

A Framework for Character Education in Schools

‘Good character is the foundation for improved attainment and human flourishing.’

INTRODUCTION

Developing children’s characters is an obligation on us all, not least on parents. Although parents are the primary educators of character, empirical research shows that they want all adults who have contact with their children to contribute to such education, especially their children’s teachers. The development of character is a process that requires the efforts of both the developing individual and the society and its schools. A society determined to enable its members to live well will treat character education as something to which every child has a right. Questions about the kinds of persons children will become, the contributions of good character to a flourishing life, and how to balance various virtues and values in this process are therefore salient concerns for all schools. Interest is now being shown in character across a variety of UK schools. The aim of this Framework is to provide a rationale and a practical outlet for that interest.

No one doubts that belonging to a school community is a deeply formative experience that helps make students the kinds of persons they become. In a wide sense, character education permeates all subjects, wider school activities and general school ethos; it cultivates the virtues of character associated with common morality and develops students’ understanding of what is excellent in diverse spheres of human endeavour. Schools do and should aid students in knowing the good, loving the good and doing the good. Schools should enable students to become good persons and citizens, able to lead good lives, as well as

‘successful’ persons. Schooling is concerned centrally with the formation of character and benefits from an intentional and planned approach to character development.

Human flourishing is the widely accepted goal of life. To flourish is not only to be happy, but to fulfil one’s potential. Flourishing is the aim of character education, which is critical to its achievement. Human flourishing requires moral, intellectual and civic virtues, excellence specific to diverse domains of practice or human endeavour, and generic virtues of self-management (known as enabling and performance virtues). All are necessary to achieve the highest potential in life. Character education is about the acquisition and strengthening of virtues: the traits that sustain a well-rounded life and a thriving society. Schools should aim to develop confident and compassionate students who are effective contributors to society, successful learners and responsible citizens. Students also need to grow in their understanding of what is good or valuable and their ability to protect and advance what is good. They need to develop a commitment to serving others, which is an essential manifestation of good character in action. Questions of character formation are inseparable from these educational goals and are fundamental to living well and responsibly. Character development involves caring for and respecting others as well as caring for and respecting oneself.

Character education is no novelty. If we look at the history of schooling from ancient times to the 20th century, the cultivation of character was typically given pride of

place, with the exception of a few decades towards the end of the 20th century when, for a variety of different reasons, this aim disappeared from the curricula of many Western democracies. Contemporary character education, however, is better grounded academically than some of its predecessors, with firm support both from the currently popular virtue ethics in moral philosophy and recent trends in social science, such as positive psychology, that have revived the concepts of character and virtue. Finally, a growing general public-policy consensus, across political parties and industry, suggests that the role of moral and civic character is pivotal in sustaining healthy economies and democracies.

WHAT CHARACTER EDUCATION IS

Character is a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct. Character education is an umbrella term for all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people develop positive personal strengths called virtues. Character education is more than just a subject. It has a place in the culture and functions of families, classrooms, schools and other institutions. Character education is about helping students grasp what is ethically important in situations and to act for the right reasons, such that they become more autonomous and reflective. Students need to decide wisely the kind of person they wish to become and to learn to choose between already existing alternatives or to find new ones. In this process, the ultimate aim of character education is the development of good sense or practical wisdom: the capacity to choose intelligently between alternatives. This capacity involves knowing how to choose the right course of action in difficult situations and it arises gradually out of the experience of making choices and the growth of ethical insight.

WHAT CHARACTER EDUCATION IS NOT

Character education is not about indoctrination and mindless conditioning. The ultimate goal of all proper character education is to equip students with the intellectual tools to make wise choices of their own within the framework of a democratic society. Critical thinking is thus a vital facet of a well-rounded character. Character and virtue are not exclusively religious notions although they do clearly have a place in religious systems. Almost all current theories of virtue and character education happen to be formulated in a post religious language. Character and virtue are not paternalistic notions. If being 'paternalistic' means that character education goes against the wishes of students and their parents, empirical research shows the opposite. More generally

speaking, the character of children cannot simply be put on hold at school until they reach the age where they have become wise enough to decide for themselves. Some form of character education will always be taking place in school. The sensible question that can be asked about a school's character-education strategy is not, therefore, whether such education does occur, but whether it is intentional, planned, organised and reflective, or assumed, unconscious, reactive and random. The emphasis on character and virtue is not conservative or individualist – all about 'fixing the kids'. The ultimate aim of character education is not only to make individuals better persons but to create the social and institutional conditions within which all human beings can flourish. Character education is not about promoting the moral ideals of a particular moral system. Rather, it aims at the promotion of a core set of universally acknowledged (cosmopolitan) virtues and values.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Character is educable and its progress can be measured holistically, not only through self-reports but also more objective research methods
- Character is important: it contributes to human and societal flourishing
- Character is largely caught through role-modelling and emotional contagion: school culture and ethos are therefore central
- Character should also be taught: direct teaching of character provides the rationale, language and tools to use in developing character elsewhere in and out of school
- Character is the foundation for improved attainment, better behaviour and increased employability
- Character should be developed in partnership with parents, employers and other community organisations
- Character results in academic gains for students, such as higher grades
- Character education is about fairness and each child has a right to character development
- Character empowers students and is liberating
- Character demonstrates a readiness to learn from others
- Character promotes democratic citizenship

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WHAT VIRTUES CONSTITUTE GOOD CHARACTER?

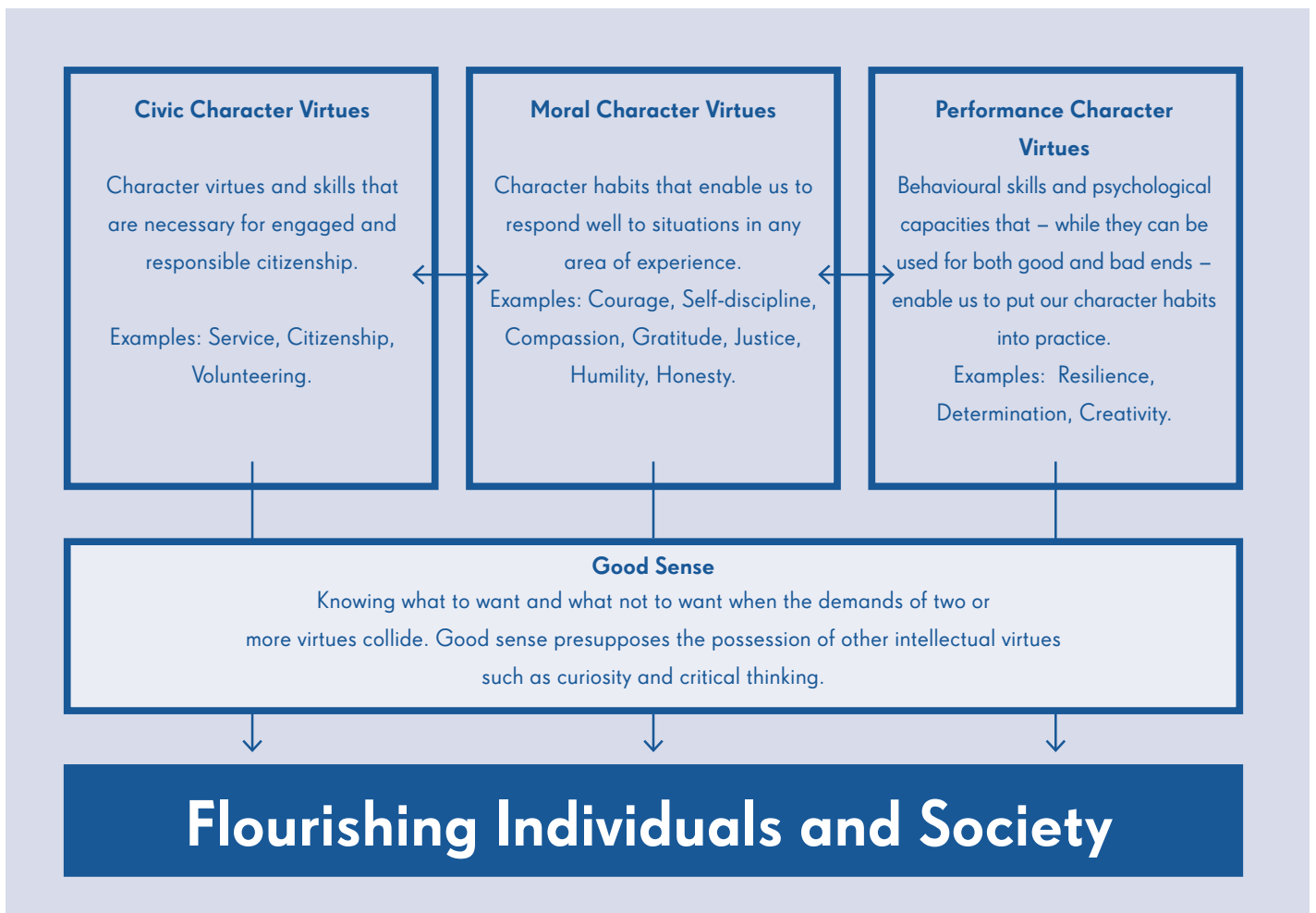
Individuals can respond well or less well to the challenges they face in everyday life, and the moral virtues are those character traits that enable human beings to respond appropriately to situations in any area of experience. These character traits enable people to live, cooperate and learn with others in a way that is peaceful, neighbourly and morally justifiable. Displaying moral and other virtues in admirable activity over the course of a life, and enjoying the inherent satisfaction that ensues is what it means to live a flourishing life.

No definitive list of relevant areas of human experience and the respective virtues can be given, as the virtues will to a certain extent be relative to individual constitution, developmental stage and social circumstance. For example, temperance in eating will be different for an Olympic athlete and an office worker; what counts as virtuous behaviour for a teenager may not pass muster for a mature adult; and the virtues needed to survive in a war zone may not be the same as those in a peaceful rural community. There are also a great many virtues, each concerned with particular activities and potential spheres of human experience. It is, therefore, neither possible nor desirable to provide an exhaustive list of the moral virtues that should be promoted in all schools. Moreover, particular schools may decide to prioritise certain virtues over others in light of the school’s history, ethos, location or specific student population. Nevertheless, a list of prototypical virtues – that will be recognised and embraced by representatives of all cultures and religions – can be suggested and drawn upon in character education. The list

below contains examples of such virtues that have been highlighted in some of the most influential philosophical and religious systems of morality – and that also resonate well with current efforts at character education in schools:

Virtue	Definition
Courage	Acting with bravery in fearful situations
Justice	Acting with fairness towards others by honouring rights and responsibilities
Honesty	Being truthful and sincere
Compassion for others	Exhibiting care and concern
Self-discipline	Acting well in the presence of tempting pleasures
Gratitude	Feeling and expressing thanks for benefits
Humility / Modesty	Estimating oneself within reasonable limits

In addition to those prototypical moral virtues, schools need to promote specific civic virtues, such as service, citizenship and volunteering, that help students understand their ties to society and their responsibilities within it. Furthermore, all developing human beings will need to possess a host of intellectual virtues, such as curiosity and critical thinking, that guide their quest for knowledge and information. Among the intellectual virtues one deserves a special mention here. That is the virtue which the ancient Greeks called *phronesis*, but can also be called ‘good sense’ – the overall quality of knowing what to want and what not to want when the demands of two or more virtues collide, and to integrate such demands into an acceptable course of action. Living with good sense entails: considered deliberation, well founded judgement and the vigorous enactment of decisions. It reveals itself in foresight, in being clear sighted and far sighted about the ways in which actions will lead to desired goals. The ability to learn from experience (and make mistakes) is at the centre of it. To live with good sense is to be open-minded, to recognise the true variety of things and situations to be experienced. To live without ‘good sense’ is to live thoughtlessly and indecisively. ‘Bad sense’ shows itself in irresoluteness, or remissions in carrying out decisions and in negligence and blindness to our circumstances. To live without ‘good sense’ is to be narrow-minded and closed-minded; it can reveal itself in an attitude of being ‘cocksure’ – a ‘know-it-all’ that resists reality. ‘Good sense’ cannot be confused with ‘cunning’; ‘cunning’ reveals itself in non-moral straining for any self-chosen good. ‘Good sense’ forms part of all the other virtues; indeed



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it constitutes the overarching meta-virtue necessary for good character. It requires a well-rounded assessment of situations, thinking through and looking ahead to potential actions and consequences.

Virtues are empowering and are the key to fulfilling an individual’s potential. Because of the foundational role of the virtues in human flourishing, schools have a responsibility to cultivate the virtues, define and list those they want to prioritise and integrate them into all teaching and learning in and out of school. Students therefore need to learn their meanings and identify appropriate practices in which to apply them in their lives, respecting

themselves (as persons of character) and being of service to others.

In addition to the moral virtues, all human beings need personal traits that enable them to manage their lives effectively. These traits are sometimes called performance virtues and enabling virtues, to distinguish them from the specifically moral ones. In contemporary school-policy discourse, they are commonly referred to as ‘soft skills’. One of the most significant of those is resilience – the ability to bounce back from negative experiences. Others include determination, confidence, creativity and teamwork. All good programmes of character education will include the cultivation of performance virtues, but they will also explain to students that those virtues derive their ultimate value from serving morally acceptable ends, in particular from being enablers and vehicles of the moral virtues.

Although virtues can be divided up into different categories, they form a coherent, mutually supportive whole in a well-rounded life, and character education is all about their integration, guided by the overarching intellectual virtue of good sense.

Flourishing Individuals and Society

THE GOALS OF CHARACTER EDUCATION

It is common for a school to outline the goals of education in its mission statement, and a school that seeks to strengthen the character of its students should affirm its commitment to doing so in its mission statement.

Each school needs to describe the kinds of citizens it wants to help develop and then outline the philosophy that underlies its approach. The philosophy and approach should involve clear ethical expectations of students and teachers and modelling by teachers to guide the building of individual virtues in students. Schools should provide opportunities for students to not just think and do, but also understand what it means to be and become a mature, reflective person. They should help prepare students for the tests of life, rather than simply a life of tests.

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SCHOOL ETHOS BASED ON CHARACTER

The research evidence is clear: schools that are values-driven have high expectations and demonstrate academic, professional and social success. They are committed and determined to develop the character of their students through the articulation of, demonstration of and commitment to core ethical virtues and to the cultivation of meaningful personal relationships. Because the ethos of a school is the expression of the collective character of everyone, it is important for every member of a school community to have some basic understanding of what character is. Students and teachers therefore need to learn not only the names and meanings of character virtues, but display them in the school’s thinking, attitudes and actions. Character virtues should be reinforced everywhere: on the playing fields, in classrooms, corridors, interactions between teachers and students, in assemblies, posters, head teacher messages and communications, staff training, and in relations with parents. They are critical in extra-curricular activities and should translate into positive feelings and behaviour. The process of being educated in virtue is not only one of acquiring ideas. It is about belonging and living within a community – for schools are, together with the family, one of the principal means by which students grow in virtue.

TEACHERS AS CHARACTER EDUCATORS

Character education builds on what already happens in schools, and most teachers see character cultivation as a core part of their role. Considerations of character, of the kind of person students hope to become, should be at the heart of teaching and education. The virtues acquired through experience by students are initially under the guidance of parents and teachers who serve as role models and moral exemplars.

In order to be a good teacher, one needs to be or become a certain kind of person: a person of good character who also exemplifies commitment to the value of what they teach. The character and integrity of the teacher is more fundamental than personality or personal style in class, and it is no less important than mastery of subject content and techniques of instruction. Teaching a subject with integrity involves more than helping students to acquire specific bits of knowledge and skills. Good teaching is underpinned

by an ethos and language that enables a public discussion of character within the school community so that good character permeates all subject teaching and learning. It also models commitment to the forms of excellence or goodness inherent in the subject matter: the qualities of craftsmanship, artistry, careful reasoning and investigations, beauty and power of language, and deep understanding made possible by the disciplines. Such commitment is important if students are to learn the value of what is taught and learn to do work that is good and personally meaningful.

Although a clear picture is emerging of the inescapability of character education, teachers often complain that they suffer from moral ambivalence and lack of self-confidence in their (inescapable) professional position as role models and character educators. Repeated empirical studies show that teachers find it difficult to address ethical issues in the classroom. Although many teachers possess a strong interest in moral issues, they are not always adequately trained to reflect critically upon and convey moral views to their students in a sophisticated way. Unfortunately, the recent surge in interest in character education has so far failed to make an impact on teacher education and training. Indeed, contemporary policy discourse, with its amoral, instrumentalist, competence-driven vocabulary, often seems to shy away from perspectives that embrace normative visions of persons in the context of their whole lives. The lack of teacher education programmes with a coherent approach to character education is most likely the result of more dominant principles of grade attainment and classroom management. This seems a lost opportunity, however, given the commonly expressed desire among trainee teachers to make a moral difference. It is fitting to end this Framework document with a call for increased attention to moral issues, in general, and character-educational issues, in particular, in teacher education and training.

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Why Character Education is Important

- Character is fundamental: it is the basis for human and societal flourishing;
- Character is largely caught through role-modelling and emotional contagion: school culture and ethos are therefore central;
- Character should also be taught: direct teaching of character provides the rationale, language and tools to use in developing character elsewhere in and out of school;
- Character is educable: it is not fixed and the virtues can be developed. Its progress can be measured holistically, not only through self-reports but also more objective research methods;
- Good character is the foundation for improved attainment, better behaviour and increased employability, but most importantly, healthier societies;
- Character should be developed in partnership with parents, employers and other community organisations;
- Good character results in academic gains for students, such as higher grades;
- Each child has a right to character education;
- The development of character empowers students and is liberating;
- Character demonstrates a readiness to learn from others;
- Character promotes democratic citizenship.

For more information about the Framework or to get involved with the work of the Jubilee Centre please visit our website: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

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