



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Insight Series

*Character and Ofsted: Considering the
New Inspection Framework in Practice in
105 London School Reports*

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Introduction

The 2019 Ofsted Education Inspection Framework for schools included new language about character under a heading of 'Personal Development'. This inclusion followed broad consultation with stakeholders from across education, including colleagues from the Jubilee Centre. Following the Department for Education (DfE) prioritisation of character under Nicky Morgan's tenure as Secretary of State (2014-16), continued by subsequent Ministers, the alignment of the Ofsted Framework with DfE guidance on developing the character of students made sense.

Ofsted used a definition of character that was largely similar to the Jubilee Centre's definition in describing 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' ([Ofsted, 2019](#)). As these authors have written previously, this similarity between the Jubilee Centre's definition of character and the definition used by Ofsted is an example of the impact that the Jubilee Centre has had on educational policy, and on affirming the importance of character in the purpose of education. This paper seeks to expand upon the findings from the first paper by looking at a new cohort of Ofsted reports.

In a previous paper ([O'Leary and Thompson, 2020](#)), the authors have considered the place of character in Ofsted reports of Birmingham schools, with inspections conducted since the new Ofsted Framework was implemented in 2019. With the severe disruption to schooling caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, it was only possible to consider a small number of reports from inspections conducted in Birmingham schools in Autumn 2019 and Spring 2020 (n=60). With this paper, we have considered a larger cohort of schools that were inspected during the same period of time, with these schools being from London (n=105). In considering reports from inspections conducted in a different city at the same time as those in paper one, it is possible to draw comparisons and contrasts with how inspectors in different regions of the country were interpreting and applying the new Framework in the first few months after its implementation.

As with the first paper, inspection reports were scrutinised for the use of the language of character and virtues, and analysed for how it was utilised. The way in which the schools were selected is explained in the Methodology section, and the main findings from the reports are described later. In short, though, the use of the term 'character' was identified in 10% of the 105 reports, although this was not always done so in reference to character as defined by either Ofsted or the Jubilee Centre. Six instances of the particular term 'character' were used by inspectors to either describe characters from literary texts (n=3) that schools had showcased in lessons or assemblies, or to denote the 'religious character' of a faith school (n=3). There was only one reference to the 'religious character' of a school found in the analysis of Birmingham inspection reports, and there were inconsistencies across both datasets where it was not used to describe all faith schools. These references to 'character' increased the frequency with which the term appeared in the overall study, but bear little relation to the definitions of character used by Ofsted and the Jubilee Centre.

Other findings were similar to the first study, in that the language of virtues was captured in the majority of inspection reports, with a range of intellectual, moral, civic, and performance virtues appearing frequently. In addition to the explicit mentions of virtues and virtue language, the authors of this paper found a larger number of implicit references to character than in the first paper, which is discussed below. Overall, the term 'character' appeared in the same percentage of reports as Birmingham schools, and the explicit virtue language was similarly prevalent across all reports. However, the implicit references to activities and pedagogies that can build character were more prevalent than in the Birmingham study. The reports were being viewed through a lens of character and virtues, so some of the implicit pedagogical references may not all have been intended to reflect

character, however, they can certainly be built upon by schools seeking to make their provision for character education more explicit, as current Jubilee Centre research is considering.¹

There is still little written about the application of the new Ofsted Framework in terms of inclusion of character, such has been the disruption to schooling and to inspections over the past year. The theoretical references cited in the first paper remain the most recent and relevant considerations of Ofsted and character, in addition to that first paper (see [O'Leary and Thompson, 2020](#); [Fullard et al., 2019](#); [Beale, 2019](#)). It is heartening, as researchers on character, that the language of character and virtues has permeated Ofsted reports in the first inspections under the new Framework. This exercise was intended to explore how widely that language of character and virtues had permeated reports on schools that were unfamiliar to the Jubilee Centre, and selected at random. The ways in which school reports were selected is explained in more detail below.

Methodology:

The process of identifying a sample of school reports for the purpose of this research is explained in detail in the methodology section of the first paper (O'Leary and Thompson, 2020). In short, the online tool, '[Find an inspection report](#),' provided on Ofsted's website, was once again used and several filters were applied to narrow down the number of reports to a manageable amount. In order to replicate the study to consider an alternative location, all the filters that were used to identify the set of reports for the Birmingham research were kept the same, with the exception of the location filter; this was changed to London in order to broaden the scope of the research and explore what impact the new Inspection framework was having on an alternative geographical area. The rationale behind choosing London as the next city to study was its position as the capital, its larger sample size, and its similarity to Birmingham with regards to being a diverse, multi-cultural, urban part of the country.

An initial search for Primary and Secondary schools within 10 miles of the city of London, which had been inspected between 1st September 2019 and 30th October 2020 and received a good or outstanding grade, resulted in 188 schools being listed. The latest Inspections took place on 10th March 2020, due to school closures as a result of the pandemic, reducing the time frame of the sample to 7 months. These Inspections were carried out either as a Full Inspection (section 5) or an Inspection of a Good School (section 8). Safeguarding reports, interim reports and monitoring visits were excluded, since, as stated in the first paper, the focus of these inspections or the level of detail in the reports did not extend to Personal Development and character, which was the emphasis of this research. Schools which had been graded either 'Requires improvement' or 'Inadequate' were not considered, in keeping with the approach taken during the first phase of research which looked at 'Good' or 'Outstanding' Birmingham school inspection reports. The researchers then manually selected state and mainstream schools from the list, thereby excluding Pupil Referral Units (PRU's), Special Schools and Independent Schools from the selection. Again, this was to keep the sample consistent with the school reports analysed in the first phase of research. Completing this process reduced the sample size to 105 Inspection Reports of London schools, compared to the 60 which were analysed from Birmingham; the larger number of reports reflects London's size as the capital city, its population density, and the number of schools serving communities there.

As a result of using an identical process to select schools, the researchers could consider the comparisons between the two sets of reports, with location being the only variable to change. Each London school inspection report was approached in the same way as the Birmingham school inspection reports in that the focus was on identifying instances of use of the language of character and virtues by the inspector. A record was once again kept of any explicit use of the term 'character'

¹ See 'Character Education Pedagogies: What works, where and why?' [Online]. Available at: <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/2936/projects/character-education-pedagogies> (accessed 16 April 2021).

with an accompanying quotation containing the word to help view the context in which it was used during the analysis stage. 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. The Jubilee Centre's [A Framework for Character Education in Schools](#) (2017) was used to help draw out virtuous 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 enabled a direct comparison to be made between the two sets of reports.

Findings:

- Recognisable virtue language (similar to that found in both the Ofsted Framework and the Jubilee Centre *Framework*) was found throughout most reports, either to describe learners themselves or what virtues a school prioritised. Whilst the use of virtues referenced in the inspection reports did cover all four categories of virtue in the Jubilee Centre Framework – intellectual, moral, civic, and performance – the researchers found fewer references to moral virtues in this set of reports and more to performance virtues including resilience, confidence and perseverance;
- Ten explicit references to character were identified out of the 105 reports considered. Of these ten, three referred to the 'religious character' of a school and three were in reference to characters used in literary text. In addition, there was one reference to each of the following: desirable behaviours embodied by characters such as 'Respectful Rosie,' the learning power characters used by a school, the environment and taught subjects;
- Researchers identified several implicit references to practices for developing character. In particular, inspectors remarked on whole school practices including: leaders and teachers having high expectations for all pupils; developing strong, positive relationships across a school community; and the development of a certain kind of school environment;
- Reports held multiple positive mentions of experiences outside the regular curriculum and beyond the classroom to broaden knowledge of the world and develop character. This once again implies that an importance is placed on such activities by inspectors and that they view these opportunities as contributing towards pupils' character and personal development.

Discussion:

Similar to the Birmingham school reports, a range of recognisable virtue language occurred frequently throughout the 105 London school reports read by the researchers, which reinforced this particularly positive finding from the first phase of research. Compared to the Birmingham set, reference to virtue language was weighted more towards performance virtues in the London reports. Whilst examples of moral virtues such as 'honesty' and especially 'respect' did appear, it was noticeable that general language was often used to describe pupils' moral behaviour such as 'polite,' 'courteous,' 'friendly,' 'well-mannered' and 'helpful'. The prevalence of these types of adjectives may reflect the confidence Inspectors felt commenting upon such aspects of a pupil's character, since they are easier traits to observe during a short one-day inspection, compared to 'compassion,' 'courage' or 'gratitude' for example, which are arguably more difficult moral traits to observe. Nevertheless, commenting upon pupils' behaviour using this language still indicates that Inspectors were looking for virtuous behaviour from pupils and prioritising it during their inspections.

Performance virtues including 'resilience', 'confidence', 'independence' and 'perseverance,' as well as pupils being able to 'work well together' recurred frequently throughout this set of reports. Again,

these character traits are potentially more obvious to an Inspector during a short time frame compared to moral or civic virtues. The particular use of ‘resilience,’ ‘confidence’ and ‘independence’ reflects a finding from the first phase of research – that Inspectors were drawing on the language used in the updated Inspection Framework, since those three areas were specifically identified as contributing towards character. Overall, these findings indicate that inspectors were familiar with using the language of virtue, since it appeared in all 105 inspection reports, but that they perhaps felt more comfortable identifying character traits of a performance nature.

Of the ten specific references to ‘character’ found in the dataset, there were different uses of the word. There were three references to a ‘character’ or ‘characters’ from literary texts, or characters that schools had created having been inspired by a particular book or activity. One report cited the creation of two characters which could be seen to reflect character as understood by Ofsted or Jubilee Centre definitions. Reference to ‘Respectful Rosie’ appeared in one report, as a school had focused on a particular set of virtues and brought them to life through the creation of fictional characters that embodied the virtues in question. There is little, if any, reflection on the use of such characters for personal development or specific character development in the report, but it is no stretch to deduce that inclusion of it descriptively can be seen as praising its application.

Another use of ‘character’ was to denote the ‘religious character’ of schools. Of the ten examples, a further three were to this usage, in spite of nearly a third of the schools looked at being faith schools. The inconsistencies of how the term was or wasn’t used across all faith schools is open to debate. Of course, when applying a character and virtues lens to such analysis, then the phrase is seen to reflect the character and virtues of the school. For a school to be of ‘religious character’ is a common term in Ofsted and in education more broadly, as per Long and Danechi (2019), but it is generally used for information about the school rather than any evaluation of character provision. We can turn back to the Ofsted definition of character used in the new Framework, that character is ‘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.’ There is no religious context given to this definition – indeed it is intended to be secular, and applicable in any and all forms of education. That said, the language of character can be viewed through a religious lens (see from the Jubilee Centre [Arthur, 2019](#); Arthur, 2021; [Arthur et al., 2019](#); [Church of England Education Office, 2015](#)). The assumptions made here are that whilst the term is used independently of any consideration of the character development that a school provides pupils with, when researching use of the language of character in Ofsted reports, it can be connected with character as per the Ofsted or Jubilee Centre definitions.

Elsewhere, and perhaps of greater relevance to a study of character and virtues, character was referred to explicitly by one Inspector in the form of reported speech, as an example of pupil voice. The Inspector reported, ‘they say that they experience an environment which develops their character, interests and passions’. This is encouraging to see use of ‘character’ in an inspection report in this manner, although it was the only instance where ‘character’ appeared in reported speech in this dataset of reports. It is encouraging first and foremost because it highlights how the pupils of the particular school were themselves confident in using the language of character to articulate their views on their education, but also because the Inspector chose to include this reference to it in the overall school report, emphasising that they felt it was a significant finding from their Inspection. Moreover, the feature which was identified by the pupils as contributing towards their character development was the environment; attending a school which has established a certain kind of environment, conducive to character education, can greatly impact a pupil’s experience of school life and contribute towards their flourishing. It may be that Inspectors viewed the establishment of a particular environment by a school as being part of their ‘wider work’ in developing pupils’ character, as mentioned in the updated Inspection Framework. Numerous

references to a positive school environment, described using a variety of adjectives, were found by the researchers in this set of reports, and will be explored further in this discussion section.

In one Primary school report, the Inspector drew attention to the way in which 'subjects provide a wide range of activities that support pupils' learning and character development'. Teaching character throughout the curriculum and through various subjects has been an area of focus for The Jubilee Centre and numerous research reports and resources have been produced to enable this to happen effectively ([Teaching Character Through Subjects](#), [Teaching Character Through the Curriculum](#), [Teaching Character Through the Primary Curriculum](#)). For an Ofsted Inspector to recognise the formal curriculum as a space in which character may be developed reinforces the idea that character can be taught through a range of carefully planned activities which engage learners in reflecting on their character, whilst also covering the academic curriculum content. This finding also indicates the impact of the revised Inspection Framework where 'the curriculum' is highlighted as a way to 'support learners to develop their character'.

Alongside recognisable virtue language and explicit references to character, whole school practices were observed by the researchers in this set of Inspection reports which could be interpreted as contributing towards character education. Three themes in particular emerged: having high expectations for pupils, developing positive relationships, and establishing a certain school environment. Whilst Inspectors did not draw explicit links between these practices and character development, the researchers recognised the important contribution such practices make to character being caught within a school. The updated Inspection Framework identifies the 'provider's wider work' as supporting learners to develop their character; high expectations, relationships and the environment may well have been seen by Inspectors to be examples of such 'wider work,' alongside the curriculum.

Inspectors frequently referenced leaders, staff and governors as having 'high expectations' or 'ambition' for all their pupils. These high expectations were occasionally linked to academic achievement; however, more often, they were left open to interpretation or linked to 'behaviour,' 'personal development,' 'happiness and success' or a particular virtue, for example: 'Leaders' high expectations of pupils match the core values of the school...pupils know that they must be resilient by trying their best to achieve.' Although Inspectors refrained from drawing a completely explicit link between high expectations and character, the generalised use of 'high expectations' indicates that Inspectors were applying this practice to all aspects of a pupil's education, including their character development. Additionally, Inspectors commented on the impact these high expectations had on pupils, including their awareness and understanding of what was expected of them and their response to such expectations, resulting in pupils setting high standards for themselves. Developing a strong commitment to being virtuous and aspiring to be the best version of oneself are key components of character; referring regularly to the 'high expectations' placed upon students is an indication that Inspectors were aware of the impact this practice can have on the development of pupils' character, as well as their academic achievement.

The development of strong, positive relationships was another practice commented upon by Inspectors in the London school inspection reports. The relationship between staff and pupils was frequently reported to be founded on care, understanding and mutual respect, resulting in pupils feeling valued, listened to and 'like they [were] part of a family'. In one report, the Inspector noted that 'staff and pupils often eat together,' reflecting the relationships built on respect and care so often referred to across reports. The impact of these relationships was observed by some Inspectors, as comments were included from pupils themselves such as, 'we know staff really care for us,' which was described by the Inspector as a 'typical comment from pupils.' This indicates an awareness of staff as exemplars, who demonstrated respect and expected the same from pupils. The Jubilee Centre's [A Framework for Character Education in Schools](#) (2017) states that a school culture that 'enables students to satisfy their needs for positive relationships...facilitates the acquisition of good character,' making Inspectors' observations on positive relationships an encouraging finding. Taking

time to establish positive relationships with parents, carers and families was also observed by Inspectors. Organising workshops, interacting at the start and end of the school day and making partnerships early on were examples given by Inspectors of how schools had built good relationships with families. As the Jubilee Centre has explored, character provision is enhanced through meaningful parent-teacher partnerships ([Harrison, Dineen and Moller, 2018](#)).

The explicit link between character and the environment, which was identified in one particular report, was echoed implicitly throughout numerous others. The school environment was described by Inspectors using a range of adjectives which included: 'harmonious,' 'inclusive,' 'supportive,' 'warm,' 'welcoming,' 'nurturing,' 'positive' and 'friendly'. Reported speech was used in one case to present opinions of pupils who stated that 'the calm, safe and caring atmosphere [was] one of the things they like[d] most about their school.' Creating a community atmosphere, where each child feels valued, reflects a school's ethos and culture and establishes a setting where children can thrive and flourish, both academically and personally. Frequent references to the school environment, with the particular adjectives chosen by Inspectors to describe it, identifies the important role of a school in supporting character development, as well as academic achievement.

Current Jubilee Centre research is seeking to build a consensus on what works, when and why in the provision for character in schools. This work is currently reviewing and evaluating existing teaching resources for character development, as well as drawing together different pedagogical approaches that can have a character focus.²

Finally, a finding which was consistent with the first phase of research was the emphasis placed within reports on extra-curricular experiences. As identified in the Birmingham set of reports, a wide range of clubs and after-school activities, ranging from sports to music and drama, as well as outward-bound residential visits, community-based activities, and educational visits were cited as contributing towards the development of new skills, reflecting the 'wider work' mentioned in the revised Inspection Framework as a way to 'support learners to develop their character'. In some cases, Inspectors made a link between such experiences and pupils' personal development, for example, 'all pupils benefit from a fantastic range of after-school clubs, enrichment activities and trips. This greatly enriches pupils' personal development and experience of school life'. Another Inspector used the language of virtue to reflect on experiences outside the regular curriculum, stating that, 'the wide range of additional activities on offer at the school contributes well towards pupils' personal development and [provides] opportunities for pupils to take responsibility and develop independence'. In this particular set of reports, Inspectors were found to comment on how schools had taken advantage of their location, making use of the many museums, galleries, theatres and attractions which are based within the city of London. In one report, the school was commended for ensuring that 'pupils access the rich range of cultural opportunities nearby'. Establishing partnerships with the Museum of London, the Royal Ballet and Tate Britain, as well as the London Symphony Orchestra, and a wide range of local businesses and enterprises in the City of London, were reported by Inspectors. One school was working with the Mayor of London's office to cut pollution in and around the school site. Capitalising on the immediate surroundings and seeking opportunities for character development from what is available in the local area is something which can be applied to all schools, as they endeavour to provide a rich, well-rounded education for their pupils.

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 more schools inspected under the new Ofsted

² See 'Character Education Pedagogies: What works, where and why?' [Online]. Available at: <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/2936/projects/character-education-pedagogies> (accessed 16 April 2021).

Framework. As with the first paper, findings are generally positive and encouraging with reference to the prevalence of the language of virtues in the majority of reports; this study found, as in the first, that inspectors were comfortably identifying virtuous aspects of a school's life and foregrounding these examples as praiseworthy and notable features of their character provision. This continues to give 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. As an extension of the first study, the more implicit references to character through school provision and pedagogy, as well as through extra-curricular activities, are interpreted here as acknowledgements of a school's character provision. However, the bias of doing so by researchers looking for references to character and virtues cannot be avoided. It is not known whether inspectors are trained to see such examples of pedagogy as having a character-building dimension or not. Given that character has only recently been included in school inspection terminology, this can be seen as another positive step on the road to character becoming an explicit priority for school inspections. At the time of writing, schools have returned to something approaching normal, and so, as inspections resume, The Jubilee Centre has called for a greater focus on how all educational stakeholders support pupils' character development during this return to being in school, following extended periods of disruption and remote learning (see [Jubilee Centre, 2021](#)). This will strengthen the position of character as seen in schools, which may translate to inspection reports. The hope is that we will continue to see character referred to more frequently in reports, as per the Ofsted Framework, as it becomes more embedded and familiar to those using it.



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