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Raising Attainment, Nurturing Values and Increasing Social Mobility in a School of Character 2008-2012

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Introduction

It has been claimed that 'quality character education results in academic gains for students' (Berkowitz and Bier, 2004) and this paper provides evidence from a school of character in the North of England where there is ample evidence of such gains. When it opened in 2005 the area it served was ranked in the worst 10% nationally for unemployment and in the worst 4% in the country as regards educational attainment. Its predecessor was closed due to low standards. After one year, in 2006, 34% of sixteen-year-old students 'passed' their five school subjects at GCSE grade C or better. However, by 2008 74% of students achieved these results and by 2010, 95% did so. The school is now in the top 3% of all schools nationally for 'value-added'. As a result its Sixth Form has increased dramatically in size with many students, from the social priority area the school serves, succeeding at A level and being the first in their family to go to University. Some have even gained places at Cambridge and other Russell Group universities. Quantitative and qualitative research carried out at the school in 2007-8 with 14-year-old students has been published previously (Pike, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). In the summer of 2012 the researcher went back and worked with the same students, now 18-year-olds, who were about to leave and go to University. This paper reports what those students said about their seven years in a school of character and compares the survey findings from 2008 and 2012.

The structure of this short paper is straightforward. First, the views of students, who had spent seven years at the case study school, are reported. Second, the school's core values are described and examples are given of how they are learned. Third, quantitative findings are presented from a survey of sixth formers in 2012 and brief recommendations for pedagogy and policy concludes. To begin we will 'eavesdrop' on a focus groups held with sixth formers at the school in 2012:

Raising Aspirations and Improving Social Mobility

Year 13 Sixth Form students, aged 18:

My name is ... I've been here since Year 7. Hopefully I'll be going University in either Aberdeen or Coventry to do Economics. I'm ..., I've been here since year 7 and I've got a place at Cambridge to study English. I'm ... I live in Thorne, I've been here since year 7 and I want to go to Leeds University to do Maths. I'm ..., I've been here since year 7 and I've also got a place at Cambridge to study English. I'm ... I've been [here] since year 7 and I'm hopefully going to go to Northumbria or York to study History.

Year 13 Sixth Form students, aged 18:

Obviously [town] isn't a particularly nice area...I've got an offer from Cambridge and that's something quite huge coming from around here because I don't think anyone has been in about 30 years to Oxbridge... My parents left school when they were 16 and my dad is a police officer and my mum is a registrar of births, deaths and marriages. They like the fact that we have been offered opportunities to go beyond what anyone ever thought. Similarly my parents ... well none of my family have been to University. My dad works in a glass company and he has worked in glass for I think about 25 years. My mum is an IT Technician ... I know that I don't want to have to work 12 hour shifts and things like that. I want to get better and I think when my mum decided to let me come to [this school] she knew from the core values when we first started that they set things in place and they knew that the school offer you a lot more.... My mum is a full time carer for my sister and my dad can't work through illness, so they both left school at 14 so they haven't really got an education to support me so I find the school's values good because there is always someone at school to help you with things and with your education. There is always someone to push you forward and support you with everything you do... Both my parents left school at around 16 – my mum is now an LSA and as soon as my dad left school he joined the RAF... None of them went to university

That's what I said earlier about certain mentalities of the area.... with certain people, there is this mentality about going on the dole and things like that and I just think that here {this school] it shows you a different world... my parents felt like they were never told anything. My dad said that he felt that he was never told about the outside world and it was very much that you leave school and get a job and live in the same area and get married and have children, that sort of thing. Here it just feels like you get taught that you can do whatever you want to just so long as you work hard obviously, it's not just handed to you on a plate.... You see people walking around... I mean when you see people walking around in tracksuits and you think I can do better than that and you feel you can come here. They teach you more things to aim for and give you more goals in life.... In every aspect as well they teach you, in sport you can succeed, it's all different subjects it's not just in academic subjects, it's in everything so you feel like you can succeed in everything.... I think it's about trying to change the mentality of that just because your parents did something that we should be penalized or we should just accept or resign to the fact that that's what our life is going to amount to... I think it's what areas like this need.

We will return to this student's comment that 'it's what areas like this need' and to the issue of social mobility at the end of this paper.

In this paper, the part played by character education in the school's success will be evaluated. For the original research project I interviewed the school's Principal the day after he had been in London receiving awards for leading the most academically improved secondary school in Yorkshire and Humberside.

During the recorded interview I asked him whether 'character' or 'academics' was the most important priority at the school. Without the slightest hesitation, he replied:

Character. I've said it's character first and then the rest will come. If you've got character first the rest will come

Approaches vary but 'if a school-based initiative targets character development in either its program design or its outcomes and goals, then it is a form of character education' (Berkowitz and Bier, 2004, p.74). The school's priorities were striking because many schools seem to focus first and foremost on academic results and the percentage of students getting their 5 GCSEs at grade C or above. This school was doing better academically than other schools and yet its first priority was the character of the student. It is not surprising that a school focusing on the character of its students should improve academically. In fact, this substantiates research findings that academic gains are supported by quality character education (Berkowitz and Bier, 2004).

Research at the case study school during 2007-2008 was funded by the ESRC and AHRC and several publications followed this original project. The case school's approach to character education can be found in the *Journal of Research on Character Education* (Pike, 2009), the relation between the school's values and those of its original (but now retired) business sponsor are discussed in *Management in Education* (Pike, 2009) and the relation between its ethos and values in *Journal of Beliefs and Values* (Pike, 2010). The transformation of the school is documented in the *Oxford Review of Education* (Pike, 2010b). Critics responded to this article to which the author had a brief right of reply (Pike, 2011). These articles are all based upon research carried out during the school's third year in operation. The contribution of the present paper is to report on further funded research carried out in 2012 during the school's seventh year in operation with students who had attended it for all of their time at secondary school. Comparing the responses of students, aged 18, with their responses when aged 14, is instructive. First, however, it is necessary to briefly re-cap on the school's Core Values.

When I asked the then Vice-Principal for Teaching and Learning (who has a D.Phil in school transformation from Oxford) how significant the Core Values were in achieving the success her response was unequivocal: 'They are the single greatest factor'. The core values do not simply appear on a card that each student has; nor are they only displayed, etched in a glass wall in a strategic location, they are pervasive. Students know what they are and talk about them. They even hold teachers accountable to them. If you imagine buying a stick of rock at the seaside and finding the words of the resort running the length of it wherever you snap the rock, you have some idea of the presence of the Core Values. The school's emphasis on character is distinctive and 'homegrown' but as can be seen on the following two pages, the values of the school have much in common with Lickona's 'essential virtues' (2005).

Essential Virtues (Lickona, 2004)

1. Wisdom or Good Judgement

'how to put the other virtues into practice – **when to act, how to act...**

Wisdom enables us to discern correctly, to see **what is truly important in life**, and to set priorities'

2. Justice

'includes so many of the interpersonal virtues – civility, **honesty, respect, responsibility** and tolerance' p.8

3. Fortitude

'**to do what is right** in the face of difficulty... **Courage**, resilience, patience, perseverance, **endurance**, and a healthy **self-confidence** are all aspects of fortitude'

4. Self-control (temperance)

'Self-control is the ability to govern ourselves...to control our temper, regulate our sensual appetites and passions...It's the power to resist temptation'

5. Love 'selfless love'

'A whole cluster of important human virtues – **empathy, compassion, kindness, generosity, service, loyalty, patriotism...**and forgiveness make up the virtue of love'

Core Values of Case Study School

All our work will be characterised by the following values

Determination

We know that hard work and the refusal to give up are essential if we are to achieve **anything worthwhile**.

Integrity

We can be **trusted to be honest** and truthful, to say what we mean and to do what we say.

Accountability

We recognise that having the freedom to express ourselves means **we must also accept responsibility** for our words, thoughts and actions.

Courage

We aim **to do what is right**, whatever the cost; we stand up for the weak, whatever the danger; **we face our fears** and find ways of defeating them.

Accountability

We recognise that having the freedom to express ourselves means we must also **accept responsibility** for our words, thoughts and actions.

Compassion

We **care for those who are in difficulty and who are hurting**, recognising that **the world does not exist for us** alone.

6. A **Positive Attitude**

'The character strengths of hope, enthusiasm, flexibility, and a sense of humor are all part of a **positive** attitude' p. 9

Honourable Purpose

We aim **to be positive** in everything, doing what is good and aiming to benefit others as well as ourselves.

7. **Hard Work**

'hard work includes initiative, **diligence**, goal-setting, and resourcefulness p.10

Determination

We know that **hard work** and the **refusal to give up** are essential if we are to achieve anything worthwhile.

8. Integrity

'being faithful to moral conscience, **keeping our word**, and standing up for what we believe... to be "whole" so that **what we say** and do in different situations **is consistent**... Integrity is ... **telling the truth to oneself** p. 10

Integrity

We can be trusted to be **honest** and truthful, **to say** what we mean and to **do what we say**.

All our work will be characterised by the following values

9. Gratitude

'Gratitude is often described as the secret of a happy life. It reminds us that we all drink from wells we did not dig. It moves us **to count our everyday blessings**'

Honourable Purpose

We aim **to be positive in everything**, doing what is good and aiming to benefit others as well as ourselves.

10. Humility

'Humility enables us **to take responsibility** for our faults and failings (**rather than blaming** someone else), **apologize** for them, and seek to make amends' p.11

Humility

We seek to do our personal best without bragging and to encourage others to achieve their best **without being critical** or jealous of their efforts.

Accountability

We recognise that having the freedom to express ourselves means we must also **accept responsibility** for **our words**, thoughts and actions.

Pedagogy: Learning Values in the Arts and Humanities

Although those leading the school were unaware of the *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education* (Lickona, Schaps & Lewis, 2007) that are central to the Character Education Partnership's (CEP) work in the USA, a high degree of congruence was found between its approach and these principles. Using the *Character Education Quality Standards* (CEP, 2008) as criteria, and also Ofsted's report, facilitated an evaluation of the character education at the school (Pike, 2009a).

One difference between the case study school and state-funded schools in the USA is that it has a Christian ethos (although it serves a largely secular catchment area). What this seems to mean in practice is that Core Values are sometimes identified in biblical narratives (in Philosophy, Theology and Ethics lessons and assemblies) as well as through narratives in humanities subjects such as English. Examples follow of each:

English - Shakespeare lesson

- Teacher: Think about our core values because we've been looking at all the different qualities of these characters. Think about the core values that we at Trinity live by or try to live by. I want you please to write down which core value you think Beatrice and Benedict either embody or break. Okay, what do I mean by embody?
- Pupil: Stick to
- Teacher: Stick to – so which one do they either stick to or break? And I'd like a brief explanation. You've got 3 minutes to do that... Which of the core values?...
(Children discuss task)
- Teacher: Just bob your pens down for me please. Very quickly, hands up if you have a core value that you think Beatrice embodies?
Bethany?
- Bethany: Determination
- Teacher: Why determination?
- Bethany: Cos um she stands up for what she believes in like when Hero is getting umslandered and like the shame of it, she believes him
- Teacher: Good yeah determination – could also be seen as courage. How about a core value that she breaks? Anyone got a core value that she breaks? Christina?
- Christina: Humility
- Teacher: Why humilty?
- Christina: She can be quite boastful
- Teacher: She can be quite boastful, I do agree. Very quickly, has anyone got a core value that Benedict embodies?
- Ellis: Courage because he fought in a war
- Teacher: Absolutely courage because he fought in a war and the big one, the one that he breaks?
- Guy: Integrity
- Teacher: Why Integrity?
- Guy: Because he lies about his feelings towards Beatrice

This use of the core values as a framework did not occur in every English lesson at the case study school for the same teacher was observed on two previous occasions (teaching writing to persuade and writing to explain) making no explicit reference to core values but the fact that the school's values are discussed at all would seem to be innovative practice, especially in English in the UK. Arguably, the potential to engage in high quality character education, especially through the arts and humanities, has been insufficiently tapped although valuable work is available in Bohlin's *Teaching Character Education through Literature* (2005) and Pike has a book manuscript, *Ethical English Teaching*, currently under review with Routledge.

One English teacher explained, 'having those core values at least makes people...not just the students but also the staff as well...think about what they are doing and how they actually fit in with those values.... they're there all the time (English teacher). Certainly values are not always explicitly identified in lessons even though they may exert a profound influence on what happens. Interestingly, though, of the two hundred 14 year-old students surveyed, only 35% thought core values 'came into' their English lessons whereas 90% believed core values came into their PTE (Philosophy, Theology and Ethics) lessons, of which 65% said this was 'quite often or very often' as the following extract from a focus group illustrates:

PTE (Philosophy, Theology and Ethics) lesson

- Dr Pike: OK, so PTE...do you think you've covered the whole school values or have you heard them mentioned in PTE?
- Aaron: Yeah *that's the main part of it where we hear them mentioned.*
- Sam: That's the base of it really.
- Dr Pike: The whole school values are really covered in PTE?
- Sam: Yeah.
- Dr Pike: Tell me a bit about that.
- Sam: Well we've studied Bible and like we've only done... tiny bits, so doing the Bible like *the core values and that come up a lot in the Bible so we see them a lot.* And like last year when we did the story of Ruth our teacher told us how it fits into core values.
- Dr Pike: And can you explain to me how the story of Ruth makes sense of the whole school values?
- Sam: She had *courage* to leave her home and town and she was *determined* to go with her step-mum and like make it work and that.

In 2012, when surveyed, 99% of staff endorsed and subscribed to the Core Values of Trinity and 99% either agreed or strongly agreed that, 'Here whole school values are explicit and the kids know what they are'. Research has shown that 'staff involvement and commitment to character education is critical to effective implementation' for 'if staff do not understand the initiative, they will likely implement it ineffectively or reject it for the wrong reasons' (Berkowitz and Bier, 2004, p. 75). As can be seen from the following findings, after 7 years, students do more than simply 'know' what the core values are.

Findings from the 2012 Research (Year 13) and Recommendations

(These are the first students to graduate from the school who began Year 7 in 2005 when it opened)

'I would be pleased if the Core Values became character traits of mine'
9 out of 10 students agreed

'This school has raised my expectations of what I am capable of'
8 out of 10 students agreed

'My parents did not attend University but I expect to attend University'
6 out of 10 students agreed

'I respect people who have different opinions and beliefs to me'
10 out of 10 students agreed

Clearly, 'success' at this school has been achieved, not just in terms of academic success but also in the character education of the students. Significantly, when comparisons are made between the questions asked in 2008 and 2012, the statistic that changes the most relates to the relations between Christianity and the core values (Pike, 2010a). In 2007, just under 75% of 14-year-old students agreed that whether or not one is a Christian, the core values are still good to follow. By 2012, 92% agreed with the following statement:

'Whether you are a Christian or you aren't, the school's Core Values are still very good values to follow'
9 out of 10 students agreed

This indicates how inclusive this school's Christian ethos is. The core values are not only identified with a particular faith but are seen to be good for everyone. Two conclusions may be drawn at this point, one relating to pedagogy and one to policy. First, it seems entirely legitimate to engage in character education and the teaching of values with reference, at times, biblical narratives in a Christian ethos school. Yet students do not see values as synonymous with Christianity or the special preserve of Christians. Second, given the academic results of the school, (and the role it is playing in aiding social mobility and providing a route out of deprivation) and its quality character education, the question is why the Government has not been actively encouraging this school to replicate its success. Given current policy that supports this approach, why is this school not being encouraged to take on the leadership and management of other schools when less successful 'chains' of schools have expanded dramatically? A further question is why more schools are not as keen to provide quality character education? As the focus group quoted at the start of this paper stated: 'it's what areas like this need'. The last word goes to the graduates of 2012: '[the school] has changed a lot of the kids. I'd say that there's not as much anti-social behaviour anyway and I just think that it really changed attitudes of people – you can tell as people go through school you get used to it...'

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