

Setting goal and DQ Story

Sydney 2000 and the 400m Freestyle, I had achieved more than I thought possible winning this silver medal.

For the past 6 years I have been speaking in schools as an Inspirational Speaker, telling this story to inspire children and teens, but I often felt something was missing in my telling of the story, and it was this - what made me stick with swimming, despite mistakes, setbacks, and distractions, and was it something that I could teach to these students I talked to. Instinctively I think I knew it was certain traits that I had, traits that I could name, such as, resilience, grit, determination, perseverance, self regulation, and focus. But was there anything behind these terms, anyway that I could teach these traits in an effective and inspiring way?

Two years ago I attended a conference called the IPEN Festival of Positive Education where I had a revelation, a lightbulb moment - that thing that had felt so strong and yet elusive at the same time, that instinctive realisation of certain inherent traits in me, was called character. And amazingly there was a bunch of academics dedicated to the research of character, academics from psychology, sociology, philosophy... I felt like my understanding of the world changed, my ability to articulate certain concepts that I felt my inspirational talk embodied changed. I knew what I had to do - I had to learn more, explore more, to ultimately allow me to teach more, as a speaker in schools.

But, I had a number of questions that needed to be answered, I needed to understand the scope of character, and specifically character education out there in the world. This led me to the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, and, of course, the first ever character education degree that was being developed. What this degree and furthering professional and personal development of myself has done has enabled me understand what character is in a wider context, but to also understand how are the best ways to extend character into school cultures in beautifully simple and effective ways.

My first connection to a larger, more explicit determination of character was sport. When you are on a sports team - such as the Paralympic team - there is, of course, certain rules set in place and certain attitudes expected, rules and attitudes that build a culture of striving, hard work, and, perhaps most crucially, positive relationships and mutual support. Regardless of whether you were part of a team sport or an individual sport, there is this sense of team development, that idea of service to others who are striving for the same goal as you. In the Paralympic swim team this was demonstrated by a very simple, but crucially democratically agreed upon team rule - the days you weren't competing you still had to show up to the competition pool to support your team mates, to cheer them on, commiserate when things didn't go well, and to help celebrate when they did. In the team culture there was a natural replication of these character traits, developed through habit and role modelling athlete leaders.

Whereas we all know the benefits that exercise and sport can have on our mental health and wellbeing, it is the development of character through sport that I feel needs to be further explored and acknowledged, but also, how this can be seen as a mirror for how we develop character in schools, and vice versa. Research shows already that developing character through the experience of sport is best done through explicit role modelling by parents, teachers, and coaches. Sport is an opportunity to develop character traits, an opportunity that we can choose to take, and this applies exactly the same to education. But how do we make it an easy choice for schools and teachers to take?

Schools and teachers have it tough at the moment - in fact, a school that my colleague and I worked with last academic year has informed me that as much as they would love to have us back in working with the pupils and staff, they can't even afford pens and paper at the moment. I get it, and as part of the Character Education Organisation that I run with Frederika Roberts - Resilience Wellbeing Success - we have had to respond to two pressing issues. Firstly, schools don't always have the budget for bringing character education into school, secondly, a lot of teachers are not sure what character education is and worry that it is simply just another bolt-on to everything else that they have to do! I wish to dispel both of these issues - at the risk of putting myself out of job here. Character Education should not be costly to implement, in fact, character is already being developed in schools and always has been, in many different ways. The way that a school can bring character further into their culture is to embed it into the curriculum - this means being explicit and intentional with things that teachers are doing already. Which leads me to addressing the second need, character education should never be a bolt-on activity. Character education should be seamlessly woven through the curriculum, with many activities and interventions having the ability to be explored cross-curricular, enabling a creative, unique, and exciting approach to developing character through education.

Many schools Frederika and I have worked with have developed this explicit approach to character in their school cultures - with results indicating that the wider impact on pupils, staff, and parents is positive and life changing. Our question to ourselves was, how can we help more teachers make this an evolving part of their school and educational culture? Our answer? We wrote a book.

Character education is growing and it's approaches are wide and diverse, ranging from the the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues to the VIA Character Strengths to the Character Lab, with the research base expanding and more and more initiatives and activities becoming available for schools. I would argue though that not many teachers have time to read through tomes of research and statistics, looking for the best, simple, and most effective ways to embed character, not just in their classroom, but in the whole school. That was the premise for the book that Frederika and I wrote "Character Toolkit for Teachers", a book that's main aim is to provide a wide and inspiring set of activities that any teacher (or person who works with children) can tap into. We need the research on character education, to ensure that what we are doing best practice for our children, enabling them to flourish in all aspects of their lives, but we also need to understand how we can achieve this in fun and engaging ways. Character can be developed along many avenues, but each avenue should run parallel, criss-cross, and loop round on each other, connecting to each other, leading, perhaps, to a super highway of individual and societal flourishing. Activities should be easy to slip into each and every day, should contribute to the wider academic and life learning of the pupils, and also be cross generational, able to be undertaken with not only 5 year olds, but also 55 year olds. When implementing character please keep in mind the bigger picture.

One team meeting I attended as a Paralympic swimmer I will never forget. We walked into a room and there were ropes and strings attached to chairs and the wall, a veritable spiderweb. Our coaches then told us what we were going to do with this spiderweb - and I want you to keep in mind that we were swimmers who were amputees, paraplegics, had conditions as diverse as cerebral palsy to arthritis. We were told that we had to work as a team to get all of us through the tiny hole in the middle of the spiders web without any of us touching the ground. I tell you now, it was a challenge - but we did it. And through that process our connections, positive relationships grew, our determination and grit grew, but also, our kindness, love, and happiness grew as well - ultimately making us a better team.

Already this morning I have had you do an activity from Character Toolkit, “Sneaky Squats”, pretty quick and simple way to bring physical activity into the classroom or school assembly. I am now going to do one more activity with you, and no, please don’t worry, I don’t have a rope spiderweb waiting for you in another room, instead we are going to get to know each other a little better by doing the “Things we have in common” activity. For the next minute I would like for you to turn to the person next to you and find out two things that you have in common with them - these could be anything, from a favourite book, to countries you have traveled too. Off you go.....

Thank you.