



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

CASE STUDY: Queen Elizabeth Grammar School and Our Involvement in The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues ‘My Character Project’.

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QEGS and Our Involvement in The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues 'My Character Project'.

Background

We, Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School Ashbourne, started our involvement with character education several years ago when staff from what is now the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues approached us to discuss our approach to the Duke of Edinburgh Award. This in turn was followed by the development of materials relating to the QCDA Citizenship Assessment Guidance.

We have always been interested in approaching Personal, Social, Health and Emotional education [PSHEe] in new and interesting ways, guided by the principles that it should benefit our students, their community, and any future interactions they might have. Therefore we have involved ourselves with several outside partners who have aided us in developing a PSHEe curriculum we feel proud of and that also stands up to external and independent scrutiny.

Our structure of PSHEe delivery has, as with most schools, varied over time. We have moved from Tutor-based drop-down lessons to discrete lessons and this year onto a new system of half-hour Form-led sessions. Each has suited our school at a particular point in its journey and has been to some degree a reaction to the needs of the curriculum and students of the day. This set of needs can be quite diverse as QEGS is a rural comprehensive state secondary school with a wide geographical catchment area. Within this area it is possible to find much of life's rich tapestry and yet whether the students arrive from large or small schools, they all must quickly bond and become more cohesively 'ours'.

We also identified a clear need to equip QEGS students with the skills of personality which might be required to find good jobs, to raise happy families, and to make a positive contribution to the wider world outside our hilly borders. In short we want our students to flourish. Traditional PSHEe programmes have always struggled with the provision of such opportunities and we had spent several years trying to develop useful schemes of work to address this shortfall. It was also a concern shared by some of our external partners, and definitely our Governors and PTA.

Therefore we were, perhaps unwittingly, looking for something which might provide a social and personal glue to help our students bond. Additionally we wanted to really start them thinking about who they wanted to be as people when they were eventually turned back out onto the streets and lanes of Derbyshire aged somewhere between 16 and 18.

Fortuitously, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues were searching for schools who might help them develop and trial just such a glue. It was only logical for us to investigate further and then to quickly jump in. We are glad we did.

The Planning

The Centre wanted to develop the project in phases and set out a clear stratagem for creating what they saw as a resource which would enable and enthuse our students. In the first year we were to contribute to the overall look of the website and journal; in the second we would help with the content; finally we would try out the product for a year and see what we thought. In these endeavours we were to work in parallel with several other schools.

In the first year we provided around twenty-five students from across our Year 9 ability range to spend a day with staff from the Centre in our Library. The students loved it. They were asked their opinions as experts [in the consumption of such resources] and provided their views on a whole range of things from materials, to colours and electronic menu designs.

In the second stage, a year later, another group of students contributed detailed ideas around the specific content of the journal and website spurred on by the sight of the resources the students in the year above had helped to design. At each stage their responses were treated as really valuable and they were encouraged to feel a part of something greater than QEGS our normal in-school activity.

The Centre staff returned for advice from the working groups and to try out questionnaires and activities. It was a real benefit to be working on a project where we knew other students from very different schools were also playing their part. We, the teachers at QEGS, like to

The Focus Group

The first day of the first stage of the My Character Project, with the first group of 25 Year 9 students, was amazing.

We had decided to invite the students formally through letters from the University of Birmingham and the school. We arranged for the students to have free lunch and drinks, and had asked them to attend in smart casual clothes.

What we hadn't counted on was the sheer exuberance of the students involved. We arranged to have two of our staff present throughout the day and they assisted the three staff the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues provided. As the students arrived we prepared ourselves for the unknown.

The day was filled from beginning to end with thoughtful and interesting activities which wrung every possible idea from their young minds. During an energiser activity, the Centre staff even managed to find a way for a student with her leg in a cast to pass a flowerpot from her knees to the knees

think we helped to create this atmosphere by allowing the students to wear non-uniform and offering free food, but really it was probably the contributions of the cheery and intelligent staff the Centre brought with them.

Once we had worked through the look and content of the resources we were sent a draft copy so our staff could consider how we might use it in school. We had, of course, been a very active part of the Centre's planning, and yet it really came home to us just how useful this might be when we actually saw the resource in the flesh. Our curriculum model at that time leant itself to a classroom based approach and we could readily see how we might use a physical journal, one with spaces to write in and a hard spiral-bound cover. It was less easy to see how we could make the website work. However once again the Centre was able to lay our fears to rest and reassure us by offering early staff logins and guidance from one of their seemingly always available experts [one who always seemed relaxed and happy, which is a real benefit when our staff are 'stressing' about getting things done!].

The Pilot

We ran our pilot of the project with three classes of Year 7 students in their PSHE fortnightly 1 hour lesson. One class worked from the hard-copy journal and one from the website, alongside one class acting as the 'control' who were taught a normal programme of PSHE. The groups were easy to set up and were quickly able to begin work on both resources. Before the pilot began we were asked to test the students [with their permission] and then it was just a case of handing out booklets or login details.

The website variant of the pilot was quite popular with the students, who enjoyed the flexibility the IT provided and the clear pathways they could take through the use of the different sections. Having their own login information enabled a small degree of personalisation within the site and this was appreciated by the students as well as the staff delivering the course. The students liked it as it gave them a sense that the providers cared about them. The staff enjoyed watching the students pick colours and navigate their own way through the various resources.

Staff who were involved in the project were also encouraged to 'have a go' themselves and login information was provided for them. This proved to be really useful for us as there were bound to be teething problems and we were better able to explain things to students once we too had tried it out. This was also true of the hard-copy journal where differing tasks demanded differing amount of preparation and thought-time from the classroom teacher before delivery.

By trying out the resources online staff could also see how the journal resources might be enhanced. We avoided doing this with the control groups, who were part of the central trial, but encouraged it with staff delivering the hard-copy journal to other classes in Year 8. There are more materials to support the eight sections online but this did not matter for those delivering the hardcopy journal as they were able to top-up with related ideas inspired by pre-reading.

Our school has a strong reputation for PSHE and we were really pleased with the parental reaction when we introduced this pilot at our Open Evening early in the first term. The parents of students directly involved were all already aware, due to letters and information from the Jubilee Centre, but we wanted increased knowledge of what we were starting. This was because we were hoping to continue using the project once the pilot was concluded. On

the evening we projected images from the website and made copies of the physical journal available. We also had a few students there who had taken part in the earlier planning. Parents were clearly pleased with the rich nature of the resources, both in terms of content and presentation. They also loved the fact that students were able to take on such a high level of ownership.

The Speech Night

As a fairly traditional school we hold an annual evening where students receive awards and our previous year is celebrated. The evening comes in the depths of winter and provides a fitting lead up to the festive season. Awards are decided by staff but the surrounding content is suggested by a variety of sources. Normally only three or four events are shown in any depth, while others are relegated to a short but pointed reference in either the Head Teacher or Chair of Governor's speech.

The Student Voice group put forward the My Character Project as something they felt had shown our students in a positive light and had the possibility of having a real effect on aspiration and happiness.

So we organised for six students to present a summary of the project as the centre-piece of the evening. In the end it was flanked by musical items and followed by a local celebrity who talked about the students as the future of our society. The students talked in terms of the respect they felt had been given to them, the skills they had used to create the materials, and the spirit of friendship they had developed across the year.

Drinks are always served following the formal stuff and it was really excellent to hear parents and visitors talking with such enthusiasm about the things those students had said.

The students, who were a little in awe of the notion that they might actually write in these books, or complete whole sections online, were surprised others outside of our school might actually be interested in their welfare. I know this has always been the case that others are interested in their wellbeing, but it was great to have this project as a long term affirmation of the students' self-worth.

We had previously discussed ownership over the materials and had decided to offer as much freedom as possible to the students as we wanted them to feel as empowered as possible and to develop 'a lust for learning' [to borrow a phrase from Ofsted] based on independence and personal authority. Content of this kind needs clear delivery and exposition, but student responses can be very personal and the more students think for themselves about what to write and also how to write it, the better.

Due to the way these materials had been created - with the aid of students from different locations and social/academic backgrounds - there are regular opportunities for them to be creative and to express their opinions. Once the project had really begun the students really took off with this.

We decided to tackle the project as a linear course where we started at the beginning and worked our way through. This did highlight that it was often quicker to follow the web journal than the hardcopy as, although the web journal has videos to watch, it is a more solitary activity. The linear approach did frustrate the students at times, as they could see fun activities further on, a problem which is not so obvious on the web where you can easily tackle each section and cannot, so easily, skip ahead. However it meant there were always activities to look forward to and the students even began linking the tasks they were working on to ones they could see coming up.

The classes really enjoyed the project and felt it was a time when they did not need to focus upon levels and grades, but instead could focus upon themselves. They appreciated not being reduced to a set of numbers and targets. The thing with the project is that it very visibly deals with who students are now, and who they might be in the future, and the students can really see this. They worked with enthusiasm and often asked to continue work outside the confines of the booklet. We ended up with a lot of display material and interesting [if varied] research pieces created for homework.

The Governor's Meeting

At the end of the project, in the summer, I was asked to attend a meeting of our full Governing Body to explain to them a little of what we had done.

I went armed with student testimonies, used journals, areas of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues website, and a smile which [I hoped] conveyed my honest appreciation that they had let us take part in this three year project.

They were all really enthusiastic and soon my 10 minute slot had grown to take over the meeting. Community Governors loved the fact that the journal reached out from within the school to the world at large; staff governors were able to expound about its merits in their own classrooms; the Head Teacher felt it had helped set us apart from other similar establishments; and there was a general murmur about the fact that Ofsted had seen the project as 'green shoots' which offered real potential for the whole school in the future.

I left with an invite to return in a year and talk about how we had moved on from the pilot. Next time I will take some students with me.

Conclusions and Future Work

During the course of the year we had many opportunities to discuss the progress of the project with staff from the Jubilee Centre and others, including our own Governing Body. The students were always really positive, as were their parents. The students themselves saw the future of this project as lying with the web version. They live in a world of mobile technology and wondered whether there might be an app version at some point in the future. Even in the absence of a phone option they still liked the interactive nature of the web journal.

However, if pushed, our school, staff and Governors favoured the hardcopy journal as it caused more open discussion between students. We were interested to find that the Form that had used the hardcopy journal described themselves as closer to one another because of their hour a week on this project, and yet this was not echoed by the Form who use the web..

SMSC

During our trial year, when the various classes were having a go at the resources, we were fortunate enough to have a full Ofsted inspection. Ofsted were very impressed with our fledgling work in this area and saw the forthcoming attempts at using the My Character project to broaden this aspect of wellbeing out across the curriculum as what they termed 'green shoots'.

Certainly the project allows for several aspects of the Spiritual, Moral, Social, and Cultural dimension to be addressed. We found that with careful mapping it has also allowed us to really think how we might broaden the project out across school in the coming year.

Now we have aspects of the project featuring in our assemblies as well as in subject areas as diverse as Catering and Music.

The hardcopy journal also provided a record of student thought which could be taken home at the end of the year and shown to parents. Our staff agreed that this was possibly the only example of a workbook being treated in this manner, i.e. in the way something made in Textiles or CDT might be carried home and offered up as evidence of being a great learner. Parents still comment on the discussions they have had over the eight topic areas and how these have inspired great debates over dinner tables and on countryside walks.

It was for these reasons we decided to carry on with the My Character project into the next academic year. We have recently moved from a curriculum model where there are PSHE lessons throughout the timetable to one where there are lessons in Year 7 and 8 and then a range of sessions which are delivered weekly by Year 9, 10 and 11 tutors. As a result we had to audit our PSHE model and move topics to new locations. The My Character project is really useful in this as it features everything we need for large chunks of both the emotional and economic wellbeing elements of the national curriculum for PSHE, as well as elements of Citizenship.

After careful thought we have placed the hardcopy journal into Year 7 Form time where it is used by tutors on a page a week basis. This means tutors cover a page, on average, every half hour. Some pages take less time than this and others benefit from being reviewed in the following week. As a resource, tutors find it both easy to use and informative. They have reported the students are more than happy to fill it in and to discuss the various ideas. Only one tutor has opted to take things out of order in the booklet but she did so as there was a part of the project she felt might help her address a particular issue in the form. Only time will tell whether her approach was justified but it is certainly a benefit of the project that things can be tackled in any order and all lead towards a shared growth in understanding.

Form Time Bonding

A more recent example comes from a Year 7 Form where both the tutor and the group were new to the school. The tutor found the journal to be a huge time saver, initially, as it meant she had an immediate focus for her Form times and knew exactly what she would need to cover each week. The Form also enjoyed this transparency and could often be found flicking through the pages to see what was coming next.

Over time the journal has become a central focus for the group who now work together to fill in the sections and to research inspirational people and possible answers for the various activities. The tutor herself is now completing her own journal and enjoys every minute.

In the next few weeks the Form have chosen to deliver an assembly on their journey through the My Character project so far, and their hopes for the rest of the course.

The use of the My Character project in Year 7 is meant to inspire conversation and the development of personal thought. However, there is also a more strategic point to our

planning, and that is to provide continuity where there has previously been precious little. At the end of Year 7 the Forms move on to new tutors. This does not impact the Form's relations with each other but it does mean their new tutor has much ground to make up. Providing a resource which the students then continue to use through Year 8 allows the tutor the chance to open a dialogue with his/her students about the previous year and to discuss things they will be doing in the following one.

In summary we appreciate the opportunity this resource provides for discussion and development of the whole child. We are now looking for ways of integrating the work of this project into the wider curriculum through developing a shared approach to the 'whole child' via the use of the language of character education.

Matthew Bawden, January 2014.