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Change Your Language, Change Your Life

The power of words lies in their ability to lift us up or bring us down. By choosing the right words, parents and educators can instill in children virtues that are the foundation of good character. Associate Professor Phyllis Chew explains how the language of the virtues can be used to build character through the internationally renowned Virtues Project.



Phyllis Chew aims to build students' character through the Virtues Project that emphasizes on the use of positive language.

"Some people never forget," says Associate Professor Phyllis Chew from the [English Language & Literature Academic Group](#) at NIE. While parents may sometimes use negative words because they want to correct bad behaviour or frighten their children into working hard, this can backfire.

The Power of Language

The power of words is such that they influence our thoughts. A child who constantly receives negative feedback in the form of words can become discouraged and may never live up to his full potential.

"Words can break your spirit just as they can also inspire and transform," shares Phyllis. "This is why people read religious texts. The words last forever and it is the words that change us."

The Virtues Project (VP) is based on this belief that words are powerful and character can be taught through language (see box story). This distinguishes it from other character-building projects that focus largely on service learning or character-building activities.

"Some may say that actions speak louder than words, but for teachers who only have a few hours a day with their students, the words they use daily are what will shape students' attitudes," says Phyllis.

By teaching teachers how to use the words of the virtues – courtesy, perseverance, moderation, truthfulness, empathy and so on – Phyllis hopes to empower them to create a culture of character in their schools.

"Words can break your spirit just as they can also inspire and transform."

– **Associate Professor Phyllis Chew**, *English Language and Literature Academic Group at NIE*

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The Virtues Project

Founded in Canada in 1991 by 3 concerned individuals, the Virtues Project (VP) is a mission to promote empowering strategies that inspire the practice of virtues in everyday life. The project offers personal and professional development training and materials which are helping people around the world to create a culture of character in homes, schools, prisons and corporations. The VP has been honored by the United Nations as “a model global program for families of all cultures” and the Conference of Cities and Corporations.

Virtues: The ABCs of Character

Across the world, the VP has proved an effective intervention tool to address poor student behaviour in schools. One primary school in New Zealand saw the elimination of bullying after the VP was introduced, while the Calgary School District in North America saw a drop in antisocial behaviour and increase in student perceptions of safety after more schools started using VP.

Closer to home, many of us are familiar with the core values of MOE's Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) – respect, responsibility, resilience, integrity, care and harmony. These form the fundamentals of what it means to be a person of good character in Singapore. The six core values also happen to be **virtues identified by the VP**.

“The core *values* in CCE happen to be *virtues*, but there is also a difference between the two,” explains Phyllis. “While values tend to be the things that people cherish, including money, status, health and success, virtues are the essence of a person's character. We also cherish virtues. As such, many values happen to be virtues, but not all values are virtues.”

More basic and intrinsic than values, the virtues are what will help students succeed in life. As Phyllis puts it, “This project is not called the Values Project because it does not teach you *how* to be rich, successful or famous. It tells you that if you have the virtues, you *can be* rich, successful or famous.”

The Language of Mentoring

So what does it mean to teach character using the language of virtues? According to Phyllis, it is about positive communication. In the VP, the words used to build character are the virtues that uplift and inspire.

For instance, if the bell is about to ring and students are all rushing out of class, instead of scolding them, a teacher could say “Please be *orderly*”. The same applies when giving positive reinforcement. If a child does a good deed such as returning a lost wallet, rather than simply praising “good boy”, pointing out “That was *honesty*” would communicate the desired virtue.

“While values tend to be the things that people cherish, including money, status, health and success, virtues are the essence of a person's character.”

– Phyllis Chew on distinguishing between virtues and values

“This is how you build the culture of character. If you use words like ‘Don't be rude’ instead of ‘Be *courteous* now’, or ‘Don't be rough (with the kitten)’ instead of ‘Be *gentle* now’, you waste the opportunity to build character,” Phyllis says. “I use such words so words of virtues in the classroom so that it is embedded in their consciousness.”

Phyllis believes that teachers create a culture of good character the minute they start using words of virtue in the classroom. Students may not know why they feel so supported in a particular class, but it is often because the teacher is using these words that encourage, affirm and empower without them realizing it.

What is important is that the language is used in context at a teachable moment. “This is the art of mentoring,” says Phyllis. “It is not just about lecturing or giving advice, but indirectly guiding people when the opportunity arises.”

Cultivating a Habit of Speaking the Virtues

As conscious practice is needed to become adept in the language of the virtues, Phyllis teaches teachers three ways – *Acknowledging*, *Guiding* and *Correcting* – to cultivate a habit of speaking the virtues in different contexts. Teachers are also taught ‘the three elements’ to help with positive communication (see box story below).

Under her guidance, both the students and teachers at [Temasek Primary School](#) where she is currently implementing the VP have benefitted from the programme.

“Students like [the VP] because they don’t feel threatened. If they’re afraid, I remind them to be more confident instead of saying “Don’t be scared” or “Don’t be timid”, says Phyllis. The VP has also rejuvenated teachers, and this is reflected in a conscious change of vocabulary. “They now think before they speak,” she says.

By embracing the virtues and integrating them into the language used in school, building character can become a part of every school’s culture.

Speaking the Language of Virtues

1. Acknowledging: Catch your students in the act of committing a virtue, and name the virtue. Say it when you see it!

E.g., That took a lot of determination to finish all your work at one go

2. Guiding: Make specific positive requests to prepare your student for the virtue they need to practice.

E.g., Your role will be crucial, so please be punctual tomorrow.

3. Correcting: Learn to see mistakes as opportunities to ask: “What can be learned?” and “What virtue does my student need to practice?”

E.g., You need to be considerate and clear the desk after you have used it.

The Three Elements

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