

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

CHARACTER PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENT TEACHERS

INITIAL INSIGHTS

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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues is a unique and leading centre for the examination of how character and virtues impact on individuals and society. The Centre was founded in 2012 by Professor James Arthur. Based at the University of Birmingham, it has a dedicated team of 20 academics from a range of disciplines, including: philosophy, psychology, education, theology and sociology.

With its focus on excellence, the Centre has a robust and rigorous research and evidence-based approach that is objective and non-political. It offers world-class research on the importance of developing good character and virtues and the benefits they bring to individuals and society. In undertaking its own innovative research, the Centre also seeks to partner with leading academics from other universities around the world and to develop strong strategic partnerships.

A key conviction underlying the existence of the Centre is that the virtues that make up good character can be learnt and taught. We believe these have largely been neglected in schools and in the professions. It is also a key conviction that the more people exhibit good character and virtues, the healthier our society. As such, the Centre undertakes development projects seeking to promote the practical applications of its research evidence.





Character Perspectives of Student Teachers

Initial Insights

Overview

In recent years, changes in education policy and a growth in character initiatives have sought to enhance the character education provision in schools in the UK. Contrary to this, insufficient attention has been paid to character during a teacher's Initial Teacher Education (ITE).

This report presents the initial findings from the first phase of the *Teacher Education: Character and the Professional Development of Pre- and In-Service Teachers* project¹. The aim of the research presented in this report was to understand student teachers' views of character in teaching and to explore how their reported personal character strengths, and what they perceived as the important character strengths of a 'good' teacher, were affected by ITE.

Initial findings indicate that student teachers recognise the importance of character as a factor in the academic achievement of pupils and acknowledge the inherent role that character plays in their own professional development. Student teachers' perceptions of a 'good' teacher remained somewhat unchanged over the course of their ITE year, with performance and intellectual character strengths being prioritised when describing the character of a 'good' teacher. Conversely, student teachers' perceptions of their own personal character strengths *did* change; at the end of ITE, a greater importance was placed upon performance character strengths at the expense of moral character strengths.

¹ www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/1757/projects/current-projects/teacher-education

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1 Background

Teachers are influential educators who spend a considerable amount of time with pupils and have the potential to inspire and motivate them. With this comes a greater level of ethical responsibility than would be expected from many other professions. Teaching can be regarded as a 'moral craft' (Arthur, Davison and Lewis, 2005): the teacher is a moral person, a moral professional, a moral educator and a moral exemplar (Campbell, 2008a). How teachers reflect this within their practice can be perceived as largely dependent on their character and presence (Carr, 1999, 2011; Richardson and Fallona, 2001); through their relationships and interactions with pupils, teachers model the qualities they wish to see in them, influencing them not only through the content of what they teach, but by *how* they teach it. Thus, a 'good' teacher is one who possesses more than just the technical skills required to successfully transfer knowledge and information.

The purpose of education is not only to cultivate knowledge, but to enhance the personal development of young people (Campbell, 2008b; Freeman, 1998; Osguthorpe, 2013; Sanger, 2012); this inherently contains a moral and ethical dimension. To educate is to form and develop an individual's character with the intellectual, moral, civic and performance character strengths that enable them to live good lives and to contribute to a flourishing society. In this regard, education is meant to change lives by changing the way people live together; those who train to become teachers must therefore understand that their role is always concerned with the lives of their pupils, not simply their grades. In addition to explaining the meaning of 'living well', Aristotle advocated for pupils to be taught how to live a virtuous life: 'we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good' (Nicomachean Ethics, 2009: 1103b26-28). In being entrusted this responsibility, fundamental demands are placed on the character of the teacher (Arthur, 2018). To fulfil this broader purpose of education, in addition to subject knowledge, skills and competences, the 'good' teacher is required to be of good character, and ought to be guided by their good sense (Arthur, Davison and Lewis, 2005; Carr, 2007; Osguthorpe, 2008; Rosenberg, 2018).

In recent years, there has been a trend towards standardisation, formal accountability and control in education, as illustrated by a succession of initiatives from the Department for Education (DfE) (DfE, 2016; 2017a; 2018a; 2018b; DfE and Gibb, 2018) that have focussed on the academic achievement of pupils. Further to this, in ITE there has been a focus on the instrumental aspects of teaching, such as subject knowledge, class organisation and lesson structure (Arthur *et al.*, 2015; Arthur, Davison and Lewis, 2005; Jubilee Centre, 2017). This focus often means an absence of attention afforded to the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching (Carr, 2012); teaching is thus being perceived as a technical activity which focusses on classroom management skills, subject knowledge and demonstrable indicators of performance and progress (Arthur *et al.*, 2015).

Furthermore, while the majority of teachers enter the profession as a result of moral or altruistic motivations (Book and Freeman, 1986; Brookhart and Freeman, 1992; Sanger and Osguthorpe, 2011), a willingness to make a difference to children's lives (Sanger and Osguthorpe, 2013) and to develop 'good' people, it is not the moral character strengths of potential teachers which are prioritised when recruiting for ITE. While personal and professional values do play a significant role in the selection process, it is performance character strengths such as resilience which often take precedence, being prioritised over moral character strengths such as fairness and honesty (Arthur *et al.*, 2015).

ITE inevitably influences and shapes the professional practice of student teachers, as well as their understanding of their role. Student teachers expect to engage with the ethical dimensions of the profession in their training (Jubilee Centre, 2015), yet training based on competences alone may not adequately prepare them for the ethical demands of the role (Arthur, Davison and Lewis, 2005). Ultimately, the pressure on teachers to attain measurable outcomes and meet standards reduces the role to that of a technician, potentially marginalising the effect teachers can have as role models who can influence pupils through their own character and qualities (Arthur *et al.*, 2017; Arthur, Davison and Lewis, 2005).

For this reason, it is important to consider the personal qualities of teachers entering the profession in order to ascertain how teacher training can support and develop them, not only to cope with the demands of the job, but to flourish as good teachers and successful educators. A 2015 study exploring the character strengths of a 'good' teacher (Arthur *et al.*, 2015) revealed that student teachers' self-perceptions differed to their conceptions of the 'ideal' teacher when they were asked to choose their top six personal character strengths and the top six character strengths of a 'good' teacher. Despite a high degree of congruence between the two, it is noteworthy that student teachers selected the performance character strengths of leadership and perseverance as two of the top six qualities of a 'good' teacher, replacing the moral character strengths of honesty and kindness selected for their personal top six. While it is postulated that this difference is illustrative of the dominance of performance character strengths in the field, and the acknowledgement of student teachers that such character strengths are needed to be a successful teacher, the student teachers involved in the study were surveyed at only one point in time during their training.

Little is known about how student teachers' self-perceptions and conceptions of a 'good' teacher might develop or change as a result of ITE, nor how they view the role of character and their role as character educators in the profession. To this end, the aim of the research presented here was to understand how ITE affects student teachers' views of character in teaching and to shed light on how this affects their reported personal character strengths and those they perceive as important character strengths of a 'good' teacher. The aims of the research were to:

- Determine how student teachers view the role of character and character education in the teaching profession and;
- Examine how student teachers' self-reported character strengths, and the reported character strengths of a 'good' teacher, are affected by ITE.

2 Methodology

The research presented here formed the first part of a wider study exploring how teachers are prepared and supported to meet the moral and ethical demands of their roles. This part of the study was designed to deepen the researchers' understanding of the place of character and virtues in the education, training and teaching practice of student teachers in primary and secondary school education. The research involved student teachers from two UK universities offering a one year post-graduate ITE qualification in the form of a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education, or equivalent. The research rationale and design are explained below.

2.1 RATIONALE

In seeking to understand the place and importance of character and virtues in ITE, the research team sought to capture the views of student teachers both at an early stage of training, and at the end of their one year ITE programme. Recognising the complexity of the issues, and seeking to expand upon previous research, multiple methods were used to collect data. It has been argued that a multi-method approach offers the best chance of obtaining robust data when exploring the intricacies of issues of character (Arthur *et al.*, 2014). The research therefore included:

1. A literature review and an analysis of profession-specific literature;
2. Two voluntary, paper-based surveys – one conducted with student teachers towards the start of the ITE programme (initial survey) and one conducted with the same student teachers in the final week of their ITE programme (post survey);
3. Voluntary completion of a reflective journal by a sub-section of the participants that completed the surveys; and
4. Semi-structured interviews with a selection of participants who volunteered after completing the reflective journal.

This report focusses on the preliminary research findings from the initial survey and post survey responses. It also outlines the research methods, methods of data analysis and limitations and ethical considerations of the study. The research methods and findings concerning the reflective journal and semi-structured interviews will follow in a separate report.

2.2 RESEARCH METHODS

Following a review of pertinent literature in the field, the participation of two universities was sought. The universities were identified through opportunistic sampling. In order to provide a balanced sample, it was ensured that participants were from both primary and

secondary training settings, across a range of subjects from both universities. Essential to the study was the co-operation and participation of these universities: with the agreement of teacher educators at the chosen universities, members of the research team attended lectures at the earliest convenient dates from the start of the ITE programmes. Student teachers voluntarily completed the initial survey and then received an extended lecture on character education delivered by the research team. Members of the research team returned to both universities in the final week of the ITE programmes to administer the voluntary post survey. Table 1 provides an overview of the number of participants who completed each survey.

Table 1: The Total Number of Student Teacher Participants

	Initial Survey Responses	Post Survey Responses	Number of Participants Who Completed Both Surveys
University A Primary	92	90	70
University B Primary	123	119	100
University A Secondary	137	135	103
University B Secondary	180	149	113
Total	532	493	386

2.2.1 The Initial Survey and Post Survey

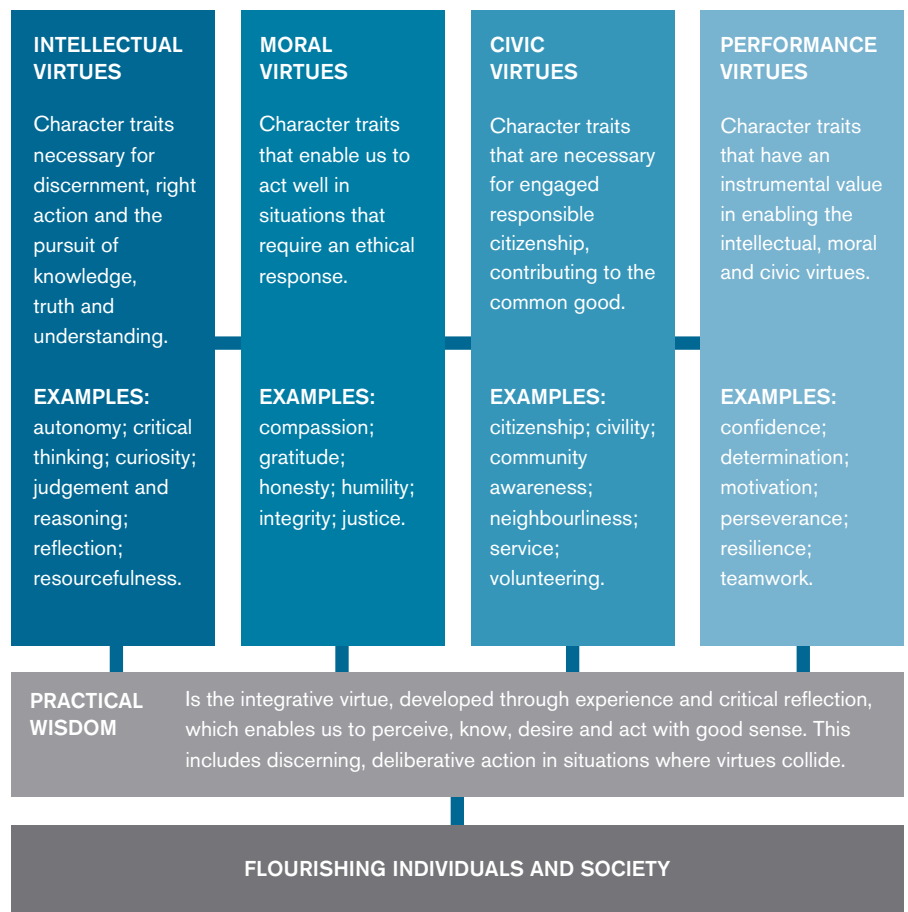
The surveys consisted of the following sections:

- A. Respondents' views on **reflective practice**: respondents were asked to define the term *reflective practice* within the context of the teaching profession, to share their habits of reflection and to offer their views on the importance of reflecting on character within the teaching profession;
- B. Respondents' views on **character education**: respondents were asked about their familiarity with the term *character education*, to define this and to offer their views on the importance of character within the teaching profession;
- C. Respondents' views on their own **personal character strengths**: a list of 24 character strengths, taken from the Jubilee Centre's *A Framework for Character Education in Schools* (2017) (see Figure 1) was presented and respondents were asked to rate, on a scale from 1–7, how well each character strength described them (7 being the strongest). Respondents were then asked to choose and rank the six character strengths which best described their own personal character;
- D. Respondents' views on the **character strengths of a 'good' teacher**: using the same list of character strengths, respondents were asked to rate, on a scale from 1–7, how well each character strength described a 'good' teacher (7 being the strongest). Respondents were then asked to choose and rank the six character strengths which best described a 'good' teacher;
- E. Respondents' **experiences of character education during ITE** (post survey only): respondents were asked for their views regarding the impact and style of training provided by the Jubilee Centre and their ITE programme in regards to character education, and their experiences of character education whilst on placement in schools;
- F. A set of demographic questions.

Figure 1: The Building Blocks of Character

The Jubilee Centre's *A Framework for Character Education in Schools* (2017) presents the Building Blocks of Character. This proposes four domains of virtue, from which the 24 virtues used in this research were taken (6 virtues from each domain): intellectual, moral, civic and performance.

For the purposes of this report, these virtues are referred to as character strengths.



2.3 METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

Responses from the initial survey and post survey were entered into an Excel spreadsheet where they were cleaned and filtered, with only student teachers who completed both the initial survey and post survey included in the final data analysis. Subsequently, the data was exported into SPSS version 24 to conduct the analysis. Frequency distributions of ordinal variables were compared using Pearson's chi square test. McNemar's test of marginal homogeneity was used to test differences on paired nominal data such as the initial survey to post survey changes on dichotomous variables. Finally, paired sample T tests were carried out to compare means between the two time points. When character strengths were ranked, a score was calculated to capture the magnitude of the selection made. In the top six rankings section, percentages refer to the proportion of the overall total score.

2.4 LIMITATIONS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The sampling, which was opportunistic and relied upon voluntary participation from universities and student teachers, presents a limitation to the research. Some of those choosing to take part had a keen interest in the subject and may have had particularly strong views, either positive or negative, on the subject matter. The choice of sample means that conclusions drawn from the survey cannot be assuredly generalised to the whole population. There are also a number of more specific limitations associated with the self-report aspects of the design. Self-reporting is subject to inherent problems such as: self-deception biases²; social-desirability biases³; and self-confirmation biases⁴.

Responses may also have been affected by so-called 'demand characteristics', whereby participants try to work out the aim of the study and answer in ways to support those aims (Orne, 1962). The research team were confident, however, that with the careful explanation and introduction of the surveys, some of these limitations were reduced.

The project was granted initial ethical approval by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee, with subsequent modifications being approved as the design developed. The research team were conscious of their responsibilities to all participants to ensure they understood their commitment to the project and the right to withdraw or modify their contribution at any point up to the commencement of data analysis. Comprehensive opt-in consent forms were signed once appropriate explanations and information had been offered.



² A self-deception bias is where one sees oneself as something other than one is in practice.

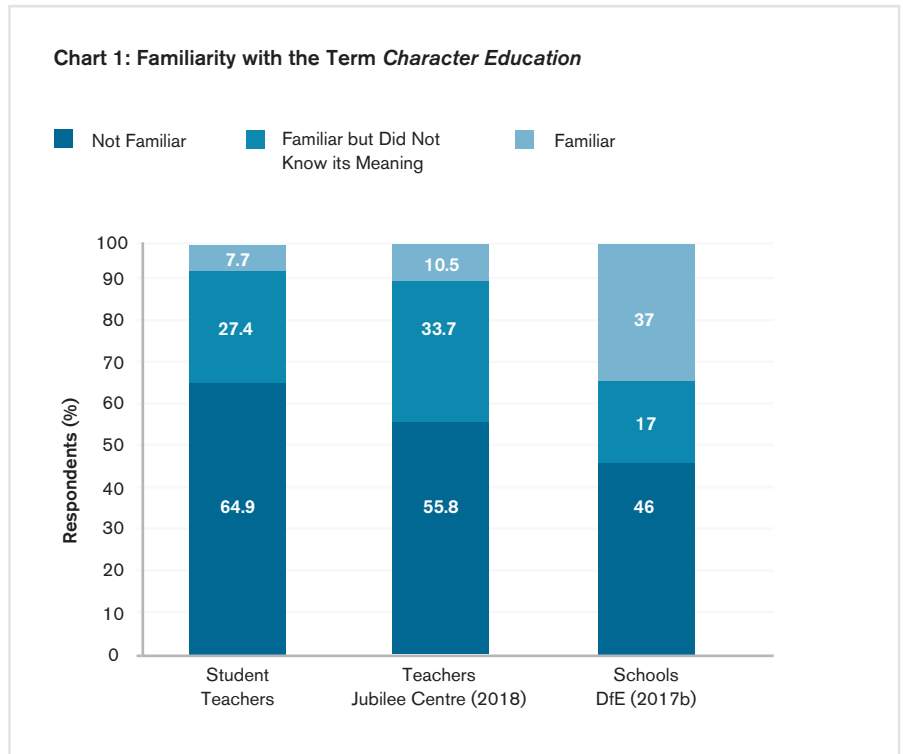
³ A social-desirability bias is the tendency for participants to answer questions in ways that they believe will be viewed favourably by others.

⁴ A self-confirmation bias is where people respond to information in ways that confirm their beliefs, and discard information that contradicts those beliefs.

3 Findings

3.1 FAMILIARITY WITH CHARACTER EDUCATION

In the initial survey, student teachers (N=369) indicated their familiarity with the term *character education*. Chart 1 shows that the majority of student teachers were not familiar (64.9%) with the term. Although a number of student teachers expressed some familiarity, most of these had heard the term but did not know its meaning (27.4%). Only a minority (7.7%) of all respondents stated that they were familiar with the term and knew what it meant. While comparisons can be drawn between these percentages and those reported in a recent Populus poll commissioned by the Jubilee Centre (2018) conducted with qualified teachers (N=457) (55.8% 'not familiar', 33.7% 'familiar but do not know what it means' and 10.5% 'familiar'), they contrast sharply with figures reported by the DfE (2017b) which indicated that 37% of schools (N=880) were 'familiar' with *character education*, 17% were 'familiar but did not know what it meant' and 46% were 'not familiar'.



3.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF CHARACTER FOR TEACHERS

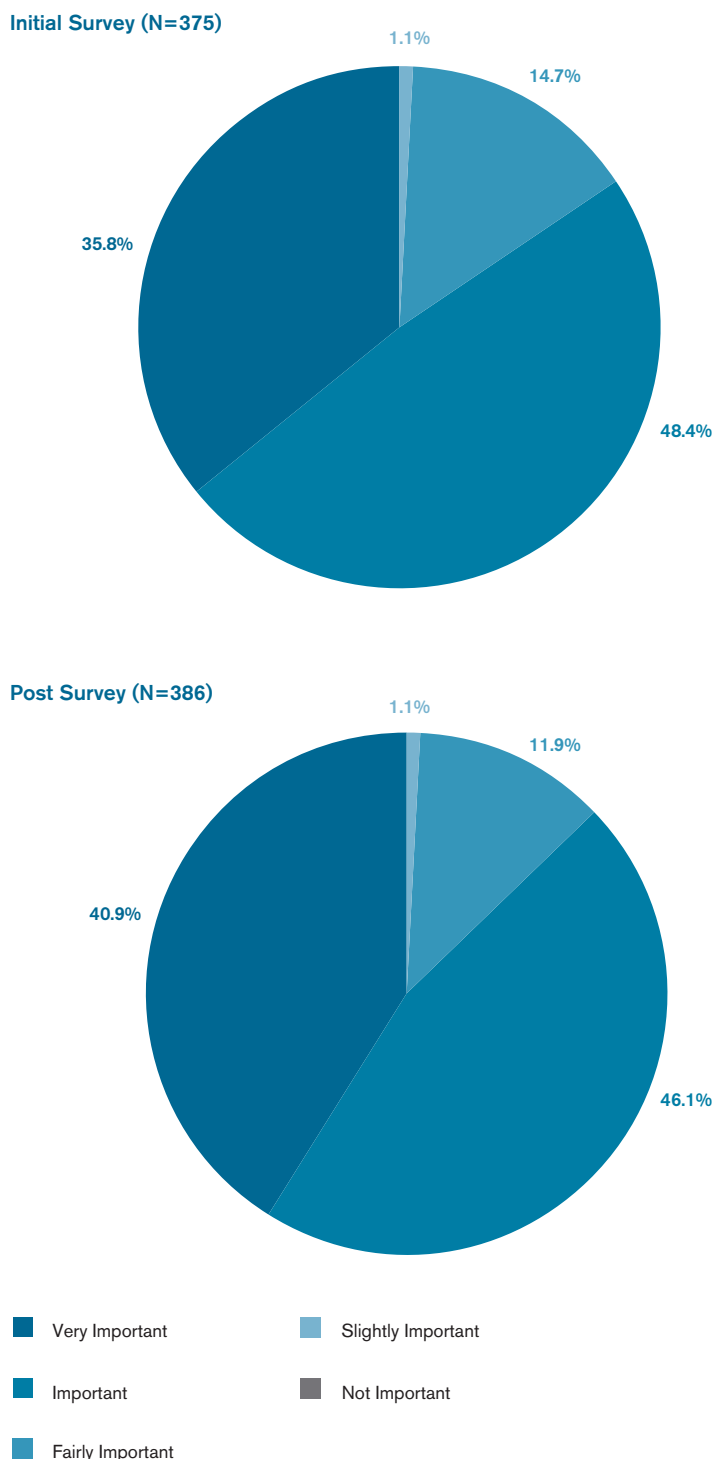
Chart 2 shows that the majority of student teachers believed the development of a teacher’s character was either ‘Important’ or ‘Very Important’ in their professional development. A higher percentage of respondents reported that this was ‘Very Important’ in the post survey (40.9%) compared to the initial survey (35.8%); and a lower percentage of respondents judged this to be ‘Fairly Important’ in the post survey (11.9%) compared to the initial survey (14.7%). For both the initial survey and post survey, no respondents selected ‘Not Important’ as a response.

3.2.1 Further Analysis by Cohort

The research also indicated that there were statistically significant⁵ differences between primary and secondary student teachers when comparing their responses to both the initial survey and the post survey. Student teachers from primary school settings had the highest proportion of ‘Very Important’ and ‘Important’ responses in the initial survey (88.2%) and post survey (93.5%) compared with student teachers from secondary school settings (initial survey 80.8%; post survey 81.9%).

A statistically significant⁶ difference was also found between the initial survey and post survey responses of primary student teachers who reported that the development of a teacher’s character was ‘Very Important’ or ‘Important’. Combined, these two responses increased from 88.2% to 93.5% between the initial survey and post survey time points.

Chart 2: How Important do you think the Development of a Teacher’s Character is in their Professional Development?



⁵ Unless stated otherwise, $p = 0.001 < 0.05$

⁶ $p = 0.09 < 0.1$

3.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF CHARACTER FOR PUPILS

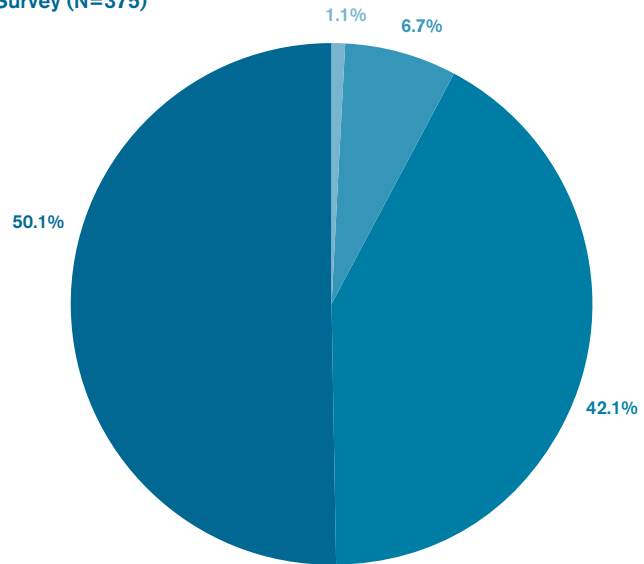
Chart 3 shows that the vast majority of student teachers believed the development of a pupil's character was 'Important' or 'Very Important' in regards to their academic achievement.

3.3.1 Further Analysis by Cohort

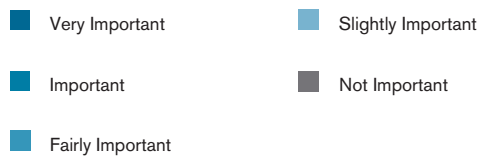
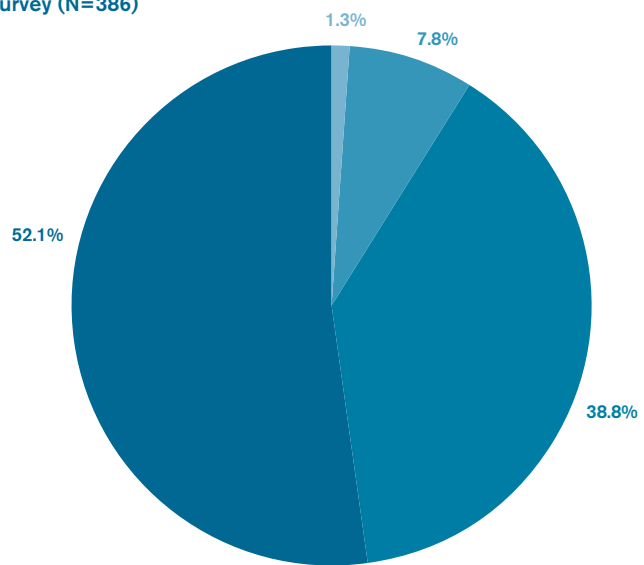
The research indicated that, when compared, there were statistically significant differences between those from primary and secondary training settings in both initial survey and post survey responses. In the initial survey, 94.7% of student teachers from primary school settings reported that this was 'Very Important' or 'Important', compared to 90.2% of student teachers from secondary school settings. In the post survey, the figures were 94.7% for student teachers from primary school settings and 87.9% for student teachers from secondary school settings.

Chart 3: How Important do you think the Development of a Pupil's Character is in Regards to their Academic Achievement?

Initial Survey (N=375)



Post Survey (N=386)



3.4 PREPARATION FOR CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

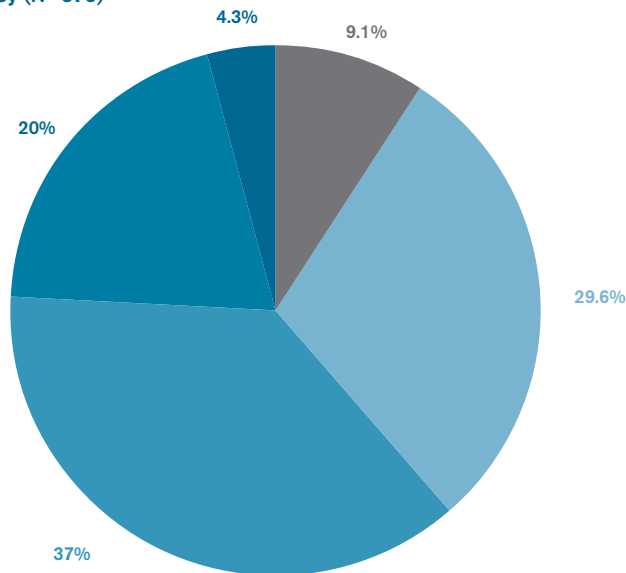
Chart 4 shows that 4.3% of respondents reported that they felt 'Very Prepared', and 20% felt 'Prepared', to develop the character of the pupils in their classrooms in the initial survey. In contrast, the post survey revealed that 15.8% felt 'Very Prepared', with the majority of respondents reporting that they felt 'Prepared' (51.3%).

3.4.1 Further Analysis by Cohort

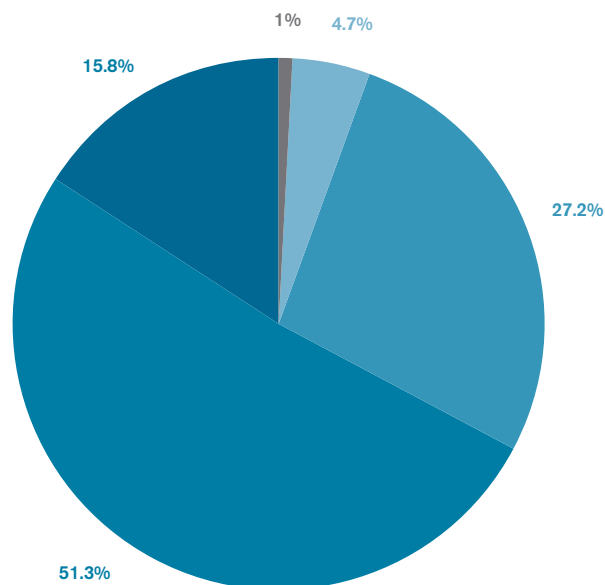
There was a statistically significant difference between the percentage of student teachers who reported being 'Very Prepared' or 'Prepared' between the initial survey and the post survey (24.3% initial survey; 67.1% post survey). Furthermore, statistically significant differences were also found within primary and secondary cohorts. Primary student teachers moved from 20.4% in the initial survey to 71.7% in the post survey, whereas secondary student teachers moved from 27.5% to 63.5% between the two points in time.

Chart 4: How Prepared do you feel to Develop the Character of the Pupils in your Classroom?

Initial Survey (N=375)



Post Survey (N=386)



3.5 CHARACTER STRENGTHS

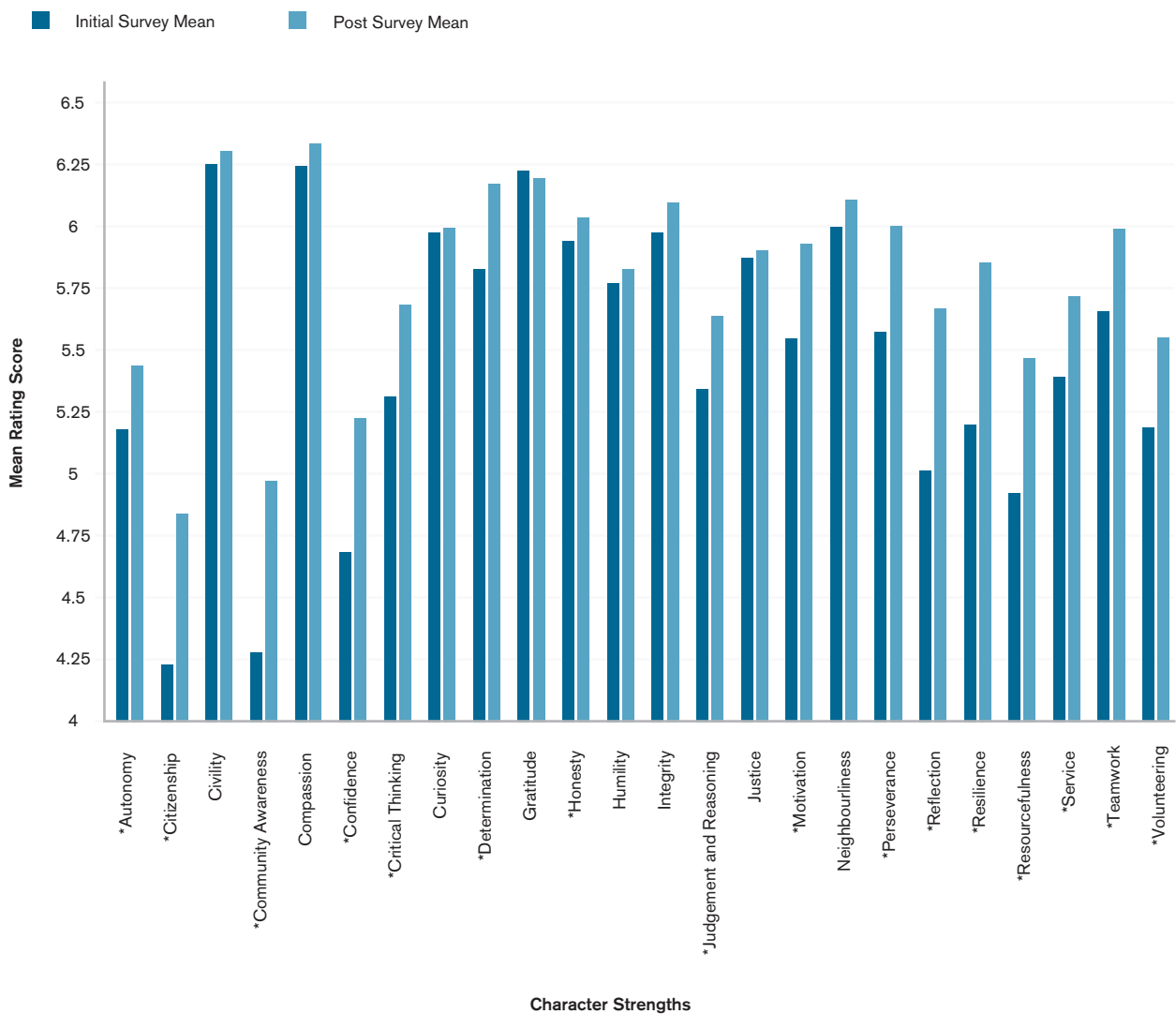
3.5.1 Personal Character Strengths

Student teachers were asked to rate 24 character strengths from 1 to 7 depending on how each one described their own character. The process was then repeated, this time rating how each character strength described a 'good' teacher.

Further analysis showed statistically significant increases between the initial survey and post survey mean rating scores for 16 of the 24 character strengths (highlighted in Chart 5 with*). Of the eight character strengths in which no statistically significant change was observed, five were moral character strengths, two were civic and one was intellectual.

Chart 5 shows that 23 out of the 24 character strengths increased between the two points in time, with the largest increases in community awareness, resilience, reflection, citizenship, confidence and resourcefulness.

Chart 5: Student Teachers' Personal Character Strengths



3.5.2 The Building Blocks of Character

Student teachers' ratings of both their personal character strengths and the character strengths of a 'good' teacher were each separated into the Building Blocks of Character (see Figure 1, page 7).

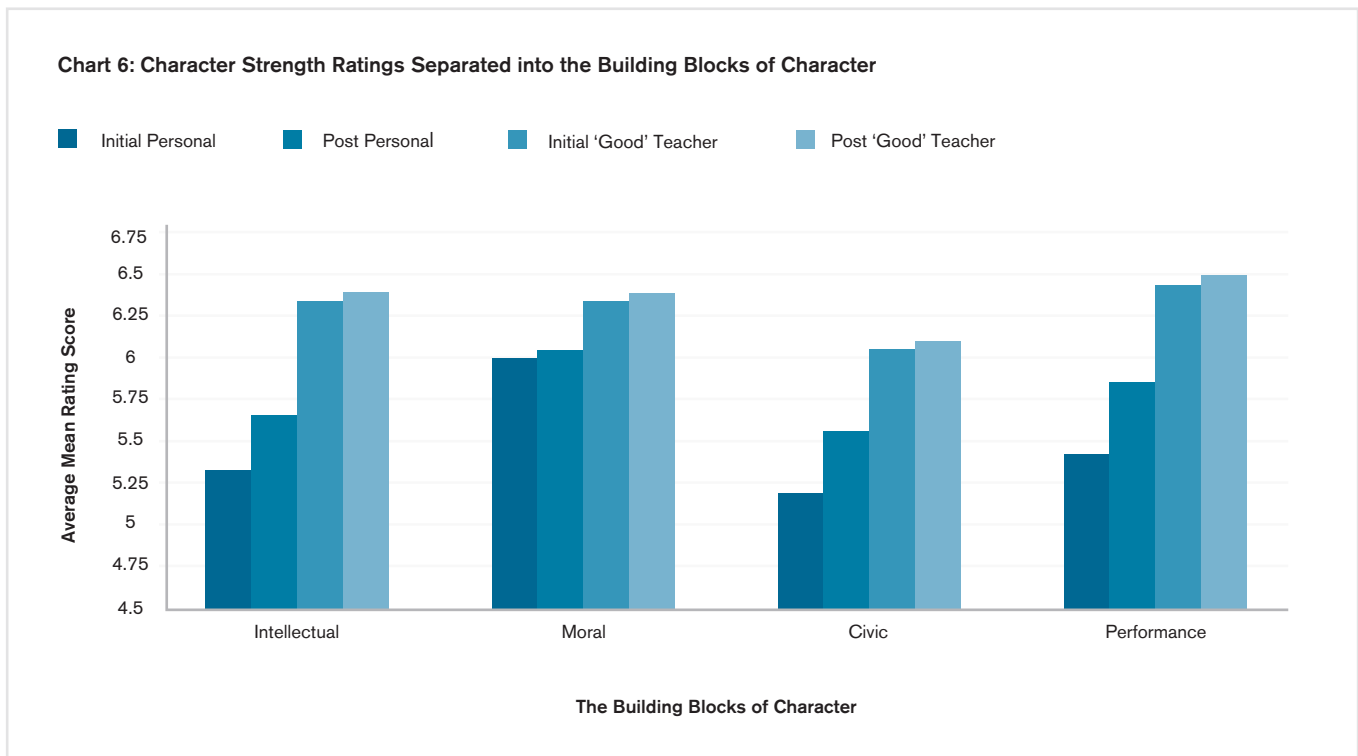
Chart 6 shows the character strength ratings separated into the Building Blocks of Character. As indicated in Chart 6, in both the initial survey and post survey, personal character strengths were rated in the following order:

Further analysis revealed statistically significant increases between the initial survey and post survey average means for the performance, civic and intellectual character strengths.

In both the initial survey and post survey, student teachers' ratings of what they consider to be the character strengths of a 'good' teacher were rated in the following order:

1. MORAL
2. PERFORMANCE
3. INTELLECTUAL
4. CIVIC

1. PERFORMANCE
2. INTELLECTUAL
3. MORAL
4. CIVIC



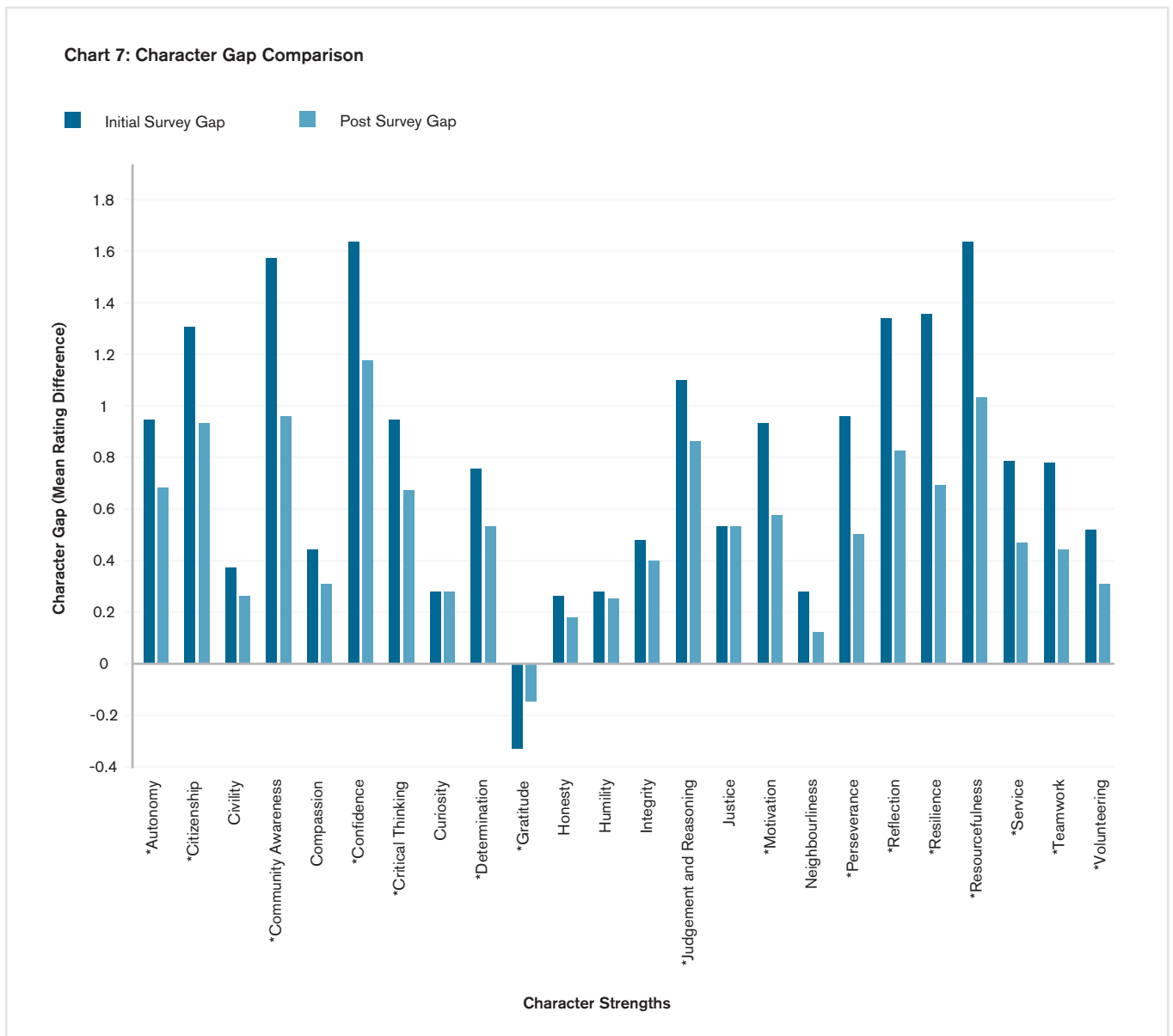
3.6 CHARACTER GAPS

3.6.1 Character Gap Comparison

For the purposes of this report, a character gap is described as the difference between the mean rating score for each personal character strength and the mean score of the same character strength attributed to a 'good' teacher. The mean character gaps from the initial survey and post survey were compared.

Chart 7 shows the size of the character gap from the initial survey and post survey for each character strength. Overall, the greatest reductions in the size of the gap were in resilience, community awareness, resourcefulness, reflection, confidence and perseverance. The character strengths with the largest character gaps at the post survey were confidence, resourcefulness, community awareness, citizenship, judgement and reasoning and reflection.

Further analysis showed that in both the initial survey and post survey, the character gap for each of the 24 character strengths was statistically significant. For 16 of the 24 character strengths (highlighted in Chart 7 with *) the reduction of the gap between the two points in time was statistically significant. Of the eight character strengths in which no statistically significant change between the two points in time was observed, five were moral character strengths, two were civic and one was intellectual.



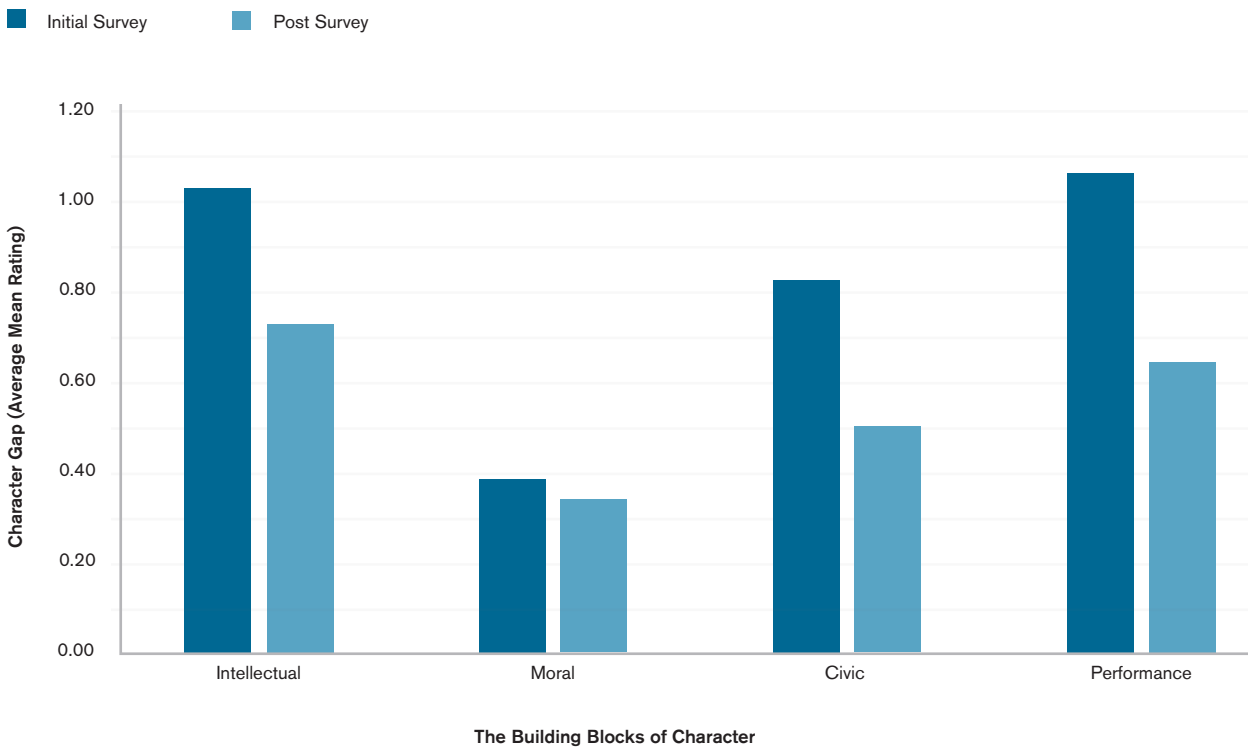
3.6.2 The Building Blocks of Character

Character gaps from both the initial survey and post survey were then separated into the Building Blocks of Character (see Figure 1, page 7) and compared. Chart 8 shows that the performance character strengths had the largest character gap in the initial survey, whereas moral character strengths had the smallest gap. In the post survey, the intellectual character strengths had the largest character gap and the moral character strengths had the smallest gap.

Further analysis showed that the character gap was reduced by a statistically significant amount between the two points in time for the intellectual, performance and civic character strengths, but the reduction was non-significant for the moral character strengths. It must be noted that the moral character strength, gratitude, was removed from the analysis as the character gap was negative. This shows that gratitude was the only character strength where the mean personal rating was greater than the mean rating of a 'good' teacher.



Chart 8: Character Gaps Separated into the Building Blocks of Character



3.7 TOP SIX RANKED CHARACTER STRENGTHS

3.7.1 Personal Character Strengths

In the initial survey and post survey, student teachers were asked to pick and rank the six character strengths which best described their own personal character, placing the strongest first.

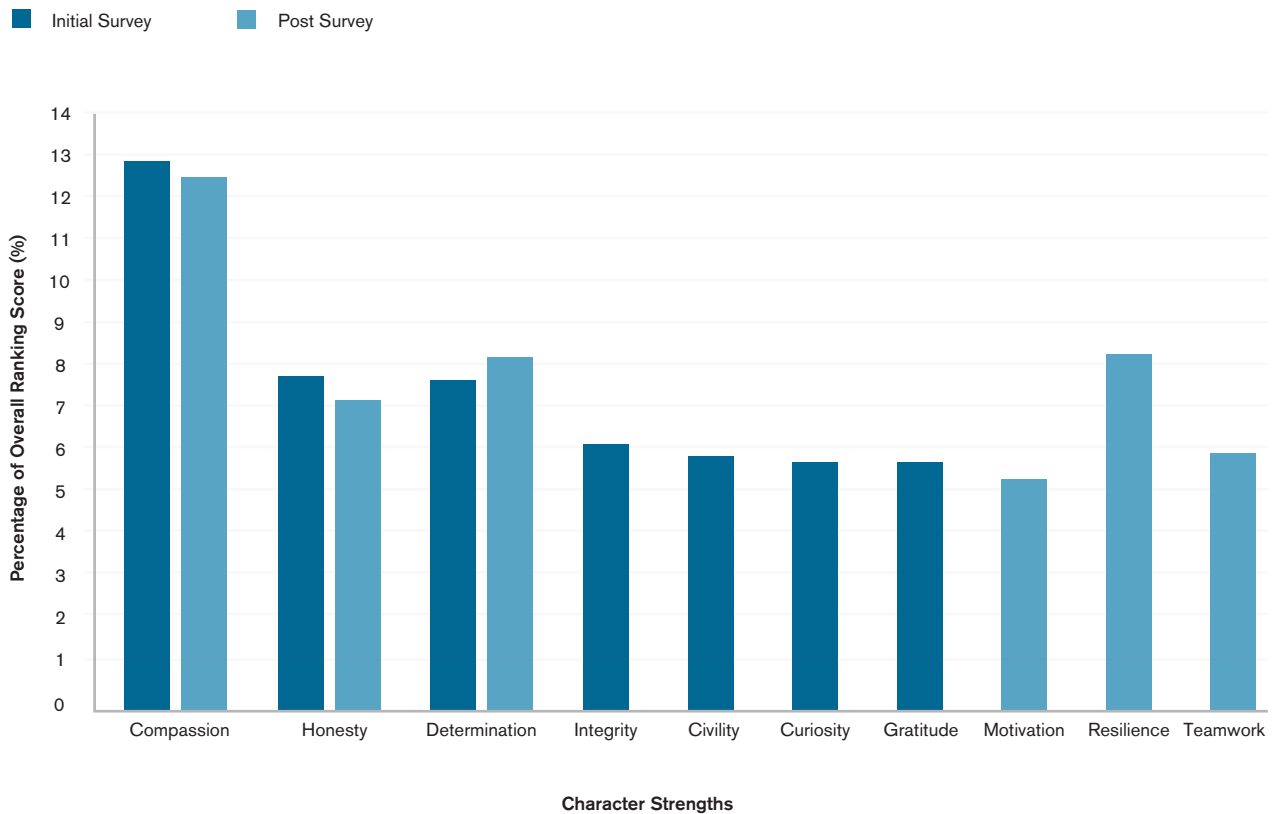
Congruence was found in the initial survey⁷ and post survey for the character strengths of compassion, honesty and determination (see Chart 9). In contrast, integrity, civility, curiosity and gratitude were replaced by motivation, resilience and teamwork in the post survey.

In the initial survey, the top six consisted of four moral character strengths, one performance, one civic and one intellectual. In the post survey, the top six consisted of one moral character strength, three performance and two intellectual.

The analysis also revealed that the bottom six personal character strengths in the initial survey and post survey did not change and comprised: community awareness, citizenship, service, judgement and reasoning, volunteering and resourcefulness. The bottom six therefore consisted of four civic and two intellectual character strengths.

Further analysis showed that there were statistically significant increases between the initial survey and post survey in six character strengths: citizenship, confidence, perseverance, reflection, resilience and teamwork. Statistically significant decreases were found in six character strengths: civility, gratitude, humility, justice, neighbourliness and volunteering.

Chart 9: Overall Ranking Score of the Top Six Personal Character Strengths



⁷ Seven character strengths are reported for the initial survey as curiosity and gratitude both had a ranking of 5.7%.

3.7.2 'Good' Teacher Character Strengths

In the initial survey and post survey, student teachers were asked to pick and rank the six character strengths which best described a 'good' teacher, placing the strongest first.

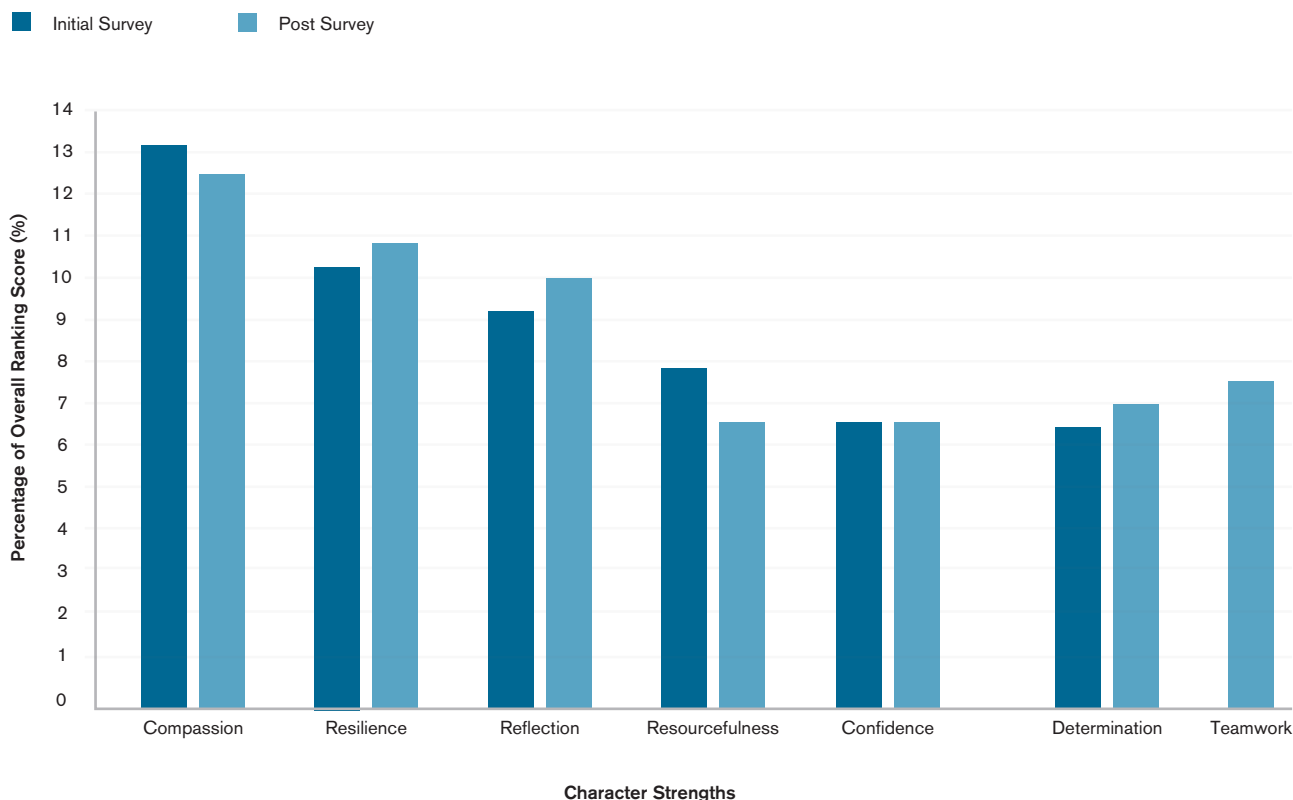
Congruence was found for all of the top six ranked 'good' teacher character strengths in the initial survey and post survey⁸ with teamwork being added to the top ranked character strengths in the post survey. In the initial survey, the top six consisted of one moral character strength, three performance and two intellectual. In the post survey, the top six consisted of one moral character strength, four performance and two intellectual.

The analysis also revealed that the bottom six 'good' teacher character strengths in the initial survey and post survey did not change and comprised: gratitude, community awareness, volunteering, citizenship, neighbourliness and humility. The bottom six therefore consisted of two moral and four civic character strengths.

3.7.3 Character Strengths Combined

In the initial survey, two character strengths were congruent in the top six personal character strengths and the top six character strengths of a 'good' teacher: compassion and determination. In the post survey, four character strengths were congruent in the top six personal character strengths and the top six character strengths of a 'good' teacher: compassion, resilience, determination and teamwork. Volunteering, community awareness and citizenship featured in the bottom six ranked personal character strengths and the bottom six ranked character strengths of a 'good' teacher in both the initial survey and post survey.

Chart 10: Overall Ranking Score for the Top Six 'Good' Teacher Character Strengths



⁸ Seven character strengths are reported for the post survey as confidence and resourcefulness both had a ranking of 6.5%.

3.7.4 The Building Blocks of Character

Student teachers' ranking scores for both their top six personal character strengths and the top six character strengths of a 'good' teacher were each separated into the Building Blocks of Character (see Figure 1, page 7).

Chart 11 shows that in the initial survey, personal character strengths were ranked in this order:

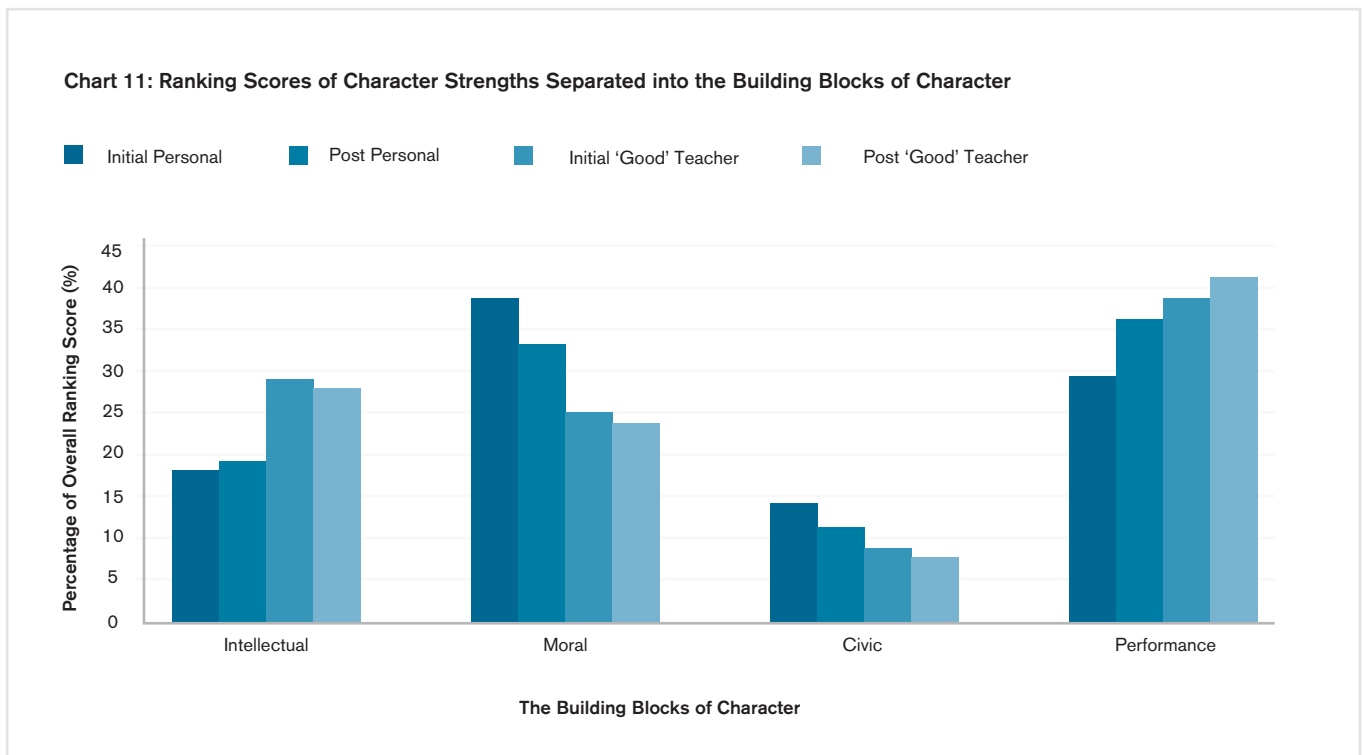
1. MORAL
2. PERFORMANCE
3. INTELLECTUAL
4. CIVIC

In the post survey, personal character strengths were ranked in this order:

1. PERFORMANCE
2. MORAL
3. INTELLECTUAL
4. CIVIC

Chart 11 also shows that character strength rankings of a 'good' teacher did not change from the initial survey to the post survey. They were ranked in this order for both:

1. PERFORMANCE
2. INTELLECTUAL
3. MORAL
4. CIVIC



Further analysis showed that, when combined, the top six ranking scores of the civic character strengths demonstrated a statistically significant increase from the initial survey to the post survey for student teachers' personal character strengths and for the character strengths of a 'good' teacher. When combined, the top six ranking scores of the moral

character strengths demonstrated a statistically significant decrease from the initial survey to the post survey for student teachers' personal character strengths and for the character strengths of a 'good' teacher.



4 Insights

The research summarised in this report sheds light on how student teachers perceive character in the early stages of their teaching career. The initial findings reveal how the importance they attribute to character development, their perceived competence as character educators, and their perceptions of character strengths in the profession change over the course of the ITE year.

By asking student teachers to rate and rank character strengths at two points in time, the research has provided a new insight into how ITE affects their perceptions. While compassion repeatedly featured as an important part of personal and professional character, this was the only moral character strength to feature in the top six character strengths of a 'good' teacher. In line with previous findings (Arthur *et al.*, 2015), it was performance and intellectual character strengths which were associated more with the conception of a 'good' teacher. Interestingly, while this conception remained relatively unchanged at the end of the ITE year, significant changes occurred to perceived personal character strengths, with a shift to prioritise performance character strengths over moral character strengths in the post survey.

The post survey shows that student teachers' perceptions of their personal character strengths began to align more with their perceptions of a 'good' teacher.

While student teachers' conceptions of a 'good' teacher may have been influenced prior to their training by their school experiences and by how the profession is presented in the media, it is conceivable that their experiences during ITE reinforced this. While the research did not assess the degree to which the ITE programmes focussed on competences and instrumental aspects of teaching, it is widely acknowledged (Arthur, Davison and Lewis, 2005; Campbell, 2018; Carr, 2012; Osguthorpe, 2013) that significant attention is paid to practical skills and competences in ITE. Indeed, the aforementioned prioritisation of performance character strengths in the selection process for ITE (Arthur *et al.*, 2015) reflects an acknowledgement by teacher educators that these are necessary to cope with the demands of the profession. The attention given to the instrumental aspects of teaching may have contributed to the shifting perceptions of student teachers; however, the extent of this effect is unknown.

Student teachers enter the profession with the intention and desire to make a difference to the lives of pupils (Sanger and Osguthorpe, 2013). Though the findings presented here suggest a prioritisation of performance character strengths during ITE, responses indicate that student teachers consider the development of character in the profession to be of high importance, both for the development of pupils and for themselves. Furthermore, following ITE, student teachers reported feeling significantly more prepared to develop the character of their pupils; this suggests that the capacity of student teachers in this regard can be enhanced as a result of ITE programmes. Taken together, these findings suggest that a focus on character development within teacher training is both welcomed by student teachers and has the potential to influence their practice.

The insights into the character development of student teachers presented in this report form just one part of the ongoing research project *Teacher Education: Character and the Professional Development of Pre- and In-Service Teachers*.



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