Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham

Evidence-Informed Policy Brief

Building Character through the Longer School Day

'We're going to use the money from this new levy…to fund longer school days for those that want to offer their pupils a wider range of activities, including extra sport'
(Rt Hon George Osborne MP, Budget Speech, March 2016).

'Education should prepare children for adult life, giving them the skills and character traits they need to succeed academically, have a fulfilling career, and make a positive contribution to British society' *(DfE Strategy 2015-2020, March 2016).*

Background – the longer school day and character

In the March 2016 budget, it was announced that money raised from a new tax on sugary drinks would be used to improve sports provision in primary schools, and fund 25% of secondary schools to run a broader range of activities through a longer school day. This briefing sets out the evidence base for developing character education through such activities. It suggests that extra/co-curricular activities focused on character development can positively influence the attainment, employability and good citizenship of the children and adults involved. Research is collated on four effective tools and methods for developing character, and suggestions on how these methods might be applied to extra-curricular activities are provided.

Recent research has shown that whilst teachers feel that character development is central to every child's education, up to 80% of teachers feel they currently face restrictions in delivering such provision (Arthur. *et al*, 2015a). In addition, a 2014 poll of parents by Populus, suggested that 87% of parents felt schools should focus on character development, as well as academic study (Arthur. *et al*, 2015b). This demand is backed up by evidence indicating that development of a child's character yields various benefits, both for students – through improved academic attainment and mental health; and for broader society – through community/social action projects and volunteering (Kirkman. *et al*, 2016; Clarke. *et al*, 2015; Arthur. *et al*, 2015c; Paterson. *et al*, 2014).

Character, co/extra-curricular activities and social mobility

There is also a growing body of evidence to suggest that extra-curricular activities have the potential to contribute to character development. The APPG for Social Mobility collated much of this evidence in its *Character and Resilience Manifesto* (2014) – highlighting evidence of 'positive social and emotional outcomes' through sport and other extra-curricular activity (2014, p. 38-39). However, research has also shown that children from wealthier backgrounds are up to 15% more likely to participate in such activity outside of school (Sutton Trust, 2014). Integration of these activities through the longer school day can

help to address this disparity and allow children from all backgrounds to benefit. Indeed, a report commissioned by the Nuffield Foundation, published earlier this year, found that '…the convenience and perhaps the lower cost' of onsite extra-curricular activities enables more disadvantaged children to participate (Chanfreau. *et al*, 2016*).

How to effectively build character through co/extra-curricular activities

In this light, a number of recommendations for using the proposed longer school day for character building activities are outlined below. Two aspects of these activities are particularly useful for character building: first, that they can provide a safe space for young people to **learn how to fail and bounce back** – crucial in developing traits such as resilience, determination and courage; second, that they **aspire primarily towards character development**, but not towards a specific academic goal.

Four effective tools and methods for character development are highlighted below, along with a sample of evidence for suitable extra-curricular activities.

1. **Character literacy** – by ensuring the language of character is consciously and consistently used during activities. Research from the Jubilee Centre has examined in detail the development of so-called '**virtue literacy**' in students, and how it can affect character development in practice. The *Knightly Virtues* project showed that participating students not only had greater knowledge and understanding of the *traits* in question, but could also apply them in real life situations affecting themselves (Arthur. *et al*, 2014b).
   o By including the language of character and virtue across different **sports (team sports, in particular)**, activities already proven to develop performance attributes, such as resilience, self-discipline and teamwork (see getset.co.uk; Demos, 2016a), could become powerful vehicles for more general character development. Inclusion of virtue literacy could provide an opportunity to also build moral virtues, such as humility and fairness, through sports participation. A recent Demos evaluation of a rugby programme found that 75% of participants developed their knowledge of character virtues (2016, p.7).

2. **New environments and new challenges** – exposure to new situations can also introduce students to real life scenarios in which they can 'test' their character - 'through *doing* they learn about being and becoming' (Harrison. *et al*, 2016a). For example, courage can be tested by asking a student to speak in front of their peers in school, or by engaging in some way with those in the wider community.
   o A number of studies suggest that **debating and discussion** are particularly effective ways of doing this. A study conducted by the University of Bedfordshire and the English Speaking Union suggested that KS2 assessment results increased for pupils involved in oral communication projects between 6% and 19% compared to those who were not (esu.org, 2013)*****.
   o The Philosophy for Children (P4C) project, an Randomised Control Trial examining the effects of children participating in dialogue and reasoned discussion, found that those involved saw a significant positive difference in

attainment, particularly those eligible for Free School Meals. The project also noted improvements in character development, with increased confidence, self-esteem and listening skills (Gorard. *et al*, 2015)*****.

3. **Volunteering/youth social action (YSA) involvement** – by increasing awareness of the value of service to both the community and the student. Engagement with community organisations and the voluntary sector is a great source for schools seeking to improve and develop character education provision. The opportunities they provide help build the character young people need to flourish as individuals, as well as benefitting the wider community – a concept YSA charity Step Up to Serve calls the 'double benefit' (Jubilee Centre, 2014, p.2; see also JC and SUTS, 2015). Recent findings have shown that 57% of YSA providers see character development as their primary aim (Arthur. *et al*, 2015c).

   o A recent report from the Behavioural Insights Team highlighted the benefits of YSA for children's character development (Kirkman. *et al*, 2016). The study measured certain character traits displayed by children participating in YSA projects against those who were not. Using data from three YSA providers, it found significant positive differences for traits such as empathy, problem-solving, and co-operation in those who were active in YSA.

   o In addition, a recent pilot run by the Scout Association* trialed character development through integration of activities into the school day. As well as showing a number of positive effects on the participating schools (Demos, 2016b), this study produced a number of interesting *process* findings, providing advice on how non-formal education providers can interact with schools to enhance YSA provision, and vice versa.

4. **Reflection** – by allowing students space and time to reflect before, during and after activities. Reflection allows pupils to make a critical assessment of what went well, what they could have done better, and what they have learnt about their character. There is an extensive body of evidence that highlights the benefits of **'guided self-reflection'** as part of character-building activities (Arthur. *et al*, 2017; Harrison. *et al*, 2016a; Arthur. *et al*, 2014a; Arthur. *et al*, 2014b).

   o Incorporation of guided self-reflection into extra-curricular activities such as **drama, music and sports** could help children to consider the character attributes involved in participating in those activities. Evidence already suggests such activities improve character and moral awareness (see Harrison. *et al*, 2016b; Arthur. *et al*, 2015a), and reflection on improved *confidence* through acting, or *determination* through learning an instrument, could be good methods of developing character through these subjects.

   o In facilitating and guiding this reflection, teachers/those running the activities can take on the role of '**character coaches'**, meaning they actively exploit opportunities to build character throughout the activity. Evidence from a number of schools suggests that staff taking a personal and proactive approach and acting as a role model greatly enhances the character building potential of their class (see Harrison, 2016a; Demos, 2015).

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* = primary school sample