



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

CASE STUDY: Meadowhead School and Our Involvement in The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues 'My Character Project'.

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Meadowhead School is a truly comprehensive school, situated on the South edge of Sheffield. Its catchment area incorporates leafy suburbs, a bustling artisan area, and three council house estates with high levels of social deprivation. It serves approximately 2000 pupils from 11-18. The school works hard to foster links with its community, has good relationships with the seven main feeder schools, and attends safety forums and community/advisory groups. It is seen as the secondary of choice in its community, and very few pupils opt out at transition. It has the confidence of most parents, and high attendance at parents' evenings.

The school was founded in 1988. Its 330 pupils per year group are predominantly white (over 95%), reflecting the local area, and the number on the SEN register varies from 26 (in year 11) to 80 (in year 7). The school has developed a set of learning mentors, operating out of a teaching base, as well as a behaviour support unit. A priority is to re-engage those pupils who have become disaffected. All pupils are entered for some form of qualification at 16, and attendance averages 93%. There is a full range of ability, and the school achieved 65% (5 A-C including Maths and English) pass rate in 2012.

In 2007, the school's PSHE started to be taught by a smaller team of specialists rather than the form teachers. In some of these lessons the students would look at the characteristics of what makes a good citizen. The form teachers (or learning managers as they are called) would focus more on academic progress, and help the students to "learn to learn". Obviously, there is some overlap with the My Character project here and such issues as teamwork and following your dream or goals would be looked at in terms of their progress through school and into the world of work. The PSHE lessons would focus more on their relationships with others, and with society in general. The other area of character or ethical education is through school assemblies, where a member of the school leadership team will speak to the students for 10-20 minutes once a week, often using power point. These assemblies will often address a moral issue or personality traits which can lead to success or happiness.

Then in 2010, the ethics faculty was born. There had always been some overlap between PSHE and religious education as RE would also look at general moral and societal issues, from abortion to political systems, so it was fairly natural to marry them together into one subject. The ethical element was enhanced, with a focus on "what is ethics?" at the start of year 7, leading to A-level studies in philosophy and ethics, as well as sociology. It is planned to add psychology at A-level. The ethical focus can be seen in many of the "key questions" of the lessons, which focus on what we **should** do, in the students' opinion. They also need to be aware of both sides of every argument, including religious views. Topics studied include friendship, family relationships, finance and charity, disabilities, tolerance of differences,

looking after ourselves (health and in society), prejudice, evil, responsibility, drugs, war and conflict, sexual relationships, poverty, crime and punishment, the elderly and dying, medical research and IVF, the environment and animal rights. A number of these are included in our ethics GCSE syllabus, which is actually a religious studies GCSE, but in which a number of the questions can be answered based on ethical awareness without reference to religion.

The school has embraced ethics with a fair degree of enthusiasm. It came about as a separate subject partly as a result of a staff survey, in which good moral values were cited by many staff as a key goal that we are trying to achieve in education. The subject has been allocated two lessons a week in a packed curriculum, though this has led to some misgivings from staff in subject areas that are being squeezed in terms of timetabled hours and student numbers. The students' response to the subject has been generally positive, especially in key stage three. At key stage four there is obviously some dissatisfaction that its inclusion as a compulsory part of the curriculum means one less option for many students. Those who struggle with literacy might feel particularly aggrieved at not being able to take another practical subject. The exam results so far have been very encouraging and reflect the overall success of the subject, with 69% A to C grades in the first GCSE cohort in 2013, higher than comparable curriculum areas and higher than the school's five A*-C percentage.

It is against this background that the school was attracted to the My Character project. The Head of Ethics, Mr Lawrenson, came across the project on the internet, and we took it further. As an idea, the concept of looking at and encouraging certain personality traits clearly complemented what we were trying to do in ethics: To develop ethically tolerant, thoughtful, literate and aware young people, who would go on to live helpful and hopefully happier lives.

Our first experience with the project was in the design stage, when about 20 of our gifted students were taken off timetable for a day to work on plans for the website and journal. The day was a great success, and the contribution of a number of students was impressive. The write-up by one of the students in the school newsletter referred to the fun they had and the worthwhile feel to the activities. I think that at the time they felt that they were contributing to the education of others in a meaningful way, and Tom certainly related well with them and got some good work out of them. It was not a lazy day off timetable!

As for the students involved in the project itself, the experiences were mixed, though mainly positive. I taught the journal group, and delivered the 10 lessons at intervals of 3 to 4 weeks throughout the year. With so much reading and writing, it was important to guide them through the activities at their own pace. Some activities seemed more engaging than others, in particular the match-ups or lists that could be completed fairly quickly. The reading of the stories of the inspirational figures seemed hard work for a number of the students, and I think the message from them could have been put across in fewer words. The reflective writing tasks seemed to repeat themselves a bit too much through each module, and there was not enough structure to guide even the average year 8 student. Only the strongest

students had the literacy skills to really do it justice. It was also difficult to set and assess the atmosphere of the room for the journal lessons. Ideally there should be the chance for some discussion with peers, to really engage the students, but the fact that it was not “for marks” and therefore didn’t really “matter”, led to an increasing volume of conversation that was not task-focused. To allow for the concentration and reflection required by the tasks, I found it increasingly necessary to insist on the silence of test conditions.

All that said, the students’ own reflections that they shared with Tom were quite positive. A strong student spoke of liking the inspirational people write-ups, and they were generally positive about the chance to think about themselves, and the quotes. An honest comment (shared with both Tom and myself, and backed up by their behaviour in lessons) was that they appreciated doing something different from the normal pattern of classes, which is perhaps a message for education in general. The students were quite positive about the impact of the project when talking to Tom, with about half of them saying how useful it was to think about themselves. With me, the class were more sceptical about whether doing the lessons had actually affected their decisions in life or their character. I don’t know at this point what the pre- and post-test scores revealed, but I feel that the lessons spread throughout the year as they were, would enhance the students’ literacy when writing about character, but would be unlikely to really have much impact on their character, compared to parenting, peer pressure, media etc.

The website group seemed to have a more positive experience overall. They commented on the well designed, accessible website, the fun activities and especially videos, and it seemed to encourage more team-work and interactivity for most of them. Mr Lawrenson, their teacher, was equally effusive about the way the students’ engaged and got on well with independent learning. Their keenness about the tasks carries over into their view of the impact as they relayed it to Tom, which seemed very positive and focused on their future. To be totally honest, I now teach that group as year 9s, and while they admit to liking the lessons on the computers, some of the abler students felt that it did not really change their personality or perceptions at all, it merely reflected them. It may be that they gave Tom the positive responses they felt he might have wanted about his project, and were more brutally frank with me, but it may also be that they were trying to be cool, dismissive teenagers with me, and were more honest with Tom.

As for the impact of the project in relation to the 8 aspects of personality, the hardest element is finding school based evidence. Such issues as patience, courage, dreams, helpfulness and saving are more readily assessed outside the school environment as they relate to friends and family and plot a path through life. Certainly there are gradual improvements in students’ ability to work together, be determined to complete a task and be creative. However it would be hard to put this down to the project, as opposed to a gradual increase in group work and creative writing tasks in our ethics curriculum.

All in all, we are delighted to have taken part in the project. Even the control group appreciated it, as the questions on the pre and post survey were thought-provoking, and led to a discussion. It was a nice touch to actually offer the money to a random student based on the risk survey, and one of the control group was understandably delighted to win it. We have continued to make use of the website with both year 8 and year 9 students this year. The extra enthusiasm with which the students approach computer tasks warrants that choice.

Improvements we suggest would be to look at differentiation, especially in terms of literacy ability. There are a number of students who do not understand some of the personality descriptors in the early introductory tasks. More multiple choice tasks would make it more accessible for them. The teacher also needs the ability to quickly check a master list of what tasks individual students have completed, and to view their work. It is quite onerous to keep logging on as the student, for us to view progress. That said, the tasks are varied and thoughtfully prepared, and we appreciate the support given to us by Tom and his team at Birmingham University. As somewhat pioneers in ethics education ourselves, we look forward to continued cooperation with the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues in their character education efforts.

David Timms