

Ebner, K. (Fall, 2008). Student reaction to discussing integrity. Character education writing assignment, University of Bridgeport. CT.

We have a school-wide reading session every Wednesday in our Advisory's for the entire 20 minutes. Last week, I brought in a news paper article¹ about how this generation of high school students reports more lying, cheating, and stealing than earlier generations, all the while, thinking that they are good kids. I thought that this would be a great article to read and then discuss.

After reading the article, my students were furious! They couldn't understand that a negative article could be written about how youth viewed cheating on tests, homework, and papers as not being wrong while the adult culture justified its own behavior. My students were frustrated with the fact that a lot of the people that they are supposed to view as powerful, influential, and uphold good character do not demonstrate important character traits.

Since my students were born in 1990 (they are now seniors), they have seen Connecticut's governor go to jail, mayors of major Connecticut cities go to jail, and a past president lie on public television saying that, "I did not have sexual relations...". My students were very angry that even the most influential people in their lives (including their parents), lie and cheat. They didn't need to remind me of the divorce rate in America. I felt their frustration. I also felt like I was defeated by lying, cheating, and stealing.

The next day, I gave them an article called "I Would Prefer to Fail with Honor, Than to Win by Cheating" Right on Sophocles", by Dr. Mimi Murray. We read it together in the twenty minutes that we had, and started a discussion. In the article, Dr. Murray looks at the relationship of sport, American values, and education. Murray states her hope, "...is to have people begin to think critically within this area and learn about what is involved in the process of gaining education through sport, or sport through education' (pg.1). The values that one person processes can be the deciding factor as to the outcome of this process. As a PE teacher, I wanted the students to relate this idea to athletics.

According to Dr. Murray, "Values are ideals, deeply held beliefs that individuals consider to be beneficial, advantageous, and significant" (pg 1). Our society has signified that sport is just one of many ways that values can be taught and practiced at any age. At a young age, an athlete is taught that with hard work and dedication to their sport they will one day be rewarded. This same value carries over to education; if the student works hard to achieve good grades they will one day be rewarded.

There are obviously positive and negative aspects to having a sport/education relationship. I wanted to focus on the positive aspects with my students, but not overlook the negatives. They realized and expressed the pressures that come with higher standards in sports. There are more pressures for athletes to do better in school to keep eligibility on the team. This higher standard to them makes it more inviting to cheat to obtain correct answers to problems on exams.

¹ See Josephson Institute of Ethics report-- <http://charactercounts.org/programs/reportcard/index.html>

We also discussed that athletes are known for their ability when they are playing, but when their career is over, how good a player they were is no longer only based on numbers. Their achievement is also based on their conduct and ethical behavior. We discussed Amos Alonzo Stagg who was cited in the article. He is known as the "Father of American Football", and has one of the best win/loss records of any football coach. Dr. Murray noted that Stagg enjoyed winning, but not at any cost. The story is told of how he called a touchdown back on his own team because he saw his player step out of bounds, when the official didn't see it happen. This would have been the deciding touchdown of the game. It said that Stagg is remembered primarily for his integrity and ethics on fair play. Murray states, "Winning isn't worth while unless one has something finer and nobler behind it" (pg 6).

I related this article to the previous day. The previous article stated that a lot of this generation's students blame others because they see cheating being done around them. I told them that with ethics, values, and winning in mind, blaming unethical behavior on others is worse than taking the blame for your own actions. Citing the quote, "Everyone else does it, it's no big deal" (pg 7) is the cheap way of explaining yourself in an unethical situation. I observed that owning up to your mistakes and facing them head on shows more character and success than the number of games won in your career, or the statistics you may be able to accumulate over the years. One should be recognized for how well they play and conduct themselves, not only whether they win or lose the game or the score of an exam.

Talking to my students about honesty and integrity is a huge topic. Trying to implement an "honesty policy" may seem impossible at this point, but I thought that using the two articles to read and discuss during my advisory was a great approach to take with the ten students that I do have in class. I found their responses to be honest and insightful. I am going to give the articles to the other teachers in the school to also read during their advisory time and discuss with their students. It may only be ten students, but it may be the beginning of an "honesty policy".