Teaching Character: A Practical Guide

Cultivating Student Agency and Virtue Through Student Leadership Teams

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Abstract: *Student leadership teams (SLTs) give students opportunities to contribute to school decision-making by meaningfully analyzing and providing feedback about their learning and school environment. This paper explores how, when implemented using a 6 step Student-Informed Inquiry Cycle, SLTs not only allow students to develop as leaders by putting character virtues into practice, but they also assist schools in establishing more student-inclusive programs and policies that ultimately lead to greater goal attainment for the school.*

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When we consider the virtues and dispositions students will need to face life's obstacles and thrive in the world, a sense of *agency* is at the top of the list. In fact, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development recently named student agency a cornerstone of their 2030 global Conceptual Learning Framework, defining it as "having the ability and the will to positively influence one's own life and the world around them," (OECD, 2019). Studies have shown that without agency, students lack purpose and meaning in their lives, but with it, they show greater motivation to learn and can more confidently manage the challenges they face (Lin-Siegler *et al*., 2016).

Unfortunately, many students, especially those who have faced adversity in childhood, struggle to develop this sense of agency (Duckworth & Schoon, 2012) and tend to have "lower aspirations for their future, less of a sense of achievement and less motivation" (OECD, 2019). Fostering these students' agency can help them overcome these circumstances, but how do we teach agency?

Student Leadership Teams and the Student-Informed Inquiry Cycle

Specialists at the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, a U.S. education consulting nonprofit, have combined a Student Leadership Team (SLT) structure and Inquiry-Based Learning Practices (Murdoch, 2015) to develop a Student-Informed Inquiry Cycle through which agency can be cultivated. Made up of 8-10 students selected to equitably represent all stakeholders in a student body, SLTs go beyond typical levels of student voice in a school, meeting regularly with the school's adult leadership team to address important instructional or environmental school issues. SLTs ideally include 2-3 standing members who serve year-

round and maintain consistency and direction, and another 5-7 rotating members who are selected periodically based on the school leadership team's current goal. However, what sets this SLT structure apart from other student voice practices is *how* it is implemented. While many schools attempt to incorporate student voice into their operations through strategies such as prom planning committees or student surveys, their influence on leadership decision-making often remains superficial and attempts typically fail to engage the students who struggle the most. Kevin Winters, an NIET Senior Specialist and key developer of NIET's SLT structure shared, "Many student voice strategies used by leaders are not getting at the heart of academic improvement or culture in a school, and they often garner feedback from students who are already popular, outgoing, or successful." By implementing SLTs through NIET's 6-step Student-Informed Inquiry Cycle, school leaders can intentionally engage hard-to-reach students, cultivate their agency and other character virtues by enabling them to explore their role as active citizens within their school community, and develop solutions to challenges that are responsive to student needs. Each step, outlined below, provides an opportunity for students to be a part of the solution design, implementation, and evaluation process.

Figure 1: Student-Informed Inquiry Cycle (Winters and Osamba, 2023)
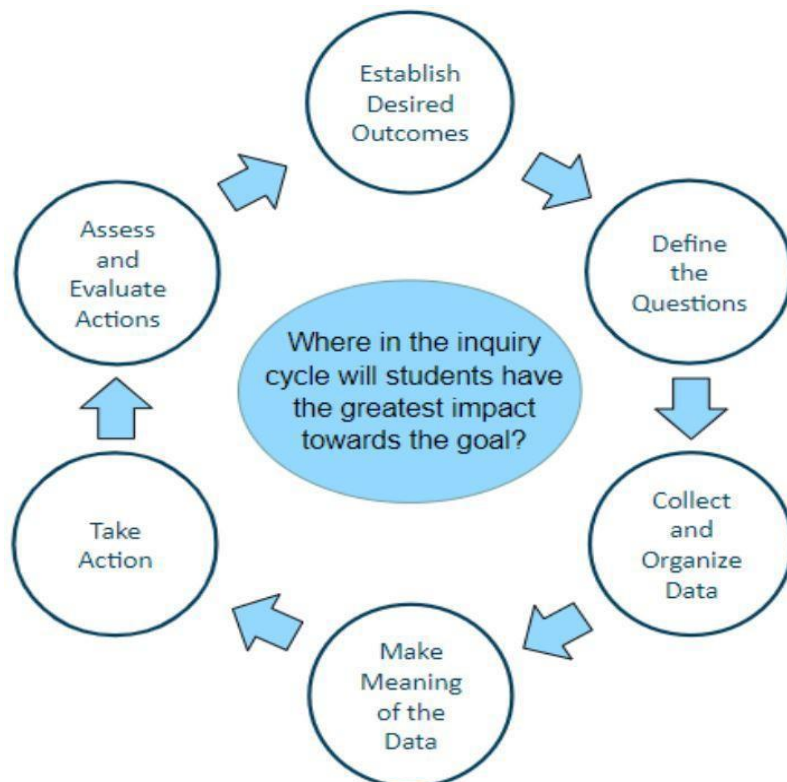
1. **Establish Desired Outcomes:** First, the adult leadership team identifies a school goal and discusses a) which students need to make progress in reaching the desired outcome? and b) which student voices would it be most important to include to get a full representation of student feedback? The answers to these questions should inform the selection of rotating SLT members, and include both those students who have experienced success as it relates to the desired outcome and those who have encountered challenges. Once adult leaders feel comfortable, students can be included in this decision as well, allowing them to think about the experiences of their classmates and practice the civic virtue of community awareness.

2. **Define the Questions:** School leaders identify a list of questions to ask students about the goal, considering where student input is needed to inform solutions. It is important for leaders to frame questions in a way that is non-leading and sensitive to student experiences. When school teams feel comfortable involving students in this step, participating in the question-generating process can develop students' intellectual virtues of curiosity and critical thinking.

3. **Collect and Organize Data:** School leaders establish the SLT by identifying members, outlining a meeting cadence, and determining norms, roles, and responsibilities. Leaders can then collect feedback from the SLT and other students using data-collection techniques such as student surveys, focus groups, interviews, or work samples. Providing students multiple opportunities to discuss and share feedback gives them the chance to practice the moral virtues of courage, honesty, and respect for others' viewpoints. School leaders can also consider how they might involve students in determining data collection techniques and in the data collection process.

4. **Make Meaning of the Data:** While adult leaders may need to organize data in a way students can digest, leaders can involve the SLT in the process of analyzing and identifying trends in the data. This is an ideal opportunity to build students' intellectual virtues of critical and analytical thinking, reasoning, and reflection.

5. **Take Action:** School leaders consider how students can give input on the design and implementation of effective solutions to reach the school goal, as well as brainstorm a role for themselves in actively working towards the solution. This is a critical step for cultivating student agency because it can help them recognize their ability to affect change beyond sharing their

perspective. This may look like student leaders using their influence to engage other peers, or communicating a solution with the rest of the student body. As students practice identifying the people and resources needed to address a school challenge and take steps to implement their solution, they cultivate the intellectual virtue of resourcefulness and the performance virtues of teamwork, confidence, and leadership.

6. **Assess and Evaluate Actions:** Finally, students are included in the process of tracking and evaluating the success of the implemented initiative. Giving students time to reflect on the impact of their actions builds efficacy, while they can develop the performance virtue of perseverance by reflecting on why they may not have met their goal and brainstorming next steps. Additionally, practice using data to inform next steps sharpens student contextualized decision-making, allowing them to build the integrative virtue of practical wisdom.

The Impact of SLTs and the Student-Informed Inquiry Cycle

In her paper conceptualizing learner agency, Schoon states that "to be an agent in the learning process involves the ability to act intentionally, to make things happen, and to be a product as well as a producer of the social world" (2018, p. 3). Implementing SLTs using the Student-Informed Inquiry Cycle creates opportunities for students to do just that. This character teaching practice can have a long-term impact on individual students and the health of a school. Each step of the cycle provides a chance for students to see character virtues modeled by adult leaders and practice putting them into action. The cycle also provides students with a comprehensive problem-solving toolkit they can apply when life's challenges arise. Finally, when adult leaders strategically engage struggling students in this process, SLTs provide adults with invaluable information needed to implement the right supports for those students, while building struggling students' belief in their ability to positively impact the world, which can transform their experience in school and beyond.

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