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School leadership and Character: Tackling a Global Education Challenge in Highly Effective and Disadvantaged English Schools

Roland Bernhard

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 13th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 9th – Saturday 11th January 2025.

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

School Leadership and Character

Tackling a Global Education Challenge in Highly Effective and Disadvantaged English Schools

Prof. Dr. Roland Bernhard
University of Teacher Education of Christian Churches Austria
Lacknergasse 89, 1180 Vienna

M: Roland.Bernhard@kphvie.ac.at

Paper presented at the

13th Annual Conference of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues 2025

"Character and Global Challenges"

Oxford, Oriel College, 9th-11th January 2025

This research is funded by the Austrian Science Fund, P31965-G. The funded project "School Quality and Teacher Education" was based at the Universities of Oxford, Salzburg and the University of Teacher Education Vienna/Krems.

Abstract

This study explores the role of character education in highly effective inner-city schools serving disadvantaged communities in England, particularly in London and designated Opportunity Areas. By focusing on exceptionally and sustainably effective schools, this research examines how school leaders perceive and implement character education as part of their strategy for sustained improvement and student success. The study is part of the Austrian Science Fund's mixed-methods project, School Quality and Teacher Education (SQTE), which investigates school improvement in challenging contexts to derive insights for broader educational practice.

Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with 24 leaders across 11 schools, the paper examines their beliefs and practices. School leaders unanimously consider character education to be a fundamental aspect of schooling. While performance virtues like resilience dominate their discourse about character education, moral virtues, particularly integrity, also play a significant role. Interestingly, civic and intellectual virtues are less frequently mentioned be interviewees, reflecting a performance-driven yet partially moral approach to character education.

Leaders predominantly view character as "caught" rather than "taught," emphasizing the influence of role modelling, positive relationships, and consistent behaviour management. Many schools adopt a structured "warm-strict" approach, balancing high expectations with relational warmth. The "character is sought" dimension is reflected in practices promoting student ownership, leadership, and aspirations, though this aspect is less developed compared to others. Critically, the study challenges stereotypes of inner-city schools as authoritarian "exam factories" by demonstrating how high expectations coexist with nurturing and supportive environments. By analysing highly effective schools in challenging contexts, this study provides insights into how character education might be leveraged to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged students and address global challenges of underachievement in schools with large proportions of disadvantaged students.

Introduction

Enhancing the way schools serve learners from disadvantaged backgrounds remains a priority in both developed and developing nations (OECD, 2012; Ainscow et. al., 2020). This recognition has fuelled the growing interest in research and practices aimed at educational effectiveness and its implications for school improvement (Antoniou, 2022; Creemers & Kyriakides, 2010, 2012; Sammons et al., 2016). In recent decades, significant attention has been devoted to school leadership (Day et al., 2016; Sammons et al., 2011), School improvement and turnaround efforts, particularly those aimed at improving outcomes in schools serving highly disadvantaged student (Kyriakides et al., 2019; Sammons, 2007). In England, a striking example of school improvement in this context is the so-called "London Effect": Since the early 2000s, the academic attainment of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in London schools has improved remarkably, the city having experienced many rapid school improvements, also called "school turnarounds" (Allison, 2018; Baares et al., 2014; McAleavy & Elwick, 2016; Ross et al., 2020). Rapid improvements have also been observed in regions of England identified by the government as 'Social Mobility and Opportunity Areas.' These regions were selected due to significant socio-economic challenges, with the goal of providing targeted support to address these issues. 12 Opportunity Areas (OAs) were chosen based on their placement in the lowest sextile of both the 2016 Social Mobility Index and the Achieving Excellence Areas Index, which highlighted the areas most in need of support across multiple dimensions (Easton et al., 2018).

Rapid improvement and increased test results in inner-city schools are sometimes associated with a no-excuses (NE) charter school model that has become popular in the US and which emphasizes high expectations for all students, rigorous academic standards, and a strict behaviour management system. Such schools often operate under the premise that poverty and other external factors should not be used as excuses for underachievement, focusing instead on creating a structured environment that helps students achieve better results (Cheng et al., 2015; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Advocates argue that this model helps students from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve at levels comparable to their more advantaged peers, preparing them for college and beyond. Critics, however, caution that the strict disciplinary measures and focus on test results may come at the expense of student well-being and broader educational goals (Disohn & Goldman, 2017; Golann, 2015; Whitman, 2008).

In this paper highly effective schools with large cohorts of disadvantaged students from London, the Opportunity Areas and one other region of England that have experienced a strong improvement trajectory will be analysed and it will be asked what their leaders' beliefs towards character education are and which forms of character education they claim to utilize in their schools. The novel aspect of this paper lies in its exclusive focus on exceptionally and sustainably highly effective schools in challenging circumstances, aiming to uncover their leaders' perspectives on character education. This will help us to understand leadership in these schools better, especially in the light of criticism of character development approaches in inner-city schools in the US. Findings help to better understand which role character education might play in tackling the challenges of poor performance of disadvantaged student groups in schools.

Theoretical framework and research questions

Researching London schools and school improvement

The case of London school improvement has called the attention of an international audience. Researchers view the phenomenon of school improvement in London as a compelling demonstration of the potential to achieve greater equity in education (Greaves et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2020), celebrating the achievements that students from most disadvantaged families go on to study in elite universities, breaking the bond between family income and academic achievement (McAleavy & Elwick, 2016; Woods et al., 2013). Others are more critical about highly effective inner-city schools they sometimes conceive militaristic, authoritarian and rigid, the term “exam factory” is being used by some in this respect.

In the large scale funded Austrian mixed methods project *School Quality and Teacher Education* that investigated the success of inner-city schools, especially in London in order to learn lessons for school improvement in difficult context in Austria (Bernhard, 2024a), we found that school leaders from highly effective schools believe that leadership with a strong focus on teaching quality and especially peer observation (Bernhard et al., 2024; Bernhard, 2024b), raising aspirations (Bernhard et al., 2021a), a culture of growth mindset (Bernhard, & Harnisch, 2021; Harnisch, 2020) as well as research engagement (Bernhard et al., 2020) is contributing to the success of their inner-city schools from the perspective of their leadership staff, as has become obvious through interviews in those schools. Furthermore, a structured approach to schooling and behaviour management with clear rules and expectations for students’ behaviour to avoid disruption of teaching has also been observed in the analysed schools (Bernhard & Greiner, 2022; Bernhard & Harnisch, 2021). The SQTE project was initially based at the University of Oxford (Bernhard, 2024c), subsequently moved to the University of Salzburg, and, in 2021, transitioned to the University of Teacher Education Vienna/Krems, where it was completed in 2023.

Inner-city schooling models

Highly structured approaches to schooling in inner-city areas, particularly in the United States, have been criticized for placing excessive emphasis on behaviour management, exam performance, and instrumentalist character development programs. Critics argue that such models focus narrowly on utilitarian educational philosophies, prioritizing cognitive development and measurable outcomes above all else. Practices commonly associated with these models, such as "teaching to the test" have been widely debated. One prominent example in the U.S. is the "no excuses" (NE) pedagogical model, which has become a rapidly growing educational alternative for urban youth over the past decades (Disohn & Goldman, 2017). Advocates of this approach highlight its potential to improve college completion rates among disadvantaged student groups, equip them for success in higher education and the workforce, and thereby close the achievement gap. It is argued that social disadvantage can be addressed by setting high academic and disciplinary standards, maintaining a culture of high expectations, and fostering a “we will go to college” ethos, whereby social disadvantage is framed as no excuse for failing to strive for excellence (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Golann, 2015; Goodman, 2013; Kipp Foundation, 2015). Lowering or altering expectations for disadvantaged students is seen as

reinforcing negative stereotypes about poverty and further widening the achievement gap (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Whitman, 2008). By maintaining rigorous standards, these schools claim at aiming to challenge systemic inequities and redefine educational opportunities for underserved communities (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

Many of such schools appear indeed to be effective in achieving better learning outcomes for their students, as suggested by meta-analyses of "no excuses" charter schools (Cheng et al., 2015, p. 225): "The impacts of No Excuses charter schools on math and ELA scores are large and meaningful." They often succeed in raising standardized test scores and improving graduation rates. Additionally, their long-term impact on college attendance appears to be positive. For instance, a recent study on KIPP schools demonstrated significant positive effects on college enrolment, persistence, and attainment (Demers et al., 2023). While these results are undoubtedly positive, the mechanisms driving such success require further examination (Harrison, 2023; Torres & Golann, 2018). Critics have raised concerns about the broader implications of these educational models: For instance, Golann (2015) highlights potential shortcomings, such as an overemphasis on deference to authority, a lack of development of critical thinking skills, and insufficient development of a mindset geared toward lifelong learning. Questions have also been raised about the motivations driving student achievement in these schools, for example fear of punishment might play a significant role in shaping student behaviour and performance (see Brophy,1987). Concerns are raised about whether students from such schools are adequately prepared to succeed beyond the structured and regulated school environment. A study by Golann, in which she conducted 18 months of fieldwork in a NE-charter school concluded that the system has “unintended consequences” for students in what the author calls a "paradox of success":

> "As students learn to monitor themselves, hold back their opinions, and defer to authority, they are not encouraged to develop the proactive skills needed to navigate the more flexible expectations of college and the workplace" (Golann, 2015, p. 115)

Golann provides several recommendations for NE schools, including training teachers to move away from authoritarian behaviour management approaches (e.g., "because I said so") and adopt the "warm-strict model" (Lemov, 2015), which aligns with an authoritative parenting style (Walker, 2009). The warm-strict model balances high expectations with genuine care, creating a structured yet supportive environment where students feel respected and motivated to meet behavioural and academic standards. She also emphasizes the importance of fostering "initiative, assertiveness, and reasoning skills through student-led activities, chants, debates, group projects, clubs, and advisories" (p. 116) – practices that would align with the "character is sought" aspect of education (Arthur, 2020). While acknowledging that many of these schools have introduced character education initiatives, which she views as steps in the right direction, Golann questions the strength of targeted lessons, arguing that they often fail to compensate for rigid behaviour management systems and other structural limitations.

Character education in inner-city schools

In fact, many of the above-mentioned charter schools have introduced character education programs, often inspired by principles of positive psychology. However, such programs have also faced criticism. Disohn & Goldman (2017) argue that the "no excuses" approach does not

clearly address how students will transfer the behaviours they acquire in the school context to future settings. The approaches are seen as amoral and careerist: Arthur (2020, p. 141) critiques that they "avoid any talk of virtues and attempt to speak about character in value-neutral terms" leading to an instrumental approach to character education. According to Arthur, the approach is marked by a “complete lack of moral principles and an avoidance of moral judgments” (p. 141). Such programs are criticised within the character education community for falling short of adopting an Aristotelian perspective on character education, which views it as a means to cultivate virtuous individuals who lead flourishing lives. Instead, they are said to see character education as a tool to drive students to work harder and achieve higher test scores. Kristjanson (2015, p. 1) is citing in this respect the famous work of Tough (2013), also raising concerns about a perceived "instrumentalist, performance-driven and amoral view of character" that focusses strongly on traits like grit (self-control and resilience) as emphasized by Duckworth (2016) or "mental toughness" (Clough et al., 2002), which are framed primarily as predictors academic success rather than as components of a flourishing life.

Some critics label such schools "factories", where students are trained to perform well on GCSEs and other standardized tests rather than being equipped with skills for life. However, is this criticism fair for schools that genuinely excel and achieve remarkable outcomes for disadvantaged students in England? Harrison (2023) investigated two "no excuses" (NE) charter schools in the US and found surprising evidence that some of the stereotypical depictions of these schools did not align with what they found. In the analysed schools, Harrison observed a rather "progressive" pedagogical approach, rather than authoritarian rules. Students were able to articulate the rationale behind school rules, which were implemented within a "warm strict" behaviour management framework. Classroom observations revealed that 30% of teacher questions were categorized as higher-order thinking questions, based on Bloom's Taxonomy. Partner work was frequently used as a teaching strategy, and a strong growth mindset orientation was evident throughout the school culture.

This raises the question: How do truly successful English schools serving inner-city populations achieve work? Could their success reflect a more nuanced approach that balances high expectations and student well-being as well as character education with a more Aristotelian outlook rather than relying on instrumentalist and performance driven inculcation of habits and negative reinforcement, fear of punishment, and rigid behaviour management systems? To gain deeper insights into this question, an analysis of interview data from highly effective and improving schools in England will be presented here. A sample of exceptionally effective schools operating in challenging circumstances was selected, and school leaders were asked how they had achieved improvement. The study also explored the presence and nature of character education approaches in these schools and the beliefs held by the leaders of those highly effective and improving schools. This paper will present an analysis of qualitative data gained from interviews with 24 leaders of 11 highly effective schools with large proportions of disadvantaged students in London and other English cities, addressing the following questions:

1. What beliefs about character education do leaders of exceptionally highly effective and improving inner-city English schools in challenging circumstances reveal in interviews?

2. What approaches to character education do leaders of exceptionally highly effective and improving inner-city English schools in challenging circumstances promote and claim to utilize in their schools?

Methodology

This paper presents findings from the qualitative strand of the Austrian School Quality and Teacher Education (SQTE) Project, which investigates highly effective schools and their approaches to quality development. The present study draws on expert interviews, as defined by Bogner et al. (2009) in London and England's Social Mobility and Opportunity Areas (OA), along with one turnaround school located outside of London and the OA regions. These interviews were part of a larger dataset comprising 43 interviews conducted with headteachers and members of leadership teams in 17 English schools within the broader research project. For this article, we have selectively focused on interviews with headteachers from turnaround or improving schools or those with leadership staff with substantial experience in leading school turnarounds. Our aim was to explore their beliefs about character education in these settings.

Sampling

To construct the overall sample for the SQTE study, we selected highly effective schools by analysing OFSTED inspection reports and academic performance data. In addition to schools facing adversity, the broader sample included comprehensive schools from more affluent areas, as well as two grammar schools and one independent school. However, for this paper, we concentrate exclusively on comprehensive schools within the sample that met the following criteria:

1. They had achieved an "Outstanding" rating in their most recent Ofsted inspection. One exception, School S7, belongs to a high-performing trust, but had not yet been inspected at the time of data collection.
2. They had previously been rated as either "Inadequate" or "Requires Improvement" by Ofsted at some point since 2003, showing significant improvement to achieve their current status. One exception, School S11, progressed from a "Good" to an "Outstanding" rating in its most recent inspection, distinguishing it from the typical "turnaround" category.
3. They had attained exceptionally high Progress 8 scores (a value-added measure, Department for Education, 2016) while serving a substantial number of disadvantaged students, as evidenced by their Free School Meal (FSM) scores.

As a result, the subsample for the current research includes 24 leaders from 11 distinct schools – seven located in London, three in Opportunity Areas, and one from another region. The gender distribution within this group is relatively balanced, with 13 male (54%) and 11 female (46%) headteachers and leadership team members. Notably, all schools in the sample studied in 2019 and 2020 remain high-performing institutions, as evidenced by their current performance data (school performance data available of English schools is available under https://www.gov.uk/school-performance-tables) indicating sustained success. Each interview began by inviting participants to outline their specific roles and positions within their respective schools (see Interview Guide in Appendix A), creating a foundation for a deeper exploration of their experiences and insights into school improvement processes. Appendix B provides an

overview of the schools included in the overall study, while Appendix C lists the subsample participants, including their locations (London, Opportunity Area, or other), gender, and leadership positions.

The author conducted site visits to all interviewees' schools during 2019 and 2020, carrying out semi-structured interviews. Each interview was audio-recorded and subsequently fully transcribed. The study underwent review by the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) at the University of Oxford, which granted approval (Bernhard, 2024c). All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study, ensuring adherence to ethical research standards (see Appendix A).

Code System and Data Analysis Procedure

A coding system derived from the character education literature was developed to systematically analyse the interview data. This section outlines the theory underpinning the coding process. Character education is a holistic approach that focuses on cultivating virtues and positive traits essential for both individual and societal flourishing. A key concept often highlighted in the literature is that character is "caught, taught, and sought" reflecting an integrated methodology for helping students develop virtues. Character is primarily caught – as the phrase "more caught than taught" suggests (Arthur et al., 2017, p. 15) – through the environments, relationships, and role models that students encounter. Kristjánsson *(2015,* p. 21) emphasizes the role of "role-modelling and emotional contagion" in shaping students' character. In this context, a school's culture and ethos play an essential role in fostering character development. Character can also be taught through explicit instruction (Arthur et al., 2017; Jubilee Centre, 2022). According to Arthur (2020, p. 157), "direct teaching of character provides the rationale, language, and tools" that students need to develop virtues both in and beyond school. This involves embedding character education into broader curricular areas such as history, literature, or science, thereby fostering "virtue literacy". The final aim of character education, however, is that character is sought freely, as students take ownership of their development and actively pursue a better life (Arthur, 2020, p. 157). This involves engaging in self-reflection and striving freely for personal growth. This aspect of character education encourages students to reflect on the kind of individuals they aspire to become and to actively seek opportunities to embody virtues through practical experiences. These experiences may include leadership roles, community service, and participation in extracurricular activities (Jubilee Centre, 2022).

Criticism of character education in inner-city schools often points to the direction that these institutions disproportionately focus on the taught aspects of character development, while neglecting the caught and especially the sought dimension. In our analysis, we investigate whether this critique holds true for our sample of leaders from exceptionally effective schools serving disadvantaged communities.

Thus, three main categories – "caught," "taught," and "sought" – were theory-based and deductively established, providing a structured framework derived from existing character education literature. Within this framework, subcategories were developed inductively by analysing the interview data, allowing patterns and themes to emerge from the responses. Another main category was "importance of character education" (finding 1) and different virtues such as resilience, integrity and curiosity (finding 2). For the latter, we used the classification of

virtues into moral, intellectual, civic and performance virtues that has been established by the Jubilee Centre for Character and virtues (2022).

Results

In this section four finding of the qualitative analysis of interviews will be presented.

Finding 1: Leaders of sustained, highly effective, and improving inner-city schools consider character education to be an important task of schooling, but differ in their approaches to its implementation.

Interviewees unanimously emphasized the importance of character development in schools. Notably, no one in our sample expressed the view that schools are not responsible for educating student's character:

> "I think it is really important. I absolutely think it is really important." (S7_L_H12_m[1])
>
> "I think character education is very important." (S10_Op_H19_m)
>
> "When students leave school, it doesn't/ although the bit of paper might be useful, it's about all the other things that are going to take them out in the big wide world – can they communicate with people? Can they fight their own corner? Can they express themselves?" (S11_Op_H22_f)

One interviewee, reflecting on the role of character education in the school, remarked:

> "So, if you are not developing character education, you are just becoming an exam factory, and you will have anarchy, really. You know, you've got to have people being nice to each other". (S3_L_H4_m_H5_w)

This comment underscores an awareness of the above-mentioned criticism sometimes levelled at some inner-city schools earning the label of "exam factories". The interviewee highlights character education as an essential counterbalance to this tendency, emphasizing its role in fostering a more holistic school environment. However, opinions differ on how character education should be delivered. While only a few interviewees advocate for direct instruction of character, most believe it is inherently embedded in the school culture and in broader teaching practices (see finding 3).

Finding 2: Leaders of sustained, highly effective, and improving inner-city schools strongly associate the performance virtue of "resilience" with character education. However, the moral virtue of "integrity" also emerges as a significant theme in the interview data.

[1] In this paper, we utilize original abbreviations to denote the larger sample of interviews for clarity and consistency. For example, S7_L_H12_m represents School 7, London, Headteacher 12, male. The abbreviations are flexible and adapt based on the context: L indicates London, while Op signifies Opportunity Areas, and O refers to Other regions. m denotes male, and f denotes female. See Appendix 2 and 3 for further information about the sample.

The analysis of the interview data revealed that performance virtues are most commonly mentioned by interviewees, when discussing the term character, especially resilience. Whereas moral virtues like sincerity, generosity, gratitude or compassion were not mentioned by the interviewees, respect plays a role in the data (see finding 3) and especially integrity was mentioned frequently (S1_L_H1_m, S2_L_H2_f, S5_L_H10_m, S10_Op_H19_m, S10_Op_H20_m, S13_O_H28_f).

Integrity is a core value in School 10:

> "And then we have one core value that we believe is the way that you should live your life, which in this way is integrity, which we define as: you always do the right thing, even when it's not the easy thing to do." (S10_Op_H19_m)

A leader of a London school is citing a standard definition of integrity and said that this is very important in his approach to schooling: "We talk about the concept of integrity, doing the right thing when no teacher is watching and that's what we try to instil" (S5_L_H10_m).

Some leaders also emphasized civic virtues such as serving others and good citizenship; however, this aspect of character is not strongly present in the interviews. For example, S11_Op_H22_f highlighted the importance of fostering a community-oriented mindset:

> "I: What do you think about character education?
>
> R**:** Yes, it's hugely important, and I think that's one of the strengths of this school because it's a community, and there's a lot of emphasis in our school about students being good citizens, serving others." (S11_Op_H22_f)

Intellectual virtues were not cited frequently: curiosity was only mentioned by S1_L_H1_m, critical thinking by two interviewees (S10_Op_H20_m, S9_Op_H16_m), autonomy as virtue for students by no interviewee.

The performance virtue "resilience" dominated the interviews. There are hardly interviewees who did not talks about the importance of resilience at one point of the interview, mostly for students, but also for teachers. S5_L_H10_m, S7_L_H12_m and S11_Op_H21_m, for instance, immediately began discussing resilience when asked about character education, which was also the case in School 13:

> In School S13 the interviewee was asked: "Do you have any character education program, or do you think that this aspect of education is important?" and the response was: "I do think it is important, but I think you have to be careful not to preach to young children about being resilient because I think they only recognize it when they see it in practice." (S13_O_H27_w)
>
> The head teacher of S5 answered the question "What do you think about character education in schools?" in this way: "Well, I don't think – you see, I don't agree with the fact that most people try to, you know, have a name for it and put it in a tidy box and say, 'Right, okay, we will do some character education today.' I don't think that. I just think that's an integral part of any school every day, every second, every minute, and what you

> are trying to do is build resilience in the kids. So, it's not something like, 'Right, let's have a character lesson or let's have a mental health lesson.'" (S5_L_H10_m)

Next to resilience, another prominent theme in the interviews is the emphasis on ideas related to growth mindset, as we have shown in detail in other publications from the SQTE-project (Harnisch, 2020; Bernhard et al., 2021a), while grit – a performance virtue – which is sometimes brought in connection with character programmes of inner-city schools (Kristjanson, 2015) was interestingly not mentioned once in the interviews. Resilience is sometimes brought into connection with exams, how the quote from a London headteacher shows, indicating an instrumentalist conception in this case:

> "And I say to them, 'You are going to need resilience in life because life is tough. Life is not easy. It is stressful.' And I think what we have to try and do is build that with them. It is difficult because we live in a very exam-based system." (S7_L_H12_m)

The analysis of the interviews revealed that indeed, the performance virtue resilience is strongly associated with character education by leaders of highly effective English schools, however, also the moral virtue of integrity is frequently cited, even if there were not mentioned many other moral virtues. This is an indication that the analysed schools are strongly driven by performance virtues, however, as it seems, truly highly effective schools incorporate the moral dimension of character and don't seem to be amoral in their character education approach.

Finding 3: Leaders of sustained, highly effective, and improving inner-city schools believe character is largely caught and not taught.

Interviewees believe that character is mostly caught and less taught. Dominant themes in the interviews are that character is caught by 1) leaders' and teachers' modelling, 2) relationship building, and 3) consistency, routines and behaviour management.

S10_Op_H19_m strongly believes in the *modelling* of character with regards to the "character is caught" aspect:

> "I think character education comes from leadership in school and how you behave on a daily basis. […] So, the staff have to demonstrate the values of school on a daily basis. When staff do that then children start to pick up on that as well and understand actually that's how we treat each other in this environment." (S10_Op_H19_m)

The head of School S5 emphasized that effective teaching begins with modelling, stating that leaders and teachers should know their students' names and demonstrate humility and positivity in all interactions. S3_L_H5_m highlighted that being a good teacher is fundamentally about being a good listener. This focus was echoed by a leader from another London school (S3_L_H4_f), who described the school's transformation during its turnaround process. As part of this effort, teachers stopped raising their voices at students and began standing outside the school every morning to greet students and parents "with a smile", fostering a welcoming and respectful atmosphere.

Many respondents underscored the importance of leadership teams and teachers serving as role models for key virtues such as respect, and politeness. They highlighted the need for staff to consistently model the behaviours they expect from students:

> "The staff have to demonstrate the values of the school on a daily basis. When staff do that, then children start to pick up on that as well." (S10_Op_H19_m)
>
> Teachers should be positive, polite, and respectful in their interactions, refraining from shouting, as one leader noted: "do not shout at them […] as an adult you have to model the type of behaviour that you expect from young people." (S3_L_H4_f)
>
> Leaders must model composure in stressful situations: "Can you keep your head when others are losing theirs?" (S5_L_H10_m)
>
> "If the adults in school behave in a way that doesn't align to our values, then the children are going to think that that's okay." (S10_Op_H19_m)

Another significant aspect of the character is caught aspect which is related to the last aspect is the role of relationship-building. Interviewed leaders spoke extensively about the importance of fostering cultures of positive and respectful relationships and emphasized their crucial role in the success of schools. Several leaders linked such relationships to the transformative "turnarounds" their schools had experienced (S2_L_H2_f; S3_L_H3_m, S3_L_H4_f; S3_L_H5_m; S4_L_H7_f; S5_L_H10_m; S7_L_H12_m; S9_Op_H14_m, S9_Op_H15_f; S10_Op_H19_m; S13_Op_H26_m, S13_Op_H28_f). Related to this was the emphasis on pastoral care, which prioritizes nurturing each child's development both academically and emotionally. Leaders highlighted the need to see and support students as whole individuals, addressing not only their educational needs but also their personal and emotional well-being.

A related and equally prominent theme in the data was the necessity of consistency across the school. Leaders stressed that consistency in both expectations, practices and behaviour management is essential for building trust and maintaining a stable environment (S10_Op_H19_m; S7_L_H12_m; S4_L_H8_f). A robust behaviour management policy resembling a kind of "no excuses policy" seems to be present in the sample schools. A leader of S1 described their behaviour system as very strict: "We have a very strict behaviour system" (S1_L_H1_m). Schools seem to prioritize a consistent, school-wide approach to establishing and enforcing behavioural expectations, ensuring clarity and uniformity in their practices. However, this is done in the sense of a "warm-strict" approach with the ideal teacher described as a "warm demander" by the interviewees (Arum, 2005; Ware, 2006), maintaining a friendly environment but keeping very high expectations of behaviour and achievement. In this context, S13_O_H28_f and S1_L_H1_m stress the importance of intrinsic motivation of good behaviour and an authoritative, rather than an authoritarian approach to behaviour management:

> "So, just having a strong focus on how you reinforce positive behaviour management and how you help students to want to be motivated in your class, is something that would really benefit young teachers" (S13_O_H28_f).
>
> "And one of her priorities was making behaviour impeccable, so that is when we brought up that quite strict system in. Before, we did not have that system. And put a bit more of

> an emphasis on preventing bad behaviour in the first place. The students knew what would happen if they misbehaved. Before, it was all about reacting appropriate once it happened, but we have been a lot clearer with students, and we have done a lot of work since to try and encourage them to actually take responsibility for their own behaviour, so I talk a lot of about trying to move towards integrity behaviour, so they behave because they know it is the right thing to do, not because they are worried about the consequences if they get caught not behaving. Gradually, we are shifting more and more students to that position they want to behave because they want to learn. They understand this right clear link between behaving and focusing in lessons, and doing well in the future." (S1_L_H1_m)

In the perspective of leaders of highly effective schools character is mostly caught through daily interactions, modelled through actions, and embedded in a consistent school culture and behaviour management system.

Finding 4: Leaders of highly effective schools place emphasis on the character is sought aspect of character education

The "character is sought" dimension is evident in the interview data through themes such as fostering students' intrinsic motivation and building aspirations, and promoting a sense of ownership, responsibility and leadership. The element of reflection about character is not very strongly present in the interviews, except in S1, where there is reflection on "British Values" every day, and in S10:

> "So we get the kids every single day to talk about what they have learned, and how it fits in British Values, and that will happen every day that they are at school." (S1_L_H1_m).

> "So, this week it's random acts of kindness week. We'll hear a story, generally a true story, of someone who has done a good deed for someone else. At the end of that, there will be a reflection where they'll say, 'Think about how you can do a good deed for someone else.'" (S10_Op_H20_m)

Given that critiques of inner-city schools sometimes imply that the "character is sought" dimension is strongly underdeveloped, I will include more direct quotations and examples from the interviews to address this point.

Aspiration building

Raising aspirations and instilling a sense of possibility in students is a dominant theme in the data within the sought aspect of character, particularly given the disadvantaged contexts in which these leaders operate: "You have got to understand your [disadvantaged] context and know how to deal with the context. But I think too many people make excuses for contexts. […] I do not care where our students come from. It is pointless. Because you are making prejudgments […]. And I think that if you create a culture in the school, I think you can break down those barriers that stop students achieving.' (S7_L_H12_m)".

Many leaders emphasized their role in inspiring students to believe in their potential and to envision successful futures:

> "Our job is to inspire young people, to say to them, you can achieve, you can do it better, and we have to do that because their parents don't." (S9_Op_H14_m)

> "If we are thinking about students in this kind of demographic, you know, in this kind of context, that is one of the things that is so important. It's making sure that they realize that school is about taking them on to the next step and raising these aspirations." (S3_L_H6_f)

In this context, some leaders stressed the importance of role models from the students' own social background and exposure to success stories that should kindle their motivation. For example, S4_L_H7_f described regularly inviting highly successful individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to visit the school and speak to students. One such guest was a friend of hers who had been the first in her family to attend university and had risen to become a partner in a London law firm. These visits were seen as opportunities for students to identify with relatable role models and to visualize pathways into the future that shall motivate students intrinsically:

> "If you are really going to make a difference [to] disadvantaged students, it is showing them how they can actually achieve their potential and making them believe that they can do that by getting people in who they can recognise that: actually he is just like me, she is just like me, if they have done it then I can do it." (S4_L_H7_f)

Ownership and Leadership

The theme of ownership in character development also emerges in the interview data within the character is sought category, particularly through initiatives that promote student leadership, responsibility, and active participation in school life. Headteachers described a variety of strategies and programs designed to foster a sense of ownership among students by giving them meaningful roles and responsibilities.

School councils are highlighted as key avenues for promoting ownership:

> "[…] we have a school council which is run basically by the students […] they raise a lot of money for charity […] They even raise some money which is then spent on some aspect at the school which the school body has voted for. So, the school council is very powerful". (S13H28).

In S3 "student take over days" have been introduced to increase ownership: "So, introduced at the time having student take over days where the students would be supported by their teachers to actually plan and deliver a lesson. And that was about trying to raise the engagement of students in their learning and taking ownership of their learning" (S3_L_H3_m). Students in S10 will participate in a what they call "stretch project", a 12-week initiative where they independently develop their own projects. At the end of this period, they will first present their work to their peers and then to the entire year group and external judges:

> "So, there's an eleven-year-old child standing in front of 160 of their friends in the lecture theatre and we've got parents in and we have judges to see our work, the police commissioner or the dean of the university would come in and present for five minutes. It's quite an impressive task. And those sort of activities develop character" (S10_Op_H19).

School 13 has a structured leadership pathway. This program encourages students to complete a series of leadership tasks, earning badges – including the prestigious platinum badge – for achievements like contributing to the local community:

> "For instance, it might be: lead a discussion in a lesson, speak in an assembly, or run a warm-up in a PE lesson. Some students volunteer in local old people's homes or run clubs in their former primary schools." (S13_O_H28_f).

In this school, the promotion of student leadership is a pervasive theme, and leadership is embedded across all levels of student experience.

> "We very much promote the idea that every student is a leader. And that starts with the idea that we are all leaders of ourselves. Then there are numerous opportunities to lead in different ways – by being a tutor captain, house captain, prefect, or leading a segment of a lesson or an assembly." (S13_O_H28_f).

This approach fosters a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility, where students potentially feel empowered to contribute meaningfully to their school environment.

Discussion

This study explored the beliefs and practices regarding character education among school leaders in exceptionally effective and improving inner-city schools in England, particularly in London, serving disadvantaged communities. The findings reveal a strong consensus that character education is a fundamental responsibility of schools. Interestingly, the "character is taught" dimension was not prominently emphasized in interviews. Several leaders explicitly expressed scepticism about character being taught. Instead, character is predominantly perceived as "caught" with some emphasis on the "sought" dimension in their approaches. Additionally, it was highlighted that character education might play a role in preventing highly structured inner-city schools from becoming what critics term "exam factories", institutions where a "teaching to the test" approach dominates, often at the expense of students' well-being. Rather than environments where students comply out of fear of punishment or focus solely on test performance, the sample schools we analysed for this paper seem to foster a more holistic educational experience. The interview data challenge the reductive caricature of inner-city schools as rigid, authoritarian institutions focused exclusively on standardized test results. While such schools may exist, the evidence from this study suggests that truly successful and sustainable schools – like our sample schools – do not operate in this manner. Instead, they balance structure and high expectations with relational warmth, aspirational culture, and opportunities for students to develop both academically and personally.

Our analysis reveals that school leaders tend to associate character education predominantly with performance virtues such as resilience and with fostering a growth mindset. Cognitive development and preparation for academic success are a priority – an observation that aligns with criticisms in the literature regarding inner-city schools. However, moral virtues, particularly integrity, also feature prominently in the accounts of the interviewees, with some leaders acknowledging the intrinsic value of character development. While the schools do not appear to have implemented a fully Aristotelian approach to character education – where actions are motivated purely by a desire to do good for its own sake – this is not unique to these settings; to be fair, such approaches probably remain rare globally. This emphasis on performance virtues may, at times, limit deeper engagement with moral virtues and the broader, intrinsic aims of character education.

Nevertheless, the data challenge the stereotype of these schools as overly controlling, authoritarian environments. Instead, the narratives suggest an authoritative approach, characterized on the one hand by high expectations coupled on the other hand with firm but supportive practices. The "caught" dimension of character education is particularly emphasized, achieved through a combination of structured – and yes, strict – behaviour management policies as well as consistency, but coupled with positive relationship-building. Leaders frequently highlighted the importance of fostering respectful and supportive interactions to create an environment where students naturally "catch" character through daily experiences. This mixture of structure, consistency, and relational warmth directly counters the clichéd notion of inner-city schools as impersonal "exam factories," presenting a more nuanced and holistic picture, at least in the case of highly effective schools. This approach aligns with the "warm strict" model, which combines high expectations with supportive and nurturing relationships.

The "character is sought" dimension is reflected in practices that focus on building aspirations, fostering intrinsic motivation, and providing students with opportunities to take on leadership roles. Although this aspect is less prominently developed compared to others, it is still recognized as an important element in some analysed schools. However, the aspect of reflection on character appears underrepresented in the sample schools and could be an area for further development. While aspirations and growth mindset were consistently emphasized across most interviews, the promotion of student leadership was more variable. Expanding leadership opportunities may offer promising avenues for schools like our sample schools to further support students in actively "seeking" character.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that the findings are based on self-reported data from school leaders, which may introduce bias since leaders may have presented their beliefs and practices in a more favourable light, consciously or unconsciously. However, the context in which the interviews were conducted may have mitigated some of this potential bias since the leaders were informed that the researcher was visiting from Austria with the specific purpose of learning from their experiences and gaining insights into their perspectives (see Appendix 1). This explicit framing might have encouraged more openness and a willingness to share authentic views, as the focus was on understanding and appreciating their successful practices rather than

evaluating or critiquing them. However, the self-reported nature of the data needs to be taken into consideration when interpreting the results.

Conclusion

What can we learn from this study for the practice? I think we can learn that truly and sustainably successful inner-city schools are not “exam factories”, but they rather balance high expectations and rigorous structures with relationship building and high aspirations to supports both academic achievement and the holistic development of their students. Sample schools may demonstrate that a highly structured and consistent approach to behaviour management, when combined with relational warmth, respect, and opportunities for personal growth, may create environments where students from disadvantaged background thrive. Integrating character education that emphasizes not only performance virtues, but also moral and civic virtues could play a crucial role in creating thriving school environments and addressing the global challenge of low standards in schools serving high proportions of disadvantaged students.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant information sheet, consent form and interview guide

University of Oxford, Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY

Dr. Roland Bernhard
Visiting Researcher
01865274009
Roland.Bernhard@education.ox.uk

School Quality and Teacher Education

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Version 1, 14.11.2018

1. ***What is the purpose of this research?***

   In this project, being conducted at the University of Oxford, Department of Education, we will examine how principals and teachers in effective schools in England understand and develop school quality. The central research question of our project is about what highly effective and improving schools in England do to increase school quality and what head teachers and key-teachers in these schools think "really works" in improving schools. Dr. Roland Bernhard, Visiting Research Fellow (usually based at the University of Salzburg), is working on the project in collaboration with Dr. Katharine Burn, Associate Professor of Education within the Department of Education and she has full oversight of the work.

   This study is being conducted with the intention that its findings will be useful in different contexts in Austria that are seeking to promote and sustain school improvement.

2. ***Why have I been invited to take part?***

   You have been invited to participate because your school is considered to be an excellent schools and/or to have improved considerably in recent years.

3. ***Do I have to take part?***

   No. You can ask questions about the research before deciding whether or not to participate. If you do agree to participate, you may withdraw yourself from the study at any time, without giving a reason, by advising the researchers of this decision.

4. ***What will happen to me if I take part in the research?***

   If you are happy to take part in the research, you will be asked to take part in an interview. I (Roland) will talk you through the study procedures and give you the chance to ask any questions. If you are still happy to take part, I will then ask you to sign a consent form. The interview, if you were willing to participate, would take about an hour. I would hold the interview in school at a time negotiated with you. If you are willing for me to do so, I would also like to audio-tape the interview so that I could then transcribe it.

   We are seeking permission to identify the schools and to present the study as an exploration of the ways in which quality is understood and promoted in schools considered to be excellent providers. However, we are aware that schools may prefer not be identified in this way and are therefore asking explicit permission of the head teachers and all of those interviewed as to whether any publications arising from the study should name the schools and/or the county within which they are located, or deliberately preserve the full

anonymity both of the schools and thus of all interviewees. The decision needs to be one with which all the schools are happy and thus if any participant requests full anonymity then this would be respected, taking care to ensure that the description of the context does not compromise this anonymity. If the interview participants consent to naming the school, we would ask your permission to include any quotations from the interview conducted with you. However, if there is any opposition to this approach, then the interviews will be anonymised completely and stored in an anonymised format. I would ensure that it was not possible in any publication to identify the school or interview partner.

5. ***Are there any potential risks in taking part?***

In order to reduce any potential risks, I will remind you before the interview that you should not mention specific names (of individuals or of other schools). However, we will ensure that all potential information given about individuals or about schools is kept strictly confidential and that in transcripts and any publications the names of persons and other schools are all anonymised.

6. ***Are there any benefits in taking part?***

We hope that you will appreciate the opportunity to reflect on what you and your school are doing well and think through the strategies that have proved most valuable in this respect. If you and other participants in the study are willing for the name of the school to be included in any publications (journal articles) that we write on the basis of this study then you may also find it helpful for the school be presented as a named example of expert practice in terms of your capacity to develop school quality.

7. ***What happens to the data provided?*** [1]

The information you provide as part of the study is the research data. Any research data from which you can be identified (e.g. your name, and the audio recording itself), is known as personal data. The research data, including all personal data will be stored confidentially using a password-protected USB drive.

If you wish not to be identifiable, your data will be stored in a completely anonymised format. All personal identifiers will be kept separately from the transcribed data. Pseudonymisation will occur as the interviews are transcribed.

Only the research team and the transcriber will have access to the research data. Responsible members of the University of Oxford may be given access to data for monitoring and/or audit of the research. All research data will be stored for at least 3 years after publication or public release of the work. We may retain and store your personal data for an additional period of time as necessary for the purposes of the study, and for further research.

We would like your permission to use anonymised data in future studies. In such a case, all personal information that could identify you will be removed.

8. ***Will the research be published?***

The research will be published in academic journal articles.

9. ***Who is organising and funding the research?***

This research is funded by the Austrian Arbeitsmarktservice (https://www.ams.at/), with further funding requested from the Austrian Science Fund (https://www.fwf.ac.at/en/).

[1] Please refer to CUREC's Best Practice Guidance on Data Collection and Management (BPG 09)

10. ***Who has reviewed this study?***

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

11. ***Who do I contact if I have a concern about the study or I wish to complain?***

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please speak to the relevant researchers, Dr Roland Bernhard or Dr Katharine Burn (contact details below), who will do their best to answer your query. The researcher should acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how they intend to deal with it. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the relevant chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter in a reasonably expeditious manner:

Chair, **Social Sciences & Humanities Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee**;
Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk
Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD

12. ***Data Protection***

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the study.

The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that we perform in the public interest.

Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/compliance/gdpr/individualrights/.

13. ***Further Information and Contact Details***

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Dr. Roland Bernhard or Dr. Katharine Burn
University of Oxford, Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
01865274009
Roland.Bernhard@education.ox.uk
Katharine.Burn@education.ox.uk

University of Oxford, Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY

Dr. Roland Bernhard
Visiting Researcher
01865274009
Roland.Bernhard@education.ox.uk

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

School Quality and Teacher Education

Purpose of Study: The central research question of our project is about what highly effective and improving schools in England do to increase school quality and what head teachers and key-teachers in these schools think "really works" in improving schools.

		Please initial each box
1	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet version 1 dated 14.11.2018 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information carefully, ask questions and have had these questions answered satisfactorily.	☐
2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences or academic penalty.	☐
3	I have been advised about the potential risks associated with taking part in this research and have taken these into consideration before consenting to participate.	☐
4	I have been advised as to what I need to do for this research and I agree to follow the instructions given to me.	☐
5	I understand that data collected during the study may be looked at by designated individuals from the University of Oxford. I give permission for these individuals to access my data.	☐
6	I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	☐
7	I agree that anonymised data collected in this study may be shared with other researchers, including those working outside of the EU, to be used in other research studies.	☐
8	**I agree that the name of the school may be used in published reports of this study and recognise that this means that I may be identified as a result given my role and association with the school.**	☐
9	I understand how this research will be written up and published.	☐
10	I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.	☐
11	I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	☐
12	I agree to take part in the study	☐

_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature

_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

Interview guide

The interview guide served as the basic framework for the conversation with the headteachers and was not "worked through".

- Could you please describe at the beginning what is your position and role in this school and what is your professional background?
- Could you please describe why you think your school is an effective school?
- How would you define school quality?
- What have you done over the past few years specifically to improve the quality of your school? And what do you think worked particularly well in that respect?
- What is important for you in the leadership of a school?
- What do you think works in school leadership to improve students' outcomes in general and the outcomes of disadvantaged students in particular?
- In what ways (if any) do you think that Ofsted inspections contribute to improving quality in schools and in what ways (if any) do you think they prove ineffective or unhelpful?
- What is a good teacher in your view?
- What is good teaching in your view?
- What works in teaching to improve students' outcomes in general and the outcomes of disadvantaged students in particular?
- How do you develop the teachers of your school?
- What is needed in teacher education in order to form teachers that can really contribute to school quality in the schools where they go on work?
- What is needed in continuous professional development in order to form teachers that can really contribute to school quality in their schools?
- Do you think that it is important to involve parents in education of the students (like parental involvement) and if yes, what are the ways that work in this respect?
- **What do you think about character education in schools?**
    - Parental Engagement?
- What advice would you give to a beginning teacher who asked you "What should I do to become a great teacher?"

Appendix B: Overview of the schools included in the overall study

Overview of the locations, period of improvement (between the relevant Ofsted inspections), the strength of their improvement (in number of Ofsted grades from first to last inspection in the period of improvement), Ofsted rating at time of data collection, number of interviews and interviewees included in the qualitative analysis, for each school in the overall sample of the SQTE project – in bold subsample of schools for the present study.

School	Location	Period of improvement	Strength of improvement	Ofsted	Number of interviews	Number of interviewees
S1	**London**	**2009 – 2013**	**3**	**Outstanding**	**1**	**1**
S2	**London**	**2006 – 2013**	**2**	**Outstanding**	**1**	**1**
S3	**London**	**2009 –2013**	**3**	**Outstanding**	**3**	**4**
S4	**London**	**2007 – 2011**	**2**	**Outstanding**	**3**	**3**
S5	**London**	**2013 – 2018**	**3**	**Outstanding**	**1**	**1**
S6	**London**	**2017 –2019**	**2**	**Outstanding**	**1**	**1**
S7	**London**	**2016 –**	**n.a.**	**n.a.**	**1**	**1**
S8	London	n.a.	n.a.	Outstanding	1	1
S9	**OA**	**2014 – 2017**	**3**	**Outstanding**	**4**	**5**
S10	**OA**	**2013 – 2017**	**2**	**Outstanding**	**2**	**2**
S11	**OA**	**2007 – 2012**	**1**	**Outstanding**	**2**	**2**
S12	Other	n.a.	-	Outstanding	3	3
S13	**Other**	**2009 – 2015**	**2**	**Outstanding**	**2**	**3**
S14	Other	n.a.		Outstanding	3	4
S15	Other	2007-2012	1	Outstanding	3	3
S16	Other	n.a.	n.a.	Outstanding	5	5
S17	Other	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	3	3
			Total		**39**	**43**

Appendix C: Subsample participants, including their locations, gender, and leadership positions

List of all participants of the subsample, the locations of their schools (London, Opportunity Area or other), their gender and position in their schools.

Interviewee	School (location)	Sex	Position (job title)
H1	S1 (London)	Male	Vice-principal
H2	S2 (London)	Female	Deputy headteacher
H3	S3 (London)	Male	Headteacher
H4	S3 (London)	Female	Safeguarding lead
H5	S3 (London)	Male	Head of year
H6	S3 (London)	Female	Head of sixth form
H7	S4 (London)	Female	Principal
H8	S4 (London)	Female	Assistant headteacher
H9	S4 (London)	Female	Head of parental engagement
H10	S5 (London)	Male	Principal of a school (MAT)
H11	S6 (London)	Male	Principal of a school (MAT)
H12	S7 (London)	Male	Executive principal of 2 schools (MAT)
H14	S9 (OA)	Male	CEO
H15	S9 (OA)	Female	Deputy headteacher
H16	S9 (OA)	Male	Headteacher for pastoral issues
H17	S9 (OA)	Male	Director of a boxing academy within the school
H18	S9 (OA)	Female	Deputy headteacher
H19	S10 (OA)	Male	Associate executive principal (MAT)
H20	S10 (OA)	Male	Head of research
H21	S11 (OA)	Male	Headteacher
H22	S11 (OA)	Female	Assistant Head Teacher
H26	S13 (Other)	Male	Headteacher
H27	S13 (Other)	Female	Executive headteacher
H28	S13 (Other)	Female	Associate headteacher