



Teaching Character: A Practical Guide

Character Taught & Sought: One Big Idea

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At Severn Academies Educational Trust, we believe developing the good character of our young people (aged 3-19) is the fundamental aim of education. We have designed a 'Pledge' to our students which provides the framework for our young people to achieve our mission of 'Growing Brilliance' through the notion that we all have brilliance within us. Our trust core values of Growth, Excellence, Ambition and Respect, overarch and compliment those of our eight individual schools, enabling them to connect deeply with the communities they serve (Arthur *et al.*, 2017). Through the Pledge we create multiple opportunities for our children to be curious learners, think critically from an early age, and foster civic engagement in our local communities. Our schools utilise many of the strategies outlined in The Character Teaching Inventory (Arthur, Fullard and O'Leary, 2022) under the 'caught, taught and sought' approaches in our curriculum. One Big Idea is one such initiative.

One Big Idea was launched during the second UK lockdown (January - March 2021) with the simple tenet of challenging pupils to think of an idea that might just change the world. The initiative was sparked by the Primary Children's Council. They wanted to find a way to (re)connect and inspire their peers during this period of uncertainty and isolation. Unknowingly, these pupils locked into a key purpose of character 'caught', desiring to develop and maintain positive relationships for all stakeholders (Arthur *et al.*, 2017). During a time where pivotal relationships had been ripped away overnight, through this request, I was provided with the provocation to impart new 'taught' and 'sought' opportunities for character development in our pupils.

The 'rules' of One Big Idea are simple. Think of an idea. Design/create a prototype. Deliver a 3 minute pitch as to why your idea will change the world. The open ended nature of One Big Idea provides a multi faceted approach to teaching, learning and character development, evolving into a central part of our curriculum. Initially, out of necessity, the key strategies of enquiry based and Independent learning were implemented, as we were not physically able to be in the same space. Now, these two elements are central to the successful delivery of One Big Idea. Resources are provided to work through, supplying structure to scaffold learning in an age appropriate way. Teachers and Learning Support Assistants provide guidance and questions, not answers, to ensure that the emphasis of solving the problem remains squarely with pupils.

To ensure all pupils are involved, the process commences on an individual basis, providing the freedom to be autonomous in how to approach the challenge. Pupils tap into their curiosity, allowing for the exploration of issues *they* want to solve. This has posed moral dilemmas to resolve, such as their personal use of plastics and what they can do to change habits, particularly in their own school and local community. After initially mapping out their individual ideas, pupils share in small groups. This diversity of thought further helps evolve their original concept, introducing cooperative learning, facilitating the development of cooperation; the need for communication and teamwork for the idea to be a success. The group decides which idea they wish to pursue, together designing a prototype and creating a compelling pitch for their peers. Again, this process is all pupil led, so they have to undertake the critical thinking, reasoning and reflection enabling them to act as role models to peers (Arthur, Fullard and O’Leary, 2022) for the character we are seeking to develop (Berkowitz, 2011). This evokes engagement and intellectual curiosity firstly at class group level and then at whole school level, as pupils work to become their schools representative for the trust finals. Some truly innovative ideas have been brought to life by pupils of all ages including:

- The Fun Trolley. A supermarket shopping trolley that has fun activities and attachments to make shopping less of a chore for children (Year 2).
- Freddie Frog, a powerful water pump used in residential areas where flooding is commonplace (Year 3).
- The Mobile Insect & Bee Home. A mobile home for insects and bees to move around and pollinate endangered flowers (Reception).
- 2021 winner, My Little Teddy Friend. A teddy that helps children who struggle to share their emotions, linked to an app to be able to inform parents of major worries or concerns (Year 5).
- 2022 winner, The Know It All Pen. A pen you ask to check the correct spelling of words before you write them down (Year 4).

- 2023 winner, The Plastigon 2000. A solar powered marine life shaped robot that collects plastics from the sea, recycles them and turns them into pellets used for construction of roads or homes (Year 2 & 4).

By providing the opportunity to grapple with real life challenges, pupils have entered into a cycle where their ability to provide critical reflection and solutions to the problems presented has risen dramatically. Their level of curiosity has increased, demonstrated by the willingness to ask questions and engage in debate with peers and staff. The repeated engagement in intellectual discussion about ideas has harnessed self motivation for pupils to become more autonomous in their decision making (Arthur *et al.*, 2017) and more inquisitive, pushing their own boundaries further. We have seen a rise in confidence in their oracy and presentation skills. Standing in front of a large number of people, articulating their vision and mastering the art of persuasion, irrespective of age, has been second nature, the new normal for these young people.

The bar is rising every year, with one group introducing the use of market research this year to price their product. This kind of innovation is making it more difficult for the judges to select just 'One Big Idea'. The next evolution of this initiative is to see how we, the adults, can facilitate bringing some of these ideas to business and industry to achieve the stated outcome of creating an idea that might just change the world.

References

Arthur, J., Harrison, T., Burn, E. and Moller, F. (2017) *Schools of Virtue: Character Education in Three Birmingham Schools: Research Report*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

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Berkowitz, M. (2011) 'Leading Schools of Character', in Blankstein, A. M. and Houston, P. D. (eds.) *Leadership for Social Justice and Democracy in Our Schools*, USA: Corwin Press, pp. 93-122.