



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Insight Series

*Character and Ofsted: Considering the New
Inspection Framework in Practice in 60
Birmingham School Reports*

Catherine O'Leary

Research Fellow, Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues

University of Birmingham

Aidan Thompson

*Director of Strategic Initiatives, Jubilee Centre for Character &
Virtues*

University of Birmingham

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Introduction

In 2019, Ofsted announced a new [Education Inspection Framework](#) for schools which included new language about character under a heading of ‘Personal Development’. Ofsted, having consulted widely with stakeholders, have revised its Framework around four areas where ‘Key judgements’ are made in inspections. Those being: ‘quality of education’, ‘behaviour and attitudes’, ‘personal development’ and ‘leadership and management’. Under personal development, the Framework sets out that:

Inspectors will make a judgement on the personal development of learners by evaluating the extent to which:

- The curriculum and the provider’s wider work support learners to develop their character – including their resilience, confidence and independence – and help them know how to keep physically and mentally healthy.

In the [School Inspection Handbook](#), Ofsted define character as ‘a set of positive personal traits, dispositions and virtues that informs their motivation and guides their conduct so that they reflect wisely, learn eagerly, behave with integrity and co-operate consistently well with others. This gives pupils the qualities they need to flourish in our society.’ This definition of character is very similar in construction to the definition used by the Jubilee Centre in its [A Framework for Character Education in Schools](#). Jubilee Centre staff consulted with Ofsted colleagues during the developmental stages of the revised Inspection Framework on the place of character in education and how it is understood by inspectors. The correlation between the Jubilee Centre’s definition of character and the definition used by Ofsted indicates the impact of those early consultations and suggests a shared understanding of the meaning of ‘character,’ strengthening its importance in schools.

The Jubilee Centre hosted a conference for teachers at the University of Birmingham campus in May 2019, after the Framework had been finalised but before it had been implemented; at this event, Roary Pownall, the Ofsted National Lead for PSHE and Citizenship, introduced the reasons for formally including character and explained its position under Personal Development. The event was attended by over 200 teachers and practitioners. The Framework was then implemented from September 2019 and used in school inspections across England and Wales.

This paper discusses the application of the Framework during the inspections of 60 Birmingham schools in the first two terms of its use (Autumn 2019, Spring 2020).

Specifically, inspection reports of the 60 schools were scrutinised for the use of the language of character and virtues, and how it was utilised within each report. The way in which the 60 schools were selected is explained in the Methodology section, and the main findings from scrutinising the reports are explored below. In short, though, the use of the term ‘character’ was somewhat absent from the 60 reports that the authors studied. This is, perhaps, not surprising given that this was the first term under which the new Framework had been implemented, and the first time the explicit use of character in the Framework had been included. Indeed, this paper seeks to celebrate the instances in which ‘character’ was cited, explicitly and implicitly. It was through the language of virtues that character was captured in the majority of inspection reports, with a range of intellectual, moral, civic, and performance virtues appearing frequently. The findings are discussed in the context of it being the first two terms during which the new Framework had been implemented. The purpose behind looking at a selection of inspection reports from Autumn 2019 was to see the initial and immediate application of the Ofsted Framework in practice. Practitioners have reflected on the explicit inclusion of character in the Ofsted Framework, but only theoretically to date (see [Fullard et al., 2019](#); [Beale, 2019](#)). Looking at inspection reports and considering how inspectors have applied the new Framework is a new endeavour. The Covid-19 pandemic, which has affected most aspects of life this year, also stopped Ofsted inspections, so there is only limited data to consider at the current point in time. However, schools have been recognised for their character provision under the new Framework (see for example [Aylesford School report, 2020](#)). This exercise was intended to explore how widely that language of character and virtues had permeated reports on schools that were less familiar to the Jubilee Centre, and selected at random. The ways in which school reports were selected is explained in more detail below.

Methodology

In an attempt to discover how many schools across Great Britain have been inspected under the new Inspection Framework, the online tool, ‘[Find an inspection report](#),’ provided on Ofsted’s website, was used. The search function allows for filtering by primary and secondary schools, childcare and early education settings, children’s social care, and other organisations. It was decided that, for ease, the researchers would begin with filtering primary and secondary school reports only. This resulted in 22,149 reports across Great Britain being identified. However, it proved difficult to then filter this data set down further so that only

schools who had been inspected since September 2019 remained. This was crucial to the focus of the research, therefore a more experimental approach to applying the search variables was required. By experimenting with the search functions provided, it became apparent that a time frame could be applied if a more specific location was used. As a result, the geographical area was concentrated on one particular city in order to gain an initial glimpse of how the new Framework was being used and implemented by inspectors in that area of the country.

It seemed appropriate to begin by examining Ofsted reports of schools located within the city of Birmingham, since this is where the Jubilee Centre is based. Again, a search was conducted using the 'Find an inspection report' tool provided by Ofsted. On this online platform, initial filters were applied to identify primary and secondary schools within 10 miles of 'Birmingham' that had been inspected between 1st September 2019 and 20th October 2020, a time frame of 13 months. When applied, these filters produced a list of 162 school reports in total, the first of which was dated September 2019 with the last inspection taking place in March 2020, due to subsequent school closures as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This reduced the time frame to 7 months. In order to make the number of reports to consider more manageable, an additional filter was applied to reveal only the schools who had been graded a good or outstanding rating as a result of their inspection. It was deemed suitable to focus only on schools who had been graded either good or outstanding for the purpose of this study as the intention was to consider the application of the language of character, and the assumption was that such language may appear more frequently in reports on schools that were considered good or outstanding. The intention was to return to the data and consider the schools eliminated by applying this filter. The filter reduced the dataset down to a list of 89 schools in total. The final stage involved selecting reports which had resulted from either a Full Inspection (section 5) or an Inspection of a Good School (section 8) from mainstream state primary and secondary schools. Safeguarding reports, interim reports and monitoring visits were excluded, since the focus of these inspections or the level of detail in the reports did not extend to Personal Development and character. This resulted in 60 school inspection reports being identified, which was deemed an appropriate and manageable number for the size and scale of this initial study.

From applying the same filters to other UK cities including Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle, it was found that the number of reports were similarly manageable, providing scope to widen this piece of research further to include other parts of the country and gain a

broader picture of the impact the new Framework is having nationally. It is recommended that the study be replicated to consider other locations, as well as reports on schools that did not achieve good or outstanding.

When approaching each inspection report, a focus was placed on identifying instances of use of the language of character and virtues by the inspector. A record was kept of any explicit use of the term ‘character’ and a quotation containing this word was noted to view the context in which it was used. In addition, any language the researchers deemed to be an implicit reference to character, personal development, or virtue, was also recorded and key language highlighted to draw attention to how and where such vocabulary was being used. When looking for implicit references to character, The Jubilee Centre’s [*A Framework for Character Education in Schools*](#) was referred to; in particular, the virtues identified as forming the four building blocks of character were used as a way of drawing out similar language from the reports. This method of identifying and recording both explicit and implicit references to character within each inspection report provided a useful overview of the frequency of such language use and the context in which it was applied.

Findings

- Six explicit references to character were identified out of the 60 reports considered. Of these six, one was in reference to the ‘religious character’ of a school, but the other five were in reference to the character and personal development provision of each school;
- Where character was explicitly mentioned, it was seen to be a valued aspect of the school’s provision by parents and pupils, and by inspectors. It was praised for being promoted by leaders and was seen to be encouraged through a range of exciting curriculum activities across different areas including culture, sport, health and getting out into the community;
- Reports held multiple positive mentions of extra-curricular activities (e.g. Duke of Edinburgh, school trips, residentials, chess club, debating, sport, music and cookery), implying that an importance is placed on such activities by inspectors and that they view these opportunities as contributing towards students’ character and personal development, even if this is not made explicit by linking such activities with the particular use of the term, ‘character’.

- The language of virtues (similar to that found in both the Ofsted Framework and the Jubilee Centre *Framework*) was found in the majority of reports. It was rare for a report to have no evidence of virtue language at all (even if this was sometimes more implicit than explicit). The use of virtues referenced in the inspection reports covered all four categories of virtue in the Jubilee Centre *Framework* – intellectual, moral, civic, and performance – suggesting that inspectors were not limited to identifying virtues more easily recognised in practice; indeed, reports cited everything from ‘respect’ to ‘empathy’, and from ‘curiosity’ to ‘resilience’, as well as more generally positive phrases that recognise the character of a school such as ‘many [pupils] thrive here’ and ‘[pupils] display a sense of moral purpose’.

Discussion

The exercise of exploring Ofsted reports from inspections that have taken place since the introduction of the new Inspection Framework was intended to shine a light on the prevalence and usage of the language of character and virtues and consider the application of the new Framework in its first two terms (Autumn 2019, Spring 2020). The main findings identified above indicate that inspectors were comfortable using the language of virtues, rather than identifying ‘character’ explicitly, as virtually all 60 reports contained some virtue language in them. Indeed, the frequency of appearance of the language of virtues across all 60 reports was a hugely positive finding, and something which deserves more attention and discussion.

Five of the six *explicit* references to character congratulated schools for their character provision. One school was applauded for ‘developing character and leadership skills’, whilst another was commended for how well its ‘leaders promote pupils’ character’. The importance of having strong, clear and purposeful leadership when it comes to character education has been highlighted both by the Department for Education (2019) and Ofsted (2019). Moreover, numerous Jubilee Centre reports, focussing on schools which are exemplars in their character education provision, found leadership to be crucial in implementing an intentional, deliberate approach to character education (Thompson, Fullard & Edwards, 2020; Fullard & Watts, 2020; Arthur *et al.*, 2017; Arthur & Harrison, 2014). Indeed, one study found that a common feature of the schools where pupils performed best on a moral dilemma test was the presence of at least one teacher who was passionate and knowledgeable about developing the whole child and who led the implementation of character education successfully (Arthur *et al.*,

[2015a](#)). Clearly, having a leader, or – ideally – a team of leaders, to introduce, direct and champion character education, is paramount and it is encouraging that an Ofsted inspector highlighted and praised this feature when inspecting a particular school.

Another school was celebrated for its provision as it's 'curriculum aims to build strength of character', and a fourth school was noted as it's 'pupils learn to gain in confidence and develop strength of character.' In two of the schools where character was referred to explicitly by the inspector, it was done so with an accompanying reference to an established programme of activities, aiming to build character. Inspectors drew attention to the '[School's Name] Gold Award' and 'The [School's Name] Bucket List,' both of which include opportunities which range from culture to sport, health and community, as well as visiting the countryside and working with older neighbours. Extra-curricular activities of this nature are central when discussing character education. The DfE ([2019](#)) highlighted a similar programme, named 'The Charter' in a Greater London school, whereby 60 enrichment activities were compiled into a list which pupils were challenged to work their way through. Extra-curricular activities are frequently mentioned in Jubilee Centre reports as an effective way of supporting character development ([Arthur et al., 2015a](#); [Arthur et al., 2015b](#); [Arthur & Harrison, 2014](#); [Harrison et al., 2016](#)). One report focussed on how students learnt to 'be' through such opportunities ([Arthur et al., 2015b](#)). The explicit link between extra-curricular activities and developing character – identified in two of the inspection reports – was echoed implicitly throughout the remaining reports read by the researchers; it was rare for a report to not mention a school's enrichment provision. Perhaps as the Inspection Framework becomes more embedded, the relationship between extra-curricular activities and character will be more pronounced within inspection reports.

As previously mentioned, most of the 60 reports studied contained reference to creative curriculums and extra-curricular activities. Whilst some well-known activities and programmes were often cited – Duke of Edinburgh, debating and cookery – some reports contained reference to less explicit activities, and highlighted schools who support pupils in becoming 'active citizens', 'enrich pupils' experience and encourage teamwork' and encourage pupils to care 'for a world beyond their school and the local community'. The Jubilee Centre has celebrated schools that provide for character in different and creative ways. *Windows into Schools: Celebrating Character* does this with particular case studies on schools that have enhanced enrichment curriculums and focusses on youth social action and citizenship ([Thompson, Fullard and Edwards, 2020](#)).

Outside of explicit references to character, some reports included terms such as ‘moral purpose’, ‘shared values’ and that pupils ‘thrive’ – all of which suggested that inspectors were aware of the character and personal development provision of each school that they were inspecting, as well as the requirement to inspect for it under the new Framework. It is worth noting that inspectors seemed particularly comfortable using and applying the language which appears in the updated Inspection Framework with regards to character. In particular, the phrase ‘personal development,’ alongside the three areas specifically listed as contributing towards character – those of ‘resilience,’ ‘confidence’ and ‘independence’ – were used frequently by inspectors in their reports. Recurring phrases such as ‘sixth-form students are **confident** young people,’ pupils ‘grow [in] confidence and become more **independent**’ and ‘they learn how to be **resilient**’ demonstrate the ease with which this terminology is used, a positive finding which shows that inspectors are referring to the updated Framework and deliberately using the language promoted there. Where other virtue language was identified (which was not to be found first in the Inspection Framework) it was sometimes in reference to a school’s mission statement or set of shared values which the school in question had decided upon. For example, one report highlighted ‘The Minworth Pledge’ which promoted values such as ‘determination, responsibility, respect and tolerance.’ Another school had ‘golden values’ of ‘respect, resilience, reliability and responsibility’ which were seen to ‘underpin school life’. It seems that schools who overtly draw attention to their own values encourage inspectors to do the same, providing them with a language with which to reflect upon the school’s provision of character.

Inspectors often recognised that the character provision in schools, whether specifically calling it character or referring to it via the language of virtues, was something that was often valued by teachers, pupils, and parents. Outside of the six reports that explicitly referenced character, numerous other reports cited where parents had praised the school for focussing on particular virtues, or where parents had expressed a shared sense of value for it. As the Jubilee Centre has explored, character provision is enhanced through meaningful parent-teacher partnerships ([Harrison, Dineen and Moller, 2018](#)).

The prevalence and frequency of the language of virtues, found throughout all of the 60 reports studied, indicates both a familiarity with using the language by inspectors, and the priority that such language has been given by Ofsted in including focus on character in the Framework. The range of virtues found in the inspection reports creates a sense of confidence and positivity that inspectors are not only looking for virtuous behaviour from pupils but are

comfortable in recognising how and where such virtues are developed by schools. This gives heart that, as school inspections return and inspectors become further accustomed to implementing the new Framework, the language of virtues will continue to feature in Ofsted inspection reports. The variety of virtue terms utilised in reports was also complemented by the range in which they were celebrated. By this, we mean that Ofsted inspection reports are generally quite formulaic documents. There are phrases and structures that remain the same between reports, regardless of the inspector who has written them, or when the inspection took place. What broke through the repetition of phrases about attendance, curriculum, bullying and safeguarding was the language of virtues. For example, phrases such as ‘personal development’, ‘personal growth’, ‘moral development’ and ‘moral sense’ could all have been replaced with ‘character’, for they all referred to the positive outcomes of focussing on character and the overall aim of schools to develop the whole child. Further, including references to such community activities and links as are created through extra-curricular activities – celebrating the ‘good’ and ‘active’ citizenship that pupils demonstrate – reflects the community aspect of character development. By including character under the Personal Development heading of the Framework, one criticism could be that Ofsted view character development as an individual exercise, done in solitude or isolation. However, that was not the case at all from the 60 reports studied. Primary and secondary schools were celebrated equally for their focus on community awareness and participation in the community, reflecting that character development is indeed a shared activity that benefits not only the individual, but the community as well.

Only considering reports of schools rated good or outstanding has certainly limited the study, and it may be that an abundance of positive virtue language is found ultimately because the schools are good at what they do. Therefore, it is not possible to generalise findings beyond those schools considered. It is, therefore, worthwhile exploring the language of virtues in reports of schools that have not achieved good or outstanding to see if there are still positive references to character and virtues, or whether they are approached differently. As mentioned above, Ofsted reports are typically formulaic documents that repeat set phrases between reports, and follow a particular structure. It is worth exploring how the language of virtues endures in reports that focus primarily on schools that are not achieving a standard expected of them by inspectors.

Conclusion

To conclude, this experimental activity was intended to explore the presence or absence of the language of character and virtues in Ofsted reports of schools which were inspected in the first two terms after the new inspection Framework was implemented. A particularly striking and encouraging finding was the prevalence of the language of virtues in the majority of reports; this study found that inspectors were comfortably identifying virtuous aspects of a school's life and foregrounding these examples as praiseworthy and notable features of their provision. This gives confidence that inspectors did assign importance to character education – given that most reports in this study referred to it – even if this was done so implicitly. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that the explicit inclusion of 'character' in the Framework filtered immediately into the inspection reports themselves, with 10% of the random sample of reports read in this study containing explicit reference to character. Given that character has only recently been included in school inspection terminology, this can be taken as a positive first step towards character becoming a priority for school inspection agendas. As schools return to something approaching normal, and so as inspections resume – following a challenging period which has tested everyone's character – the focus on how schools support pupils' personal development amidst cancelled examinations, disrupted learning and prolonged time spent away from the classroom, may strengthen the position of character as seen in school inspections and see it referred to more frequently in reports, using an updated Framework which is becoming all the more established and familiar to the inspectors who use it.



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Insight Series

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues is supported by the John Templeton Foundation.

- ◆ *Pioneering interdisciplinary research of international standing focussing on character, virtues and values in the interest of human flourishing.*
- ◆ *Promoting a moral concept of character in order to explore the importance of virtue for public and professional life.*
- ◆ *A leading informant on policy and practice in this area through an extensive range of research and development projects contributing to a renewal of character and values in both individuals and societies.*

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham | Edgbaston | Birmingham | B15 2TT

www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk 0121 414 4875