

Character Driven

In everything she teaches, Pareen Gill, OCT, looks for ways to nurture the whole child.

BY STUART FOXMAN

At Connaught Public School in Collingwood, Ont., Ann Boucher once had a student named Pareen. School wasn't fun for her. Pareen, the only student there with brown skin, had been bullied the previous two years. Every day, she'd come home crying. Now, in Boucher's Grade 4 class, Pareen found an ally.

Boucher showed kindness and compassion. She sought ways to compliment Pareen, and encouraged her to try out for basketball, which Boucher coached. Pareen excelled. "She was a special girl," says Boucher. "I tried to make her feel good about herself and increase her confidence."

This isn't a story about Boucher. It's about Pareen Gill, OCT. That little girl decided on her career right then, in 1991 in Grade 4.

"That's why I wanted to be a teacher, to help other children the way Mrs. Boucher helped me," says Gill. "Empathy, caring and respect are values I have today because of Mrs. Boucher, who demonstrated these as a teacher. I knew one day when I was a teacher, I'd do everything to bring those traits to my students."

She has. In 2019, Gill earned a Certificate of Achievement from the Prime Minister's Awards for Teaching Excellence. The award summary states that for her, character "matters as much as academics."

Gill, who teaches Grade 3/4 at Nottawa Elementary School in Collingwood, is in her 13th year of teaching. She started her career at Connaught, where Boucher was her colleague for six years.

Looking back, Gill doesn't remember much of the curriculum from when she was in Grade 4. But she vividly recalls



Pareen Gill, OCT, fosters an inclusive and caring environment for her Grade 3/4 class at Nottawa Elementary School in Collingwood, Ont.

It all ties back to the same teaching mission of nurturing the whole child. “Teaching character shouldn’t be seen as an ‘extra’ expectation,” says Gill. “It should be embedded within all strands we teach.”

Boucher’s character lessons. “If you’re a good person,” says Gill, “the possibilities are endless in the world.”

Nottawa focuses on 10 character traits throughout the year, highlighting one each month. The list includes the three values Gill mentioned — empathy, caring and respect — along with co-operation, courage, honesty, inclusiveness, integrity, optimism and responsibility. Gill looks for every opportunity to instil those traits with students naturally, through her approach and the subject matter.

Consider the book *Stone Soup*, which describes how members of a community each contributed ingredients for a soup to feed the hungry. Gill teaches the story, and tells her class that if one of them is in need, a helping hand or even a smile goes a long way. “We have to open our hearts and minds to each other,” Gill said.

“Pareen really believes in having a community of learners,” says Margaret Allard, OCT, the teacher-librarian at Nottawa.

Just having the students work together in groups, for a common purpose, teaches co-operation. If a student has completed his or her task, Gill also expects them to support someone who may be struggling with the same task. That’s responsibility and caring in action.

“It empowers them. They feel accountable,” says Gill. “When I say who’s the teacher, they say all of us. When I say who’s the student, they say all of us. We work together to get the job done.”

Gill also has students acknowledge the ways they show consideration for each other. She prints sheets that say, “You filled my bucket today,” with spots for students to write something to a classmate. One wrote, “You are my best friend because you have always accepted me. Also you are always kind.”

“She focuses on the idea of giving,” says Tamara West, OCT, a Special Education teacher at Nottawa. She calls Gill’s attitude of gratitude part of “the culture of her classroom.”

And beyond. Gill had her students write “gratitude” on a stone. At Thanksgiving, the children took out their stones and passed them around their family tables, asking everyone to state what they were thankful for.

Character education weaves into everything. For instance, Gill’s classroom has a poster chart titled “Developing a Growth Mindset.” It puts learning into perspective. Instead of feeling “this is too hard,” the chart says, try thinking “this may take some time.” Instead of “plan A didn’t work,” think “there’s always plan B.”

Gill celebrates successes, but also gives permission for failure by reframing it. She says FAIL stands for First Attempt In Learning. Another favourite saying: practise makes progress. Nobody is perfect, she says.

“It’s OK to experience challenges,” says Gill. “I want to get their thoughts working positively.”

The growth mindset fosters a sense of optimism. That and a sense of responsibility also inform how Gill structures parent/teacher interviews. She doesn’t lead the process. Instead, students sit at the centre of a half-moon table, facing her and their parents.

The arrangement sets up the student as the leader. Students create the report card and walk the parents through their work, using stars (strengths) and arrows (areas to improve) to review their progress.

“They create their own success criteria in groups, and the children are accountable,” Gill says.

Nottawa’s interim principal, Lindsay Richards, OCT, says you can tell a lot from a classroom walk-through. “I look for the atmosphere, the sense of belonging,” she says.

In Gill's classroom, the environment is inclusive, another of the character traits. The way the students treat each other and collaborate — "You *feel* it," says Richards.

Beyond the classroom, Gill has had her students participate in Bowls for Beds, a fundraiser for a transitional home for youth. She talks to her students about homelessness, and at Christmas spurs school-wide donations for a women's shelter. "I want to bring the character traits to life. How can we make a difference?" Gill says.

It's important that her students grow in every way. It all connects. Roxi Shaw, OCT, who teaches kindergarten at Nottawa, says Gill's celebration of character creates a safer and more enriching environment. That supports overall success. Character and the curriculum "intertwine to develop an all-around person," says Shaw.

Students will meet the curriculum expectations to different extents. Some days will be better than others. That's reality. But all students, every day, can demonstrate a character trait.

What's powerful is that Gill acknowledges those traits, says Barbara Op't Hoog, OCT, who teaches Grade 1/2 at Nottawa (she taught Grade 3 with Gill last year). When Gill routinely identifies and notes something special about each child, students feel that their character matters. "When you feel better about yourself, you feel better about school," says Op't Hoog.

"Character education in Pareen's classroom is the foundation on which she builds her academic program," adds Boucher, who retired in 2018.

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"We must be models first and foremost," she continues. "Children are

more apt to listen and follow instructions if educators are genuine in our approach, through our thoughts, words and actions. Character education helps people develop ethically, intellectually, socially and emotionally."

Gill takes the lead in the school's empathy spirit assembly, which reinforces messages about appreciating the feelings and actions of others. One of Gill's favourite quotes: It's wonderful to be loved, profound to be understood.

Last year, Gill also co-ordinated Nottawa's first ever Black History Month assembly. She shared resources with her fellow teachers, so that they, in turn, could educate their students. For Gill, the assembly was about more than a valuable history lesson.

"It's part of the big picture of character, how people weren't treated fairly or equally. But we can make a better world, starting with our little bubble," says Gill.

She invited a special guest to the Black History Month assembly: Boucher. "She was the first person who didn't see me as a colour," says Gill.

At the end of the assembly, Gill showed her old class picture from Grade 4. She asked Boucher to stand up, and spoke to the Nottawa students about her influence.

This was the teacher who showed Gill so much about doing the right thing and about hope. Boucher was the teacher that Gill turned into. The one who wants her class to succeed as students and people — to be the best possible version of themselves. And to feel they're capable of giving their all and giving to others.

Then, in front of everyone, Gill addressed Boucher. "I said thank you for teaching me to believe in myself." **PS**

The Ontario Certified Teacher featured in this profile has been recognized with a teaching award and exemplifies the high standards of practice to which the College holds the teaching profession.

Hitting the brain gym

Character education builds leaders. Calm classrooms build a supportive learning environment. Pareen Gill, OCT, addresses both of these goals through an exercise called "brain gym."

Here's how she does it.

- She starts by teaching about different parts of the brain: the prefrontal cortex ("to help us make wise decisions," says Gill), the amygdala (which acts as their "security guard") and the hippocampus ("our memory saver").
- For several weeks Gill leads mindfulness sessions. The students massage the parts of their heads that serve as "energy points," and notice how this affects their state of mind.
- Once students know the drill, they take turns leading the sessions after recess. A chime rings, and the students "exercise" their brains to get them ready.

Gill says brain gym helps the students to self-regulate and focus. She adds, "It helps us to think, learn and behave our best."