

## Lesson direction regarding character strength in the classroom

### Taking Control

“I decided to use the character strengths as the real core of the curriculum, a positive overarching theme that would span the year. I began by asking my students a question: **‘Who is your teacher?’**”

‘You!’ they answered.

‘Nope, not me,’ I said. ‘Who could it be?’ They went on to name other people in the school, or parents, or relatives. Finally, I said, ‘You are your teacher. I am a consultant.’ I then went on to tell them that they each have all the tools inside for a lifetime of learning and we are going to work together to learn how to use them.”

**See the video** ,, All the things that could go Right <https://youtu.be/BdQRECe37K0>

... **distributed a list of sixteen “VIA/Habits of Mind” Character Strengths to her students.** They pronounced them together then he told them they had a special assignment. “Take this list home and ask your family what these words mean. In two weeks, we will meet and gather all of the definitions together.”

Creativity	Empathy (listening)	Courage	Kindness
Curiosity	Reflection	Perseverance	Finding humor
Questioning	Striving for accuracy	Zest	Gratitude
Taking responsible risks	Learning continuously	Self-Regulation	Teamwork



During the following days, a powerful link developed between the classroom and home as the students engaged their families in discussions about courage, love, creativity, curiosity, and more. Positive stories emerged in car rides, around dinner tables, and at bedtime — stories that might never have been discovered.

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Two weeks later, ... and her students settled into a discussion about how they would define each of the sixteen terms as a class. “Now,” she said, “We’ll begin our adventure of spotting these strengths in our world. They’re all around us – and within us.”

### Defining ourselves and our classroom

The tone for the rest of the year – and far beyond—was set. An overarching vocabulary had been introduced that would infuse the curriculum. Students had another lens through which to analyze reading material, group projects, their individual interests, behaviors, successes and “failures.” Most importantly, they had a new lens through which to view themselves and others.

“Because of the strength’s vocabulary, I’ve been able to help kids see themselves in a different light. Things they weren’t sure of about themselves turned from problems to possibilities. One boy had a hard time focusing. When we made individual “curiosity lists,” his revealed fifty areas of interest. This was a child who had basically been written off as a problem student. I can’t begin to say how gratifying it is to be able to show a parent something like that and tell them, ‘Your child has a highly curious mind! Here are some things we will work on in class. This might be fun for you all to investigate together in your free time.’”

**... created a variety of activities that draw from the list of strengths.** Students use daily journal writing to explore their own strengths, describe those of others, and those of characters in their reading material. They write and share stories, poems and drawings and math diagrams of strengths in action with each other, and with the class of 2nd graders they mentor. They’ll receive the list of the twelve remaining strengths at the beginning of the second semester.

The atmosphere in ...’s classroom has changed from previous years. “Kids at this age are typically restless. They are so often looking around, seeing what others are doing, comparing themselves to see how they fit in. By helping them understand their strengths I’ve seen a dramatic shift in my classroom. It is calm. Discipline has improved dramatically. The kids are more relaxed about themselves. They get along with each other better. They go home feeling respected and empowered.”

“For me as a teacher, I am far more inspired and able to feel comfortable in my own style of teaching. I feel like I have found an elixir, that much of my burden is lightened. When I see the “aha” moments, I know my students are aware of their role in learning. I am sharing in their learning process. It’s a nice relief. And I know that parents feel so much happier knowing that their child has been seen for who they really are.”

“Initially, I had a parent who wasn’t keen on the idea. ‘It’s too philosophical,’ she’d said. ‘... not learning what they need to in school.’ But when she saw her son’s journal writing about courage, and how that led him to take part in the classroom play, she understood the connection. When kids are more aware of what’s right with them they feel more at ease with who they are. It is a tremendous boost to their ability to learn.”

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### Strengths Impact - Beyond the Classroom

It wasn't long before that parent took the VIA Strengths Survey herself and returned with her list of results. "I thought you might like to see these," she said. "Maybe we can talk about it when you have more time." She handed ... an envelope and scooted out of the classroom with her child. When ... looked inside, he found a three-page letter. She was grateful for the insight, was appreciating more about herself and was thrilled at what she could share with her child. As a teacher, ... understood immediately what effect this awareness would have on this particular parent/child relationship, well beyond the school year.

"My teaching has never been this rich. I have days where I am helping kids discover who they are, and other days where they, or their parent's, remind me of who I am. When I do finally retire, I'll be so enthused to share this material with others."

... 's ease and enthusiasm infuses his classroom. Her students speak openly about their confidence in their ability to learn. They inspire their families to think about their own strengths, which, in turn, reinforces the fact that they can positively impact others, no matter their age. The parents share their new insights with relatives, friends, and co-workers. ... 's teaching extends far beyond the twenty-four desks in his classroom and well into the future – **a teacher's dream.**

**Material used from VIA.org and Habits of Mind**