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Character and Attainment: Does Character Make the Grade?

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Character and Attainment: Does Character Make the Grade? The Research Evidence

‘far too neglected in the current debate there is a set of behaviours and attitudes, a kind of social literacy that we must foster. An exclusive focus on subjects for study would fail to equip young people with these, though rigour in the curriculum does help. These personal behaviours and attributes – **sometimes termed character** – play a critical role in determining personal effectiveness in their future lives, and should be part of our vision.’

(CBI First Steps Report, 19th November 2012)

The research evidenced below provides support for the positive association between the principals of good character, and more explicit character education, with academic attainment. A positive direct relationship is consistently evidenced between character and academic success, albeit sometimes small in size. In addition, the evidence highlights the positive impact that character education can have on students’ behaviour and well-being, and the favourable consequential influence this can have on academic attainment.

Direct Links between Character Education and Academic Attainment

Jeynes (2017)

Meta-analysis of 52 studies of character education (predominately based in the US) found there was a positive association between character education and academic achievement, particularly in reading and maths. These effects were found regardless of differences in students’ ethnicity and socio-economic status.

- Character education programmes that had been implemented over a year had the strongest positive effects on achievement.
- The positive effects between character education and achievement were stronger for high school students (aged 14-18) compared to younger elementary school children (aged 5-10).
- Significant positive associations were also found between character education and behavioural outcomes, such as increased self-control, reduced disruptive behaviour, and higher expressions of love, honesty and compassion.

Diggs & Akos (2016)

A positive overall effect was found between character education programmes and academic success in US middle schools, although small in effect size. Follow-up analysis revealed the association between character education and grade point average was non-significant but a significant moderate effect was found between character education and higher mathematics performance. Character education programmes were also associated with lower student school referrals (i.e. tardiness and suspensions) and more positive student attitudes and beliefs.

Arthur, Deacon Crick, Samuel, Wilson & McGettrick (2006)

UK students responses to the dimensions of “living my values and virtues”, “community engagement” (similar to civic virtues) and “political engagement” were all positively associated with higher GCSE achievement.

Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith (2003)

A study of 681 elementary schools in California showed that schools with higher total character education implementation tended to have higher academic performance scores in reading, language and maths by a small but significant margin. Three specific indicators of character education emerged to show the strongest correlations with prior and current academic attainment, as well as attainment in the subsequent two school years. These were:

- When teachers modelled and promoted good character education
- When students were offered opportunities to meaningfully contribute to their character development
- When the school encompassed a safe secure learning environment

Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo (2000).

Students’ prior prosocialness, an indicator of good character by reflecting cooperativeness, helpfulness, sharing, and being empathic, was found to positively predict future academic achievement, even after controlling for variation in early academic achievement.

- Prior student prosocialness was also positively associated with their peers’ future desire to study, play or be associated with them.

Indirect Links between Character Education and Academic Attainment

Weber & Ruch (2012)

The study drew a distinction between heart-related (e.g. gratitude, hope, zest) and mind-related (e.g. love of learning, prudence, perseverance) character strengths, with both types positively correlated with students' satisfying school experiences, academic self-efficacy, and positive classroom behaviour. In turn, the mind-related character traits predicted higher school achievement both directly, and as consequence of better classroom behaviour.

- Students that increased in school grades across half a school year also reported statistically higher scores in character traits compared to students that decreased in school attainment.

Wagner & Ruch (2015)

In UK primary school (mean age = 11.16 years) and secondary school (mean age = 14.4 years), character strengths were associated with positive classroom behaviour, which in turn predicted better school achievement.

Weber, Wagner & Ruch (2016)

Character strengths were positively correlated with higher student reported well-being. Higher student well-being was then found to mediate the relationship between students' character strengths and positive school functioning. This process, in turn, was found to lead to higher teacher-rated academic achievement.

Snyder, Vuchinich, Acock, Washburn, & Flay (2012)

Schools that incorporated 15 to 20 minute character education lessons, delivered by teachers, into an elementary school curriculum significantly improved reports of better overall school quality from baseline to the end of the 1 year trial by their teachers (21% increase), parents (13% increase), and students (16% increase) compared to the schools that did not implement the programme. These character education lessons were tailored to enhance students' social-emotional development.

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