

# Character Education and Mentoring

A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM



THE JUBILEE CENTRE  
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

*Imani Academy*

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## Introduction:

The Jubilee Centre's [A Framework for Character Education in Schools, 2017](#), has much to offer to teachers, mentors and learning coaches in the school environment:

- Provides practical tools to enhance well-being, flourishing, motivation and harness one's strengths.
- Supports teaching of good virtues that individuals in society should have, why and how we can motivate young people.
- Helps educators and practitioners foster the development of ethical and responsible young people.

Mentoring through character education is a good tool to achieve this, it focuses on supporting young people to explore their purpose in the world. This approach enables young people to reflect on how they might make positive contributions in line with their own interests and strengths. Mentoring gives young people life direction and forward momentum; it motivates and guides their goals and daily activities. With a strong sense of purpose, young people flourish and can enjoy a more meaningful life, are healthier and more resilient when setbacks in life occur and feel good about their accomplishments.

This Handbook is intended for teachers in schools and those involved in mentoring of young people, as a tool through which a focus on character can be embedded into new and existing mentoring practices.

## What is character education?

The term 'character education' is a regular feature in educational discourse, particularly since its inclusion in the Ofsted inspection; [Character Education Framework Guidance, 2019](#). The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues defines character education as "all the explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people to develop positive personal character strengths or virtues" (Jubilee Centre, 2017).

As an example, positive personal character strengths include honesty, resilience, courage, perseverance, and compassion. Character education is about encouraging children and young people to develop thinking driven by moral codes of behaviour and citizenship, which will allow them to go on to lead flourishing lives, by supporting them to acquire key developmental character traits.

Teaching character education must be a consciously developed process with identified virtues that schools would like their pupils to acquire. Schools should be working to ensure the language of those virtues is central to the school ethos and vision, evident in everyday school life.

This requires teachers to focus on the building blocks of character to help young people develop practical wisdom: the ability to do the right thing, at the right time and for the right reasons (Harrison, Morris and Ryan, 2016).

To achieve this, schools can explore the language of character, working to permeate students' learning in different environments, preparing them for the different life experiences they will encounter:

- In assemblies; sharing the rationale for why character is important and welcoming the school community to come together to explore their chosen virtues and how these inform the school's mission and ethos.
- In lessons; as a discrete subject, providing space and time for young people to think about their own character development and consider how they may respond to moral dilemmas they may face. The foundation of this important, sometimes challenging but rewarding relationship, is the strength and quality of the interaction teachers and young people share.

### What is mentoring?

Mentoring exposes young people to different ways of thinking, ultimately building their attitude to learning, attendance and punctuality and so on. Mentoring is a collaboration between mentor and mentee. It is structured and underpinned by trust with caring individuals who offer guidance, support and encouragement. The intention is to develop the competence and character of the young person; often facilitated by a skilled individual who provides a young person with support, counsel, friendship, reinforcement and constructive example. Bohlin and Ryan (1999) share practical ways to bring moral education to life in the book *Building Character in Schools Practical Ways to Bring Moral Instruction to Life* – including through mentoring (see also, Berkowitz and Bier, 2005).

Acknowledging that doing the right thing is not always an easy choice for young people and they may need support from a responsible adult, both before and after they make decisions, providing them with space to reflect. The mentoring relationship can be a reminder to young people that character building is not easy and there will be moral dilemmas that they can learn from throughout their lifetime (Bohlin and Ryan, 1999).

A mentoring relationship that is strength based in a school setting, is a deliberate pairing of an older peer, volunteer or role model to guide a young person, offer advice and provide them with the opportunity to reflect and build on their confidence, develop resilience and character and raise aspirations. The primary purpose of the mentoring relationship is the opportunity it affords the young person to refine and further develop their language skills, understand the value of respect, and the importance of responsibility, as tools that will drive and underpin their journey through life. An example of this would be to discuss what habits or virtues could make the transition from primary school to secondary successful.

Mentoring relationships that are character led provide an opportunity for young people to discuss and review areas that are risky to discuss elsewhere. For some young people, the relationship with their mentor creates a safe space and a sense of being understood. The mentor is responsible for creating a trusting relationship with the young person, enabling them to look at or explore whatever they choose (Stewart, 2012).

### Beware of deficit model mentoring

Mentoring interventions in schools are often based on a deficit model, with a focus on young people who have barriers to learning or are out of step with the educational curriculum for reasons outside of their control. Mentoring is then implemented as a preventative measure to engage young people who are labelled as hard to reach or at risk of educational failure or exclusion.

The mentoring structure tends to have more emphasis on the barriers to their success; poor attendance or behavioural difficulties. This is followed by a mentoring relationship that is driven by agreed terms of reference, focused on explicit outcomes young people must meet during the mentoring journey, necessary for the success of the mentoring intervention.

The degree to which this type of mentoring is effective appears to have little or no positive impact on intended academic outcomes. The perceived benefits can be detrimental for the young person, particularly if the mentoring relationship is an unsuccessful mentor pairing (Education Endowment Foundation, 2018).

## Educating Character Through Mentoring

### The mentoring relationship

A more inclusive and proactive approach is to invite young people to explore the purpose and principles of having positive virtues and formulate moral principles for themselves. Herman Stewart's book, *Every Child Needs a Mentor* offers a strengths-based framework for teachers and educators to support young people to make changes that are sustainable and make the most of their educational experience. Stewart, (2012) encourages mentor and mentee to enter a collaborative partnership that challenges hierarchy - teacher pupil dynamics, centres youth voice and focuses on the participatory and transformative journey of mentoring.

If there are conditions in place that are not designed around the strengths of the young person, with a heavy emphasis on deficits rather than strengths, then this is likely to be at odds with the principles of mentoring; to empower the young person and remove the essential non-judgemental warmth, empathy and congruence of the relationship.

Mentoring that is free from one's personal filters, assumptions and judgement, generates greater awareness and self-belief in the young person, allowing them to take responsibility for their own growth and development (Hemery, 2005).

The mentor's role is to meet the young person where they are at, considering the feeling and meaning of specific behaviours and traits. This can be achieved by being an active listener, really understanding what is being said and subtly checking; by reflection, paraphrasing and clarifying to guide and support the young person appropriately.

For the mentoring relationship to be successful for both mentor and mentee, both must have confidence in the mentoring scheme supporting them. This requires the scheme to have several policies, procedures and guidelines which offer clear information to both the mentor and mentee, outlining what will be required of them at each stage in the relationship. There should be enough flexibility in the mentoring relationship to allow mentor and mentee to take different approaches over time to balance dependence and autonomy. The regularity with which contact is maintained should be a considered one on the part of the mentor. This will support the building of trust, opportunities for support and challenge but also provide consistency (Rolfe, 2020).

### The following are some examples of how information can be passed between scheme coordinator, the mentor and mentee:

- Mentoring scheme guidelines - An understanding of what mentoring is, including duration and frequency of meetings
- Action plan/goal setting - Work out what is working well, what is not and how mentee and mentor can work together to explore developmental opportunities
- Interest questionnaire - Define the goals of the mentoring relationship

- Mentoring contract - Clear expectations for the partnership and how best to communicate
- Mentoring meeting record - Written session review to track progress throughout, including exit record.

### Principles and purpose

The principles and purpose of mentoring that is character led, are not binary inasmuch as, it lays down the rules or commands obedience, but one that engages young people in an exploration of virtues and encourages them to think critically. Young people are invited to explore the world of virtues with the help and guidance of their mentor. It is an exploration that results in inclusion rather than exclusion. An exploration that means all involved in the character focused mentoring process, are all beneficiaries of the developmental journey the young person goes on, which includes the skill acquisition of moral reasoning and personal and social development: a sense of purpose (Malin, 2018).

In practice, character led mentoring explores the idea of purpose; supporting young people to find their way in the world and equipping them with the tools to live intentional, fulfilling lives. Mentors promote purpose through paying attention to and supporting young people to pursue interesting avenues that bring about a personal sense of achievement and satisfaction. Working in collaboration with the young person to enable the building of their confidence and self-esteem.

A trusting mentee and mentor relationship is key as the mentee is the guide who will shape and nurture their aspirations and bring them to fruition (Malin, 2018). Damon's research further emphasises this; the mentor is guiding the young person to find their place in the world and more importantly, their purpose (Damon, 2009). Teachers or learning mentors interested in implementing character led mentoring in schools, or indeed educationalists wanting to integrate a character approach into their practice,

should ensure a clear focus on broadening young people's thinking as well as their problem solving skills.

This requires mentors to be aware of the cultural context which the mentee is in and use this to support the mentee to acquire the character strengths in question and help them make sense of competing challenges. Supporting this requires the mentor to provide effective constructive feedback and reflection for the mentee to critically think about how they will succeed or flourish in the different spaces they will go on to occupy, with the strengths they now possess.

There are some important human qualities that one needs to possess to make this experience successful.

### Personal qualities which mentors are strongly encouraged to aspire to and continually develop include character traits such as:

- Empathy: Actively listening to what the mentee is saying and making and demonstrating the appropriate response will be central; noticing small inflections in language and tone or body language, being fully present will be important.
- Sincerity: Using every opportunity to praise the mentee's efforts and encourage them to think for themselves will allow the mentee to build their self-esteem but also value their own developing wisdom.
- Integrity: It will take time to build a mentoring relationship - it's not one to be rushed. Finding common interests and using them as a platform from which to build the relationship will help build rapport.
- Resilience: It's important for mentors to be patient with the mentoring journey, it may take time and there are no quick fixes to a successful mentoring journey.

- Respect: Mentors should take pride in what they are doing, it is time well spent and they are investing in someone's future.
- Humility: Treat mentees as equals, strive to build their confidence and self-esteem as this can be imperative in enabling them to further achieve and nurture their talents.

## Virtues In Mentoring Practice

### Character strengths

A cornerstone of mentoring involves the mentor encouraging the young person they are engaging with to connect with them and consider different perspectives, some of which they may never have been exposed to before. Through effective questioning from the mentor they invite the young person to explore the different possibilities.

For example, when asking young people how or why we should respond to climate change in a particular way, it can be useful and helpful to ask the same question again, but go beyond the facts and make it personal or localised; "How will climate change affect where you live?" This provides the young person with an opportunity to connect whatever knowledge they may have about something to their personal circumstance (Mackenzie-Wright, 2013).

It is through this process of critical thinking that the young person is exposed to different ways of thinking. Allowing them to think about how they will digest and apply; consider how their actions affect them and others and what character strengths and virtues they may want to possess. The mentor's role is to direct their questions, listen and respond appropriately. It is through this exploration and two-way conversation that benefits are realised in relation to the development of the young person's character strengths (Mackenzie Wright, 2013).

It is crucial to remember that in any mentoring relationship it is the mentee who drives the agenda not the mentor. A mentor does not give advice, they help the mentee to weigh up situations, through a process of reflection, open questions, challenges, and feedback, allowing the mentee to come to a decision themselves.

Throughout the mentoring journey the young person will begin to consciously think about, own and demonstrate their natural skills and talents; looking for ways to build on them. They will eventually become a natural part of who they are and bring strength to their day to day life.

By incorporating this type of mentoring programme based on character education, young people and teachers provide an opportunity to create a culture in which character traits are thoughtfully considered and applied in everyday school life.

The purpose of a character-led mentoring approach is to equip young people with the tools to know how to choose the right course of action in difficult situations. The following case study is an example of mentoring through character that promotes reflective discussion and encourages the young person to use a critical lens in applying character traits in their daily lives.

The case study highlights how character education can be used in a mentoring capacity, to support a young person to understand what is important in situations that challenge them and how to act for the right reasons. The result is they become more autonomous and reflective in the practice of virtue. This is a gradual process, demonstrated in the case study below. The young person is provided with learning experiences and opportunities that allow them to practice making choices and see the growth that comes from critical reflection, facilitated by the mentor.

### Case Study: Character and mentoring in practice

Imani Academy uses character education to assist in developing the potential of every young person, in a mentoring capacity. Supporting young people to apply the skills of critical thinking, allowing them to learn to positively interact with others and constructively respond to inevitable life situations, while promoting deeper understanding of self and their own character virtues and strengths.

Moreover, supporting the improvement of learning, achievement, motivation and positive behaviours in young people, toward themselves and others, supported by a model that is underpinned by a positive frame.

Imani Academy offers 1-2-1 support over a number of sessions from trained mentors who lend a listening ear and give support to help young people feel inspired, uplifted and empowered, to make healthy and considered choices.

A young person was referred to Imani Academy for mentoring as she needed support with the transition from primary to secondary school. The young person held debilitating beliefs about her intelligence. She would say things such as, “I’m not smart enough” or “This subject just isn’t for me.” These beliefs were becoming academically and socially challenging, for her transition from primary to secondary school. The young person was presenting as being highly anxious about everyday situations and struggling with changes to her routine.

Left unaddressed, these anxieties can become self-fulfilling prophecies that perpetuate a less than positive mindset (Tavener, 2019). Bearing this in mind it was decided mentoring would be the most appropriate method of support for this young person. The purpose: to help and support her to adopt a growth mindset; to understand that academic aptitude and confidence can be improved (Malin, 2018).

The School’s Mentoring Coordinator met with the young person to discuss how a mentor could help with building her self-esteem and confidence. On the self-assessment the young person identified that she could benefit from the support of a mentor. The coordinator explored who would be a suitable mentor to work with the young person, arranged a meeting and introduced the mentor to the mentee. The mentor and mentee met over a period of 8 weeks, with the first few weeks used to build a trusting relationship. The mentor and mentee worked through the areas of development identified by the mentee and set a few goals and targets together, based on where the mentee felt she needed support to grow.

**If young people are able to incorporate their experiences into a coherent story, they are able to extract the positive learning from the not so good experiences they encounter.**

**Allowing them to exercise personal power and informed choice moving forward (Jones, 2018).**

In the mentoring sessions the mentor focused on activities that included competence-building themes through stories, focusing on both successful and unsuccessful moments in her life. The mentor asked the mentee to reflect on a time when she had achieved something and the steps she had taken to succeed, and also a time when she felt she had failed and what she felt she learned from that.

This activity encouraged her to build a better narrative about herself, she was able to reflect on the power and limitations of her own thought patterns and the associated narratives about her own successes and failures, and what her strengths are in those moments of challenge. The impact was a conscious recognition and awareness of how she can adopt and bring those strengths into her present reality. An example of this activity can be found by visiting [Character Lab](#).

Although, the young person was needing additional support for her anxiety from the school Nurse, the activities she had worked on with her mentor had allowed her to make significant improvements in all areas of the self-assessment, completed pre mentoring. The young person said having someone to talk to had really helped, she had built up enough confidence to volunteer once a week at lunch time in the library, with the reading club; spending less time alone at break and lunchtime.

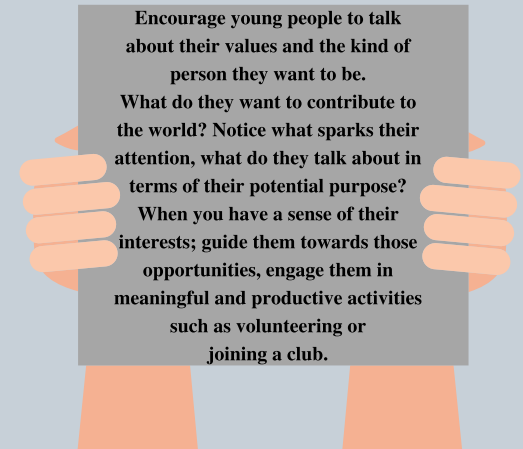
The mentor explained that the young person's progress was visible in the resilience and motivation she had demonstrated, to accomplish her longer-term future focused challenges.

In a previous session, the young person was asked what she thought about attending the school residential.

Initially, she did not want to attend because she felt she did not have a connection with any other young people. However, unprompted she brought this conversation to a later session and decided she would like to attend the residential. Whilst she was still a bit nervous, she could see the benefit of attending, as it would help her build her confidence and force her to step outside of her comfort zone.

She showed great courage and demonstrated an understanding of the benefits this challenge may bring. Coupled with the mentoring evaluation, this was an example of how the mentor was able to measure the mentee's progression, as part of the mentoring relationship.

This mentoring journey focused on the future, allowing the young person to explore what could be achieved, giving her the confidence to commit and make positive changes happen.

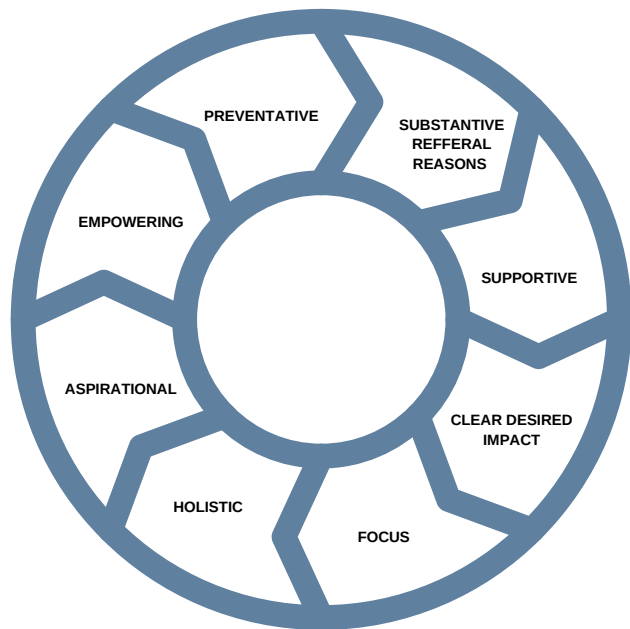




## Embedding Mentoring For Character In Schools

### An illustration of mentoring in practice

Mentoring that is character led supports young people to identify their skills and talents so they can thrive. It is free from corrective punitive measures, with a focus on empowerment and potential.



### Takeaway points

In summary, the below provide key takeaway points for those looking to introduce a character-led approach to mentoring.

1. Create a bespoke whole school mentoring programme in line with the mission, vision and ethos of the school
2. Train staff to be mentors, equip them with tools to provide quality 1-2-1 support for mentees
3. Record and feedback to the mentee how their character strengths are being demonstrated through the mentoring sessions, reflect on what is going well and where there is room for growth
4. Track progress of the mentoring relationship at key milestones; pre, midway and post programme. Capture where resilience, trust, practical wisdom has been demonstrated by the mentee
5. Evidence the successes of the mentee throughout the mentoring relationship; these can be highlighted by the use of anonymised case studies to capture learning and best practice, and where the application of character strengths has improved outcomes for the mentee

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