A disciplined mind, a synthesizing mind, a creating mind, a respectful mind, and an ethical mind: these are Howard Gardner’s Five Minds for the Future (2006). Notably, the first three of these five minds focus on cognitive skills, but the final two—the respectful and ethical minds—focus on how people interact with and relate to others.

Thousands of studies in education, psychology, and neuroscience delve into the types of tasks, activities, and lessons that can strengthen students’ cognitive skills (see, for example, Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Glenn, 2007; Schwartz & Heiser, 2006). Far less attention has been paid, however, to fostering students’ respectful and ethical minds. During the past year, our research has focused on several middle and secondary schools
that are achieving extraordinary academic results while developing students’ respectful minds. One of those schools is the Boston Preparatory Charter Public School.

Boston Prep, as it is known, is a charter school founded in 2004 in Boston, Massachusetts. The school currently serves 350 students in grades 6–12, three-fourths of whom are African American and come from low-income families. Boston Prep’s mission is to prepare students for success in college by cultivating five core ethical values: courage, compassion, integrity, perseverance, and respect.

A Curricular Foundation
Much of Boston Prep’s success rests on the foundation of respect that is explicitly woven into the school’s curriculum and culture. All students participate in a weekly class on ethical philosophy. In this class, they learn how such philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, and Gandhi understood the school’s core ethical values. Students then draw on these perspectives to consider their own roles and responsibilities as students, family members, and citizens.

At the middle school level, the students’ advisory teachers teach these ethics classes; the head of school and a founding faculty member teach the high school ethics classes. Thus, Boston Prep follows in the tradition of America’s earliest universities, at which the final requirement for graduating students was a capstone course in ethical philosophy taught by the university president (McLellan, 1999).

All Boston Prep’s ethics classes for the 2010–11 school year began with a unit on respect. In 7th grade, students considered the relationship between respect and the principles of nonviolence espoused by Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. One lesson considered arguments at recess through the lens of Gandhi’s famous quotation: “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” Many 7th graders initially asserted that they had a right to respond to teasing with physical force—that such a response constituted legitimate self-defense. Drawing on Gandhi’s metaphor, however, their teacher pushed them to consider whether such retaliation constituted self-defense or revenge. Toward the end of the lesson, one student concluded that “more violence leads to more disrespect and doesn’t solve anything.” Another student added “respect of community is what you give to the community, and in turn the community gives you benefits.” Studying Rousseau broadened these high school students’ definition of respect to include the give-and-take nature of belonging to a community and the role that individual community members must play in ensuring a community’s success.

At the end of each ethics unit, students write a treatise that demonstrates their intellectual understanding of the core ethical value they have been studying and a personal reflection about the role of that value in their lives. At the conclusion of the respect unit, one 8th grader, Natasha, explained that “I chose

Both teachers and students at Boston Prep say that the attention to respect and the other core values has played a pivotal role in their success.
Beyond the Classroom

Although ethics class offers a valuable opportunity for Boston Prep students to learn about the school’s core values, Eliot and Fulton (2008) argue that respect and other core values only become embedded in a school’s DNA when they are featured in schoolwide events. At Boston Prep, several schoolwide practices reinforce the lessons about respect raised in ethics class. For example, at a community meeting every Tuesday morning, the entire school comes together for announcements, the word of the day, and the awarding of commendations to students and faculty who have exemplified the school’s core values.

At the first community meeting of the 2010 school year, one teacher stood up and reported that he had been traveling to school that morning on a city bus when he noticed a teenager on the bus giving up his seat to an elderly lady. The teacher described his pride at the realization that the student was from Boston Prep, and he commended the young man for exemplifying respect both inside and outside the walls of the school. As is the custom at Boston Prep, the student body signaled approval by snapping enthusiastically.

The community meeting concludes each week with the presentation of the DuBois Award. The award, named after African American scholar W. E. B. DuBois, is presented to a student whom the faculty feels has exemplified courage, compassion, perseverance, integrity, or respect. At the final community meeting before the 2010 winter break, a teacher gave a DuBois Award to a student who demonstrated respect for herself through her tenacity in working to understand the skills and concepts raised in her classes. The entire student body broke into thunderous applause when the young woman’s name was announced.

Of course, respect and the other core values come up in less rousing moments at Boston Prep. When a misbehaving student is sent to the dean of students’ office, the ensuing discussion focuses on the particular value that the student was not following and the behavior that the student needs to improve. In this way, the school embodies one of the promising practices Lickona and Davidson (2005) cite in Smart and Good High Schools—namely, that effective schools and educators treat disciplinary problems “as an opportunity for character development” (p. 152). The conversations in the dean’s office represent opportunities to foster students’ respectful minds.

Shared Vocabulary

Boston Prep’s founder and executive director, Scott McCue, offers both the conversations in the dean’s office and the weekly DuBois Award as examples of the extent to which respect and the other core values permeate the culture of the school. Ethics class not only introduces students to these values but also builds a common vocabulary that enables the entire school community to talk about them. McCue explains that this common vocabulary enables Boston Prep faculty to praise students’ respectful actions and address their disrespectful behavior with language that the entire community has come to understand.

Discussion of the school’s core values permeates not only teacher talk, but also student talk. As founding middle school principal Amanda Gardner explains, “If you’re walking around Boston Prep during recess and you’re really listening to what kids are saying, you’re going to
hark a lot of language about the virtues. Sometimes it’s them teasing one another, like ‘Oh, you weren’t showing integrity there,’ and it’s kind of funny, but it’s unique and it’s palpable.” By weaving the school’s core ethical values into academic instruction, community building, and discipline, Boston Prep has built a powerful foundation of respect.

A Culture for Success
On the 2010 Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests, 70 percent of Boston Prep’s 8th graders and 90 percent of 10th graders scored advanced or proficient in both mathematics and language arts—scores that are competitive with those of students in the state’s toniest suburban districts. When the first senior class graduated in June 2011, all of the new graduates had been accepted to four-year universities, and the class had collectively earned more than $800,000 in scholarships. In short, Boston Prep is doing its part to close the achievement gap.

Certainly, there is no single strategy that enables a school to demonstrate the extraordinary academic achievement that recently led New Leaders for New Schools (2009) to recognize Boston Prep for its success in raising student achievement. However, both teachers and students at Boston Prep say that the attention to respect and the other core values has played a pivotal role in their success.

Eighth grader Natasha explained that the focus on respect “kind of reminds people what we’re here to do and how we should treat other people.” Fostering a school culture where students know what they’re here to do and how to treat other people would seem to be a powerful foundation on which to build.

Authors’ note: All students are referred to by pseudonyms.

References


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