

Putting character education at the centre of teaching and learning

Education at its best should expand the mind and build character.
—Secretary Margaret Spellings

The composer and lyricist, Irving Berlin, said “*our attitudes control our lives. Attitudes are a secret power working twenty-four hours a day, for good or bad. It is of paramount importance that we know how to harness and control this great force*”. Respect is an attitude, or a disposition/Habit of Mind, and a corner stone for character education. Laerskool Fonteine in Sasolburg decided that the purposeful and intentional nurturing of “*respect*” should stand at the centre of teaching that aims to instil good thinking habits among learners at the school during 2016. The school joined the NWU Schools as Thinking Communities project during 2015.

The recent mass protest action regarding study fees at the different universities in the country, often resulting in destructive behaviour, mirrored the lack of, and foregrounded the importance of, cultivating good attitudes, dispositions or Habits of Mind among our students at school. The protest actions revealed how far away we seemingly are in South Africa from equipping students with the competencies to become smarter at thinking and smarter at behaving. There are good reasons for enhancing competencies to both think and behave smarter. This can help to contain violence and aggression in favour of behaviour based on reducing impulsivity, respect for others, problem-solving guided by self-control and creative and critical thinking, and listening with understanding and empathy. The history of humankind will always involve conflict, and schools cannot ignore the fact that competencies to think and behave more smartly should be reinforced in order to benefit human and societal flourishing in the 21st century,

Teachers and learners at Laerskool Fonteine collaboratively decided on what “*respect*” constitutes and developed a “*tree of respect*” that comprises, among others, the following branches:

- Being positive – do not embarrass, insult or make fun of others
- Being trusting - to make choices and take responsibility.
- Being fair – listening to someone’s side of the story before reaching a conclusion.
- Being polite - using "please" and "thank you".
- Being reliable – to keep promises.
- Being a good listener - giving your full attention to somebody.
- Following rules at school and at home.
- Being caring - showing concern for people, animals and the environment.

The staff at the school has been trained on how to integrate “*respect*” as part of character education into the life and culture of the school. Each of the aforementioned aspects or branches that form part of the “*tree of respect*” are dealt with individually, and learners’ behaviours are regularly assessed against well-defined criteria that were formulated collaboratively by teachers and learners. As soon as learners appear to have become sophisticated in the application of a certain “branch”, a following branch will become the focus of attention.

In order to make the focus on character education visible in the school, each learner and teacher wears a red silicon wristband with the word “*reëls* (rules) branded on the band. This serves as a constant reminder of what the focus in curricular and extra-curricular activities at the school is. Different colour branded silicon bands will be used to reflect the various branches of the “*tree of respect*”.



On 12 February 2012 the first group of learners, pictured in the photo below, was identified as those setting examples in terms of respecting the school rules, and were rewarded with Popping Candy Crusher gift vouchers from Kentucky Fried Chicken.



In order to obtain parental support for the project, a parent evening was held on 17 February 2012, where Prof Grosser addressed 200+ parents (pictured below) about the importance of schools becoming thinking communities, and the important role that parents should play in reinforcing the thinking behaviours emphasized in school, at home. The parents applauded the school for their initiative to prepare learners better to face the challenges of the 21st century, and indicated their commitment to reinforce the efforts of the school at home by formulating some house rules to be obeyed by everybody in the family.



Within the character of the citizen lies the welfare of the nation.

— Cicero