationships. Our future requires a generation of skilled problem-solvers, people who can collaborate with others to handle conflict productively, without becoming outrageously defensive or resorting to physical violence. Students must be given the opportunity to increase their ability to create win/win outcomes.

- 4) **Living in the future of the past**—Students are influenced by the world in which they live...or have live in...or want to live in. Helping them understand how they filter information when making decisions, whether it be choosing friends, a date, a movie, job or career path is an important element in being successful in relationships with others. Helping students to answer important questions such as “what am I learning from my past experiences?”, “What does the future look like for me?”
- 5) **Learning through change**—Our students today live in a time of unprecedented change. Their world is transformed when they aren’t selected for the sports team or peer group they desire to be a part of. Even more dramatically when their family life undergoes upheaval and they move from one part of the country to another. They experience first hand just how vulnerable they are when changes occur that are out of their control.
- 6) **Comfort with interdependence**—From the time children learn to walk and talk they are taught to be self-reliant and independent. As our students grow and mature they learn that their life is interconnected with others. We need to model for students that we are more than an island in an ocean of social relationships. They need to want to be a benefit to others and to want to need help from others – to be good citizens.

## *The Challenge of Character Education*

Preparing the next generation of citizens is the greatest investment our society can make today. And yet we often hear, “Why teach character education in school? We don’t have time for this. It seems so disconnected from the rest of my curriculum.” Why does character education seem disconnected from the curriculum?

Part of the answer is illustrated in a story about a lady who had a small house on the seashore of Ireland at the turn of the century. She was quite wealthy, but also quite frugal. People were surprised, then, when

she decided to be among the first to have electricity in her home. Several weeks after the installation, a meter reader appeared at her door. He asked if her electricity was working well, and she assured him it was. "Then I'm wondering if you can explain something to me" he said. "Your meter shows scarcely any usage. Are you using your power?" "Certainly," she answered. "Each evening when the sun sets, I turn on my lights just long enough to light my candles; then I turn them off." She was wired for electrical power, but didn't take full advantage of it by turning on the switch and leaving it on. We're wired, we're connected, many of us have implemented character education programs. But are we neutralizing the power of these programs by lighting dim candles while leaving the light switch untouched? Are we modeling for students how to make the connections between theory and practice, between character and content, between what's preached and what's practiced?

In this issue of the ICSS Journal, five teacher leaders from around the world share with you how they have come full circle; how they have identified core citizenship values, modeled them for their students and partnered with other teachers and parents to integrate them successfully in their schools and communities.

- Mara Kopitsky teaches Advanced Placement and Jr/Sr. English classes at Schuylkill Haven High School in Schuylkill, PA. Mara writes about how she has built service learning projects into her curriculum as a way of bridging the classroom to the community.
- Todd McKee is Secondary School Principal at the International Community School of Addis Ababa in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Todd writes about the value of building strong parent/school partnerships.
- Ursula Pong teaches Middle School Dance at the Singapore American School in Singapore. Ursula writes about how character education can be integrated across the curriculum.
- Julie San Nicolas is a Guidance Counselor at the DODEA Guam South Elementary/Middle School on the Pacific Island of Guam. Julie writes about how current events can help students develop the virtue of compassion.
- Kim Tyo-Dickerson is a School Library Media Specialist at Dryden Middle School/High School Library Media Center in Dryden, NY. Kim writes about how citizenship can be taught even in the school library media center.

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Phyl Burger has been a middle school classroom teacher, high school vocational education teacher, elementary principal, educational consultant, director of special needs programs and university adjunct professor. Currently Phyl is a business and education consultant based in St. Paul, Minnesota where she develops and teaches workshops in partnership with the University of Minnesota and the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis. Prior to establishing her own business Phyl was a corporate manager of training, education and development for Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. She is a skilled public speaker and works as Senior Consultant with Stephen Dent, author and CEO of Partnership Continuum, Inc., a consulting firm dedicated to helping people establish truly great partnerships.

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### *Reference*

Noll, Kathy (1999). Taking the bully by the horns. New York, NY, Unicorn Press.