

## **Health:** Rules and Community

### What if a unit on class rules were about growing together?

Ashley wanted to establish the character of the class for her 9- to 11-year-olds right at the beginning of the new school year. She decided to create a different lesson and join in all the activities herself.

"I began this process by sitting in a circle with the students. In the center, I placed large sheets of paper for recording our responses. I posed the following questions:

- What would we like our class to be like? Why?
- What don't we want? Why?
- Can we create a classroom where everyone can grow and learn?

"We read the responses and discussed them to create a shared vision. To make this more concrete, we used role play to explore the various behaviors and attitudes that make the class a place where students can grow and serve each other. Rather than starting by drafting rules, we discussed the following question, 'What sort of people would we have to be to create this type of class?' The students added virtues to an outline of a person as a response to this. (They were familiar with Christian virtues and values from previous work.) For each virtue they explored the following:

- What thinking, feeling, and doing is involved?
- How can we help each other grow like this?

"We decided what this would look like in terms of classroom practices for both teachers and students. For example, if we wanted a place of respect, a practice might be that if one person is speaking, the others will put their hands down and listen until that person has finished. This involves self-control. Finally, the class decided whether any rules result from this process."

## What's going on here?

Ashley saw that what was needed was a change in classroom culture, not just rules. It is about the people we become. She wanted to move from rules to vision and virtues, and invited students to take responsibility together for a shared climate and their exercise of self-control.

She engaged students directly in negotiating the vision for the class, having them experience the implications of the ideas discussed through role play, and focusing their attention on virtues and how they related to one another.

She reshaped her practice by addressing the layout of the room, the specific questions to be asked, and ways of guiding the interaction of the students (arranging them in a circle).

## What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

The Bible holds up Jesus as the example of what a human being could be, and urges people to develop a character like his (Philippians 2:5) as the basis for living together well. For Christians, the character of Jesus determines the direction of growth in virtue. The fruits of the Holy Spirit are another defining factor: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. Finally, the Christian hope for the future is about a new earth where there is justice, peace, love, and joy, and where people serve each other. The Christian lifestyle is about beginning to live the future now, and practicing an alternative way of living characterized by faith, hope, and love.

## What difference does it make?

Often, we start a year with a set of class rules for which there may or may not be ownership. In contrast, Ashley emphasized the students becoming the people they wanted to be. She also saw this as a communal process, and not just as individuals growing. In a faith-school context, this was explicitly informed by Christian teaching.

## Where could we go from here?

This could lead into journaling, mentoring, or possibly using a buddy system where students of the same age support each other. This approach could lead to further work on personal development and faith formation, as appropriate. Some of the virtues explored as part of this process can be developed across the curriculum and through work units on living in community. The task of considering how to intentionally shape the character of a class at the beginning of the school year is applicable to all classrooms.

## Digging deeper

The Christian life draws from a vision of the people we could be rather than from rules; it is about the people we become, inspired and enabled by Jesus (1 John 2:6). It is also about all that our world could be, inspired by the vision of the new heaven and earth where God's peace and justice reign (Revelation 21:4). Our vision of the future can be drawn in the way we live now.

*Truth lies in character. Christ did not simply speak the truth; he was truth; truth, through and through; for truth is a thing not of words, but of life and being. Frederick W. Robertson*

Rules have their place; they are like the fence around a playground that marks the boundaries, but God wants us to play on the swings—not hang around the fence. Rules alone will not make people act ethically; rules may curb bad behavior, but faith is about much more than that. Just keeping the rules will not make a person a good football player; similarly, just keeping the rules does not make a person a good Christian. Character (or virtue) is about numerous small choices made with God's help. Those choices bring about change until they are automatic and part of our character. It is learning new habits of life.



**Previous:** Rules and Virtues

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