

Character & Culture: The  
Pathway to Rigor, Relevance, and  
Relationships

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## Research Methodologies

1. A comprehensive research review—producing more than 1400 references (books, studies, reports, essays, etc.)
2. Site visits to 24 award-winning schools where we conducted systematic interviews, focus groups, and observations
3. Guidance from two panels
4. Hundreds of supplemental interviews with students, faculty, staff, administrators, and parents.



The Smart & Good report  
is available free for  
downloading from our website,  
[www.cortland.edu/character](http://www.cortland.edu/character).



Schools need more power to  
meet the academic and  
behavioral challenges they  
face.



Character is power.

—Booker T. Washington



In my travels across the  
country I find schools where  
students are remarkably good  
at something...  
They take whatever students  
they happen to get and  
make them stars.

—Ron Berger  
*An Ethic of Excellence*



## The Season: De La Salle Football 151: The Greatest Streak

ESPN Productions  
Bristol, Connecticut  
February 24, 2005



### "A Star is Made"

By Stephen Dubner and Steven Levitt

- Anders Ericsson and colleagues study expert performance using performance statistics, biographical details, results from their own laboratory experiments with high achievers
- Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance
  - ✓ 900 page academic book published in June 2006

- "The trait we call talent is highly overrated."
- "There is surprisingly little hard evidence
- "Expert performers regardless of the field are nearly always made, not born."
- "Practice does make perfect".
  - ✓ Deliberate practice—setting specific goals, obtaining immediate feedback (coaching), and concentrating as much on technique as on outcome.

In our research on high schools we have been challenged to reconsider foundational questions regarding the theory and practice of character education.

### 4 Foundational Questions

1. What is character?
2. What is character education?
3. What is the role of character in academics—and work in general?
4. What is a caring community?

## Question #1:

What is character?



In Greek, *arête*, commonly translated as "virtue," means "being the best you can be"—reaching your highest human potential.

### Performance Character A Mastery Orientation

- The cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dispositions needed to realize one's potential for excellence in academics, extracurricular activities, the workplace, or any other area of endeavor.
- These dispositions include:  
Diligence, perseverance, a strong work ethic, a positive attitude, ingenuity, and self-discipline.

### Moral Character A Relational Orientation

- The cognitive, emotional, & behavioral dispositions necessary for interpersonal relationships and ethical behavior.
- Moral character enables us to treat others—and ourselves—with respect and care and to act with integrity in our ethical lives.
- Moral character moderates our personal goals to honor the interests of others, to ensure that we do not violate moral values such as fairness, honesty, and caring in the pursuit of performance goals.

### What's the difference?

- Performance is the outcome (the grade, the honor or award, the achievement).
- Performance character consists of those qualities needed to pursue our personal best—whether the outcome is realized or not.
- Talent is the natural ability we are born with (intellectually, artistically, physically, morally, etc.).
- Character development is the process by which we develop the dispositions that enable us to maximize our talent potential.

Each of us is gifted with a Unique Potential that defines a destiny.

A commitment to character development enables us to achieve personal excellence and find fulfillment in life.

We value attitude more than aptitude, effort more than ability, character more than talent.

—School Mission Statement

## NCLB and Character Education

- Short on time?
- Worried about test scores?
- Want what's best for students?

BET ON CHARACTER & CULTURE!



- When we make character the pathway to helping students do their best work and treat each other with respect and care we unlock the real power of character education.
- In the face of NCLB we should be spending more time on character education, not less.



## Question #2

What is character education?



Character education is the intentional integration of excellence and ethics—in the home, school, workplace, and wider community.



For us, this broader definition of character education represents a paradigm shift:

from a focus on developing moral character  
to a focus on developing both

performance character  
and moral character.



## Question #3

What is the role of character in academics—and work in general?



1.) We need performance character (effort, attitude, study skills, perseverance) in order to do our best work—in math, science, writing, etc.



2.) When we strive for excellence in our work, we develop our performance character. We learn to work hard, overcome obstacles, and find joy in a job well done.



3.) We need moral character (respect, kindness, fairness) in order to create the safe and caring environment required for teaching and learning.



4.) Through academics we develop our moral character (empathy, justice, integrity) by:

- Engaging students in a culture of critique—helping each other do their best work
- Examining the ethical dimensions of the curriculum
- Using our knowledge to benefit others (e.g., through community service and democratic citizenship).



In this paradigm we need character in order to do academic work.

We develop character through academic work.



In this paradigm we no longer say:

- “We need to balance character and academics.”
- “Test scores are important, but we also care about character.”
- “It’s easier to teach character through English and history than it is through math and science.”



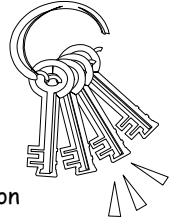
Instead we say:

In every academic subject it is both possible and necessary to develop character—performance character and moral character.



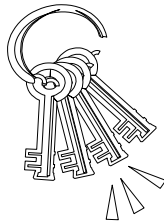
## 4 Keys For Developing Performance Character and Moral Character

- ❑ A community that supports and challenges.
- ❑ Self-study
- ❑ Other-study
- ❑ Public performance/presentation



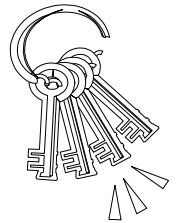
### Key: Community That Supports & Challenges

- Develop a learning community whose members pursue the realization of their own potential for excellence and ethics,
- AND help to bring out the best in every other person.



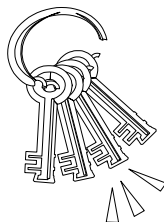
### Key: Self-Study

- Engage in self-monitoring to identify strengths and areas for growth in performance character and moral character.
- Based on self-assessment, set goals to chart a course for improvement.



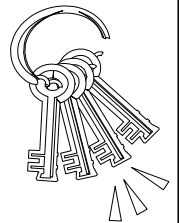
### Key: Other Study

- Study and emulate the products and pathways of individuals who demonstrate performance excellence and high moral character.
- Learn to identify and replicate exemplars' pathways to success.



### Key: Public Performance/Presentation

- Use public performances—exhibitions, competitions, speeches, concerts, shows, "real-world" work.
- Make schoolwork public—sharing sample work, presenting to peers, getting feedback from peers, etc.—to heighten students' responsibility for doing their best work and being their best ethical self.



#### Question #4

What is a caring community?

We call the community that supports and challenges an Ethical Learning Community (ELC).

Members of the ELC support and challenge each other to do their best work (performance character) and treat each other with respect and care (moral character).

#### 4 Groups Comprise the ELC

1. Students
2. Parents
3. Wider community
4. Faculty and staff

In the ELC all four groups support and challenge each other to do their best work (performance character) and be their best ethical self (moral character).


This concept of a caring community is illustrated in Ron Berger's book,

*An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students.*


In Berger's Vision a Caring Classroom Community Provides...

1. Work that matters
2. Models of excellence
3. A culture of critique
4. A norm of multiple revisions
5. Opportunities to make one's work public.

An Ethical Learning Community requires personal responsibility—for doing my best work and treating others with respect and care.




An Ethical Learning Community requires collective responsibility—supporting and challenging others to do their best work and to treat people with respect and care.




In one school with a strong ELC one student said:


In our school, in every class, we are required to learn on a level that is above normal expectations for most schools. We use mastery learning—which means that B work is the minimal standard you must meet—and it takes hours of planning, research, and sometimes more than one revision to meet that. When you do, it feels great.



Our whole program is about perseverance. We explain to students, "With mastery learning we push you out of your comfort zone. At another school, if you fail the test or the paper, that's it. Here we say, "That's okay; you can try again."



Among the faculty there is:

1. A lot of cross-staff sharing of student work.
  2. Collaborative discussion of what constitutes quality.
  3. Sharing of lesson plans.
  4. Critical Friends Groups among faculty.
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We call this the:

Professional Ethical Learning Community (PELC) —faculty and staff collaborating to achieve excellence. The PELC is made up of all school staff.

The PELC leads the development of the ELC.



These practices demonstrate a high level of collegiality—a distinguishing mark of the PELC.

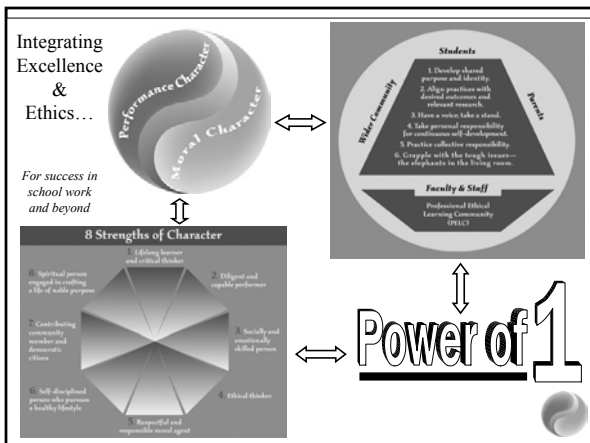
In the report we define performance character and moral character in terms of 8 Strengths of Character or developmental outcomes.



1. Lifelong learner and critical thinker
2. Diligent and capable performer
3. Socially and emotionally skilled person
4. Ethical thinker
5. Respectful and responsible moral agent
6. Self-disciplined person who pursues a healthy lifestyle
7. Contributing community member and democratic citizen
8. Spiritual person engaged in crafting a life of noble purpose.

### Where do the 8 Strengths of Character come from?

- Classical philosophy about the good life
- Psychological theory and research
- Interviews and observations
- Contemporary writings and wisdom
- Cultural indicators
- Positive psychology
- Life-span perspective
- Our grounded theory approach



Character—the pathway to excellence & ethics...

