Beyond the Tripartite: Context-Based Character Education Embedded in the Humanities

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Abstract

This paper explores a practice-led, research-informed approach to context-based character education within the Humanities curriculum. Drawing on insights from over 750 students and staff across two contrasting Australian school campuses, we consider how character formation unfolds when not only taught, caught, and sought but also contextualised. Using mixed methods, we investigated students' conceptions of the good life and human flourishing. Findings highlight that meaningful character development is shaped by local influences, inviting reflection on the tripartite framework and proposing context as a potential fourth dimension bridging theory, pedagogy, and lived educational experience.

Introduction

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues' neo-Aristotelian framework has offered schools a compelling way to organise their character education work and cultivation of virtues. Its emphasis on virtues being *taught*, *caught* and *sought* provides a structure that is both philosophically grounded and practically workable. Importantly, while guided by the eudaimonic *telos*, the Framework avoids the prescribing a universal set of virtues. Instead, it recognises that real schools serve real communities and therefore must discern which virtues speak most meaningfully to their history, ethos and student population. The framework provides an approach to virtues that can be embraced by school communities of all cultures and religions. This openness allows the model to be taken up across diverse cultural and religious traditions, while still acknowledging that character formation cannot be abstracted from context:

… there are cultural variations; such as virtues appearing pronounced in one tradition while not featuring in another. It is, therefore, neither possible nor desirable to provide an exhaustive list of the moral virtues that should be promoted in all schools. Moreover, particular schools may decide to prioritise certain virtues over others in light of the school's history, ethos, location, or specific pupil population (Jubilee Centre, 2022, p.7)

This acknowledgement recognises that context provides the social, cultural and aspirational soil through which character takes root. Character develops through a complex interplay of histories, pressures, institutional norms, expectations and possibilities that define a community. Thus, context is the moral, cultural and aspirational terrain on which character unfolds. Crucially, character develops in dialogue with the very purpose of education, as imagined by its young people, and the futures they imagine for themselves.

Within a neo-Aristotelian paradigm, such considerations are important because virtue cultivation presupposes the teleological orientation toward an eudaimonia as the ultimate good. The habituation of virtue must be accompanied by reflection on these ends. If students understand schooling primarily in instrumental or economic terms, therefore, their reception of virtue language will naturally differ from that of students who perceive education as a moral and intellectual project oriented toward human flourishing.

In our research, located in contemporary Australian schooling and shaped by rich cultural diversity, the question of context has proven especially salient. The Australian education system, like many around the world, is shaped by shifting demographic patterns, and complex student experiences of belonging, purpose and aspiration. The diversity of student backgrounds means that virtues are always encountered within specific moral horizons and subjective experience, meaning that virtue language rarely arrives untouched. Moral language is interpreted through students' lived experiences and these understandings constitute the moral background against which any discourse of character will be apprehended, contested or appropriated.

This paper begins from that reality. Drawing on a collaboration with a large independent school with two distinct campuses, Campus 1 in a rapidly growing and culturally rich outer-suburban community, and Campus 2 in a regional Victorian setting with longstanding local ties, we explore how students understand schooling, success and flourishing. These understandings form the moral horizons within which any talk of character will be received, questioned and reworked. They also illuminate why character education is not simply *delivered*; it must be *interpreted* in light of context. Since students must come to recognise, reflect upon and endorse the eudaimonic telos for character to become internal rather than merely behavioural, attending to their conceptions of educational purpose becomes indispensable.

This recognition of context spans many scholarly traditions. Contemporary comparative education theorists remind that all educational practices are embedded within social, cultural and political particularities (e.g. Rizvi, 2019). Students inhabit worlds in which mobility, pluralism and planetary challenges inform their sense of possibility and their implicit judgments about the ends of education. Rizvi (2019) suggests that such an approach to ethical learning invites the practice of "ethical reflexivity", focusing on the everyday ordinary ethical problems that inexorably arise within culturally diverse and globally interconnected settings (p. 324). Important too is the curriculum and policy context of the school. The Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d.), which informs the various Australian state curricula, highlights personal and social capability, ethical understanding and intercultural understanding as general capabilities essential for student development. These sit naturally alongside the ambitions of character education, although they do not always explicitly use virtue-based language.

Our study school brings a complex of contextual socio-political and cultural sensibilities. Our case study school was established as an independent grammar school servicing the needs of the local community in a rural town 60km west of Melbourne, Australia. Founded in 1998 by a collective of local families, it offered an alternative to the local government school and became part of Ecumenical Schools Australia. The school's early years presented both challenges and successes as the school grew to accommodate local demand and welcomed large numbers of students from Melbourne's fast-

growing western suburbs. By 2023, the school's rich cultural makeup included 40% of students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), and many faiths.

Within this context, our research builds on evidence that adolescents' conceptions of success and the good life vary widely and are closely linked to identity and values. Gill, Trask-Kerr and Vella-Brodrick (2021) show that young people tend to hold quite different accounts of what counts as a successful life, ranging from personal growth and contribution to more extrinsic markers such as achievement or financial security. Similarly, recent work exploring adolescent notions of flourishing found that while relationships and emotions feature prominently, moral goodness and virtue were not especially explicit in students' accounts of the good life (Trask-Kerr et al., 2024; Trask-Kerr et al. 2019). These findings prompt us to consider the virtue concepts that naturally resonate with young people and the moral languages and the aspirations students already bring into school. Further, we are prompted to consider how we can embed character education in a school in a way that acknowledges students' sociological, political, geographical and philosophical context, as well as their very ideas about what school is *for*. Critical literature has suggested a Eurocentricity and paternalism within Character Education (Fiala, 2024; Jerome & Kisby, 2022), and these issues are especially critical in an Australian postcolonial multicultural context.

In response to the aims of our case study school, we also foreground the *humanities* as a powerful site for cultivating practical wisdom (phronesis). The humanities invite students into complex moral landscapes, situating ethical questions within history, culture, literature and politics. Sanderse (2019) cautions that virtue education can drift toward maintaining the educational status quo, particularly when it fails to engage the contemplative and critical capacities needed for moral discernment. The Bildung tradition similarly emphasises the humanities as essential for cultivating freedom, judgement and moral growth, and Pawelski (2022) emphasises connections between the humanities and wellbeing. Yet our preliminary findings indicate that many students at our case study school may reflect policy and public opinion in seeing the humanities as less connected to purposes of education.

Also important to our study is the role of *aims talk*. Noddings (2003) argues that aims talk should be a regular part of schooling, and argues that

> "..we need to talk about aims because aims provide criteria by which we judge our choices of goals, objectives, and subject content. for without explicit engagement with the purposes of education, students are left to construct meaning through fragmented signals from curriculum, assessment and community expectations. Without freedom, democracy degenerates into a form quite different from liberal democracy. Similarly, without continual, reflective discussion of aims, education may become a poor substitute for its best vision. Moreover, just as freedom takes on newer and richer meanings as times change, so must the aims of education change." (p.76)

In this sense, the purpose of education operates as a gatekeeper for character education. If "what school is for" remains largely unexamined, then "character taught" is likely to be interpreted through narrow, largely instrumental lenses. If, however, the school deliberately cultivates shared aims talk, linking virtues to broader accounts of education and the good life, then character education can move from the margins to the centre of students' meaning making. To determine how to do this, we explored the status quo in our study school at the beginning of their character education journey.

Taken together, these insights lead us to propose context as a fourth dimension that sits alongside taught, caught and sought, and ideas about the purpose of schooling, or education at large, as a core concern bringing together the various elements of context. Context shapes how virtue concepts are understood, how they resonate with students' aspirations and how practical wisdom becomes possible. Responding to context is not simple: If we select focus virtues that relate directly to students' ideas about purpose we may indeed encourage a continuation of the status quo. Equally, if we only focus on the virtues we see as important to eudaimonic flourishing regardless of context, we risk misinterpretation or irrelevance in the context of the subjective school experiences. Our study, therefore, represents an exploration and an iterative journey towards eudaimonic flourishing in our context school.

Our "temperature test" study: Initial findings

Our temperature test study, conducted through a survey and accompanying narrative responses, provided an initial picture of how students within our study school understand the purpose of education and the role schooling plays in shaping t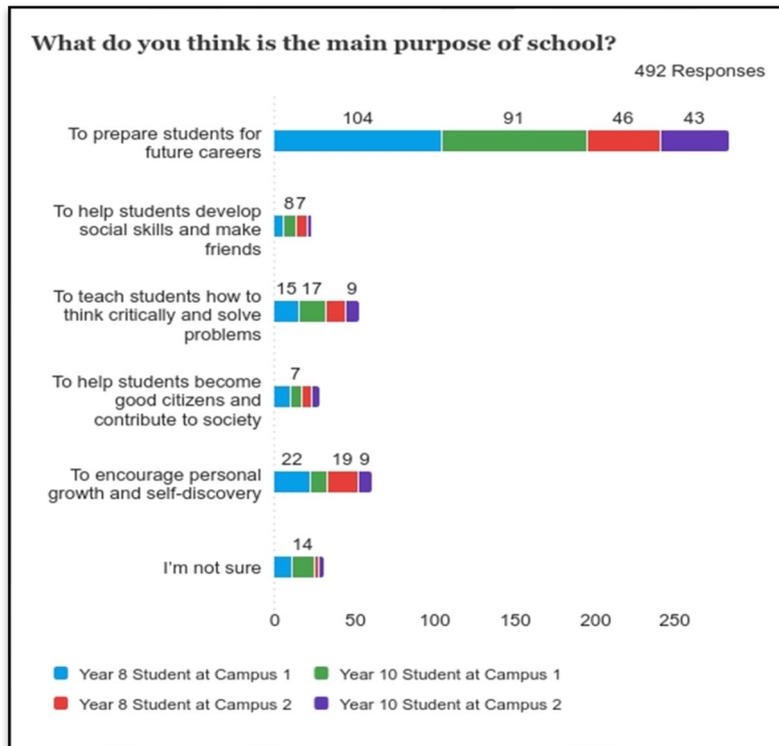heir thinking about a life well lived. We invited students from Years 8 (age 13-14) and Year 10 (aged 15-16) across the two campuses, to reflect on what they believe school is for, what aspects of their schooling feel most meaningful and how their learning contributes to their developing sense of flourishing. Data were collected through Qualtrics surveys and two narrative reflections, with different numbers of students responding to different parts of the study (between 500 and 700

Figure 1

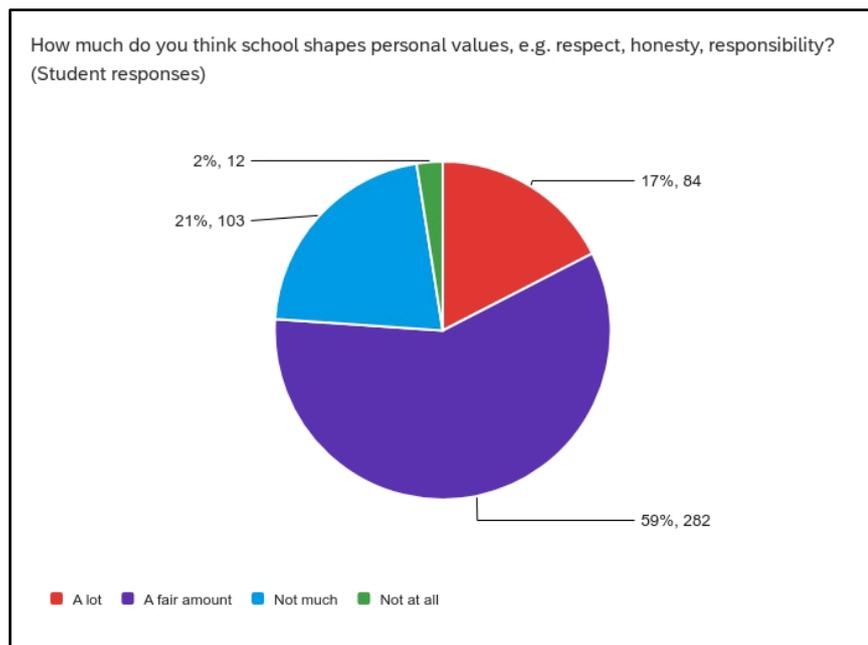Student.perceptions.of.the.purpose.of.schooling¡

students, plus teachers). These early insights have begun to guide our thinking about a way forward for character education in the humanities that aligns with the school's core values of respect, discipline, confidence, ambition, leadership, kindness, knowledge and wisdom. The data described herein largely unpacks the *student* survey responses, but they are interpreted in light of the narrative responses, the teacher responses, and the curriculum audit that inform our next stage of the study (2025-2026).

The purpose of schooling

Our study points to an uncertainty about purposes of schooling in our context school (Figure 1), beyond future career goals. Across both campuses, the dominant view was that the main purpose of school is credentialling, or preparing for a future career or further study. This is not surprising in the current policy and cultural climate, but it has important implications for how "character taught" is heard. If students approach schooling primarily as an engine for future employment, then explicit character lessons can appear peripheral unless they are clearly connected to this overarching purpose or gently challenge it. In other words, the dominant purpose narrative provides the interpretive frame within which virtue language is evaluated. While it has been observed that "schools are places where character development occurs, whether intentional or not" (Kristjánsson, Harrison & Peterson, 2025, p.9) a more holistic idea of school's purpose would provide the philosophical scaffolding necessary for students to situate virtues within their broader conceptions of a flourishing life.

At the same time, most students indicated that school influences their personal values "a fair amount" (Figure 2). The narrative study showed that home was seen as the primary influence, but school was recognised as a significant secondary context in which values, aspirations and conceptions of flourishing are shaped. This combination is striking. Students see schooling as primarily about credentialling, yet they also acknowledge that it plays a meaningful role in shaping who they are becoming.

Figure 2

School's.influence.on.personal.values¡

What aspect of schooling is most meaningful to students?

We were particularly interested in differences in ideas between campuses, given the cultural shift

within the student populations since the opening of Campus 2, and the potential influence of this on what families value in education. While views on purpose in schooling and other factors were the same across campuses, the survey revealed interesting differences in what students across age groups and campuses perceive as most "meaningful" in their schooling, with the strongest contrast found

Figure 3

Aspects.of.school.students.find.most.meaningful

between the two Year 8 cohorts (Figure 3). At Campus 1, younger students tended to emphasise friendships, belonging and relational connection as most meaningful to their school experience, regardless of school's primary purpose. At Campus 2, however, Year 8 students were more likely to emphasise skills and capabilities linked to future opportunities, which most resembled the views of the Year 10 students in Campus 1.

These findings suggest that demographic context interacts with school experiences and developmental stage to shape what young people value in education and influences how they imagine their futures, and may also reflect the ways students understand school's role in supporting their hopes, or their families' hopes, for educational success. The demographic composition of this Year 8 cohort is similar to the Year 10 cohort on the same campus, and we hypothesise that this difference might be a combination of developmental stage, since Year 10s are older and more likely to be thinking about their future, and the curriculum to which they have been exposed at each stage. The
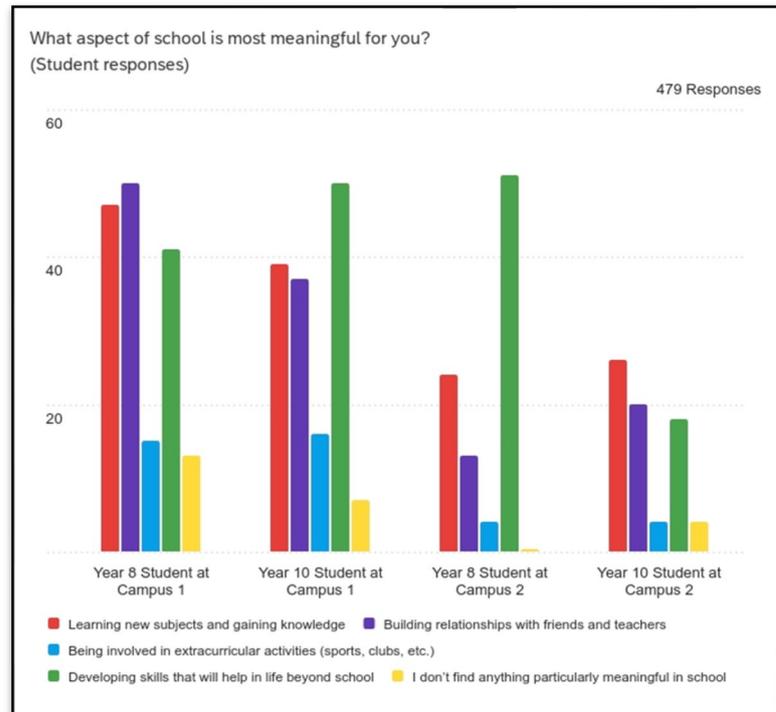
other unique characteristic of this school is that there is sometimes some attrition at the end of Year 8, as some high-achieving students move from this high-achieving independent (private) school to a selective government school. The narrative study reveals a profound influence of school rankings on ideas about what school contributes to a good life, which may be more pronounced as students move toward the high-stakes assessment at Year 12. The completion of the curriculum audit and more detailed analysis at the next stage of our study may give a more nuanced picture of why this may have occurred.

Where might students think character education "belongs" in a school?

Students also did not have a single, unified view about what parts of school helped them to become a "better" person. Year 8 in Campus 1, for examp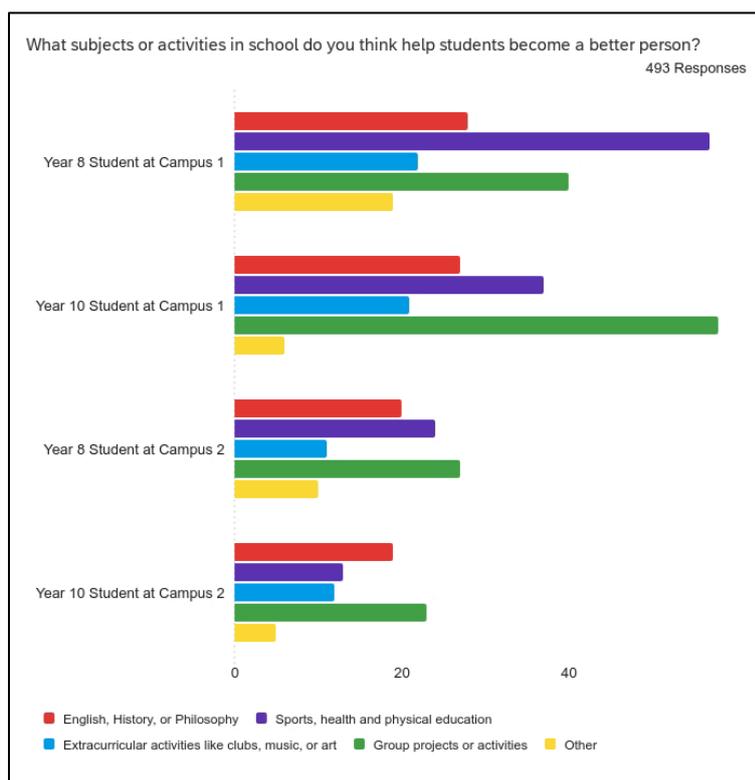le, most often located this kind of work within Health and Physical Education (Figure 4). This positioning is telling. It suggests that when students think of becoming "better" through school, they associate it with wellbeing, behaviour and personal health rather than with, say, history, literature or philosophy. Character, if understood as becoming "better", is thus tacitly compartmentalised: important, but housed in a particular curricular space rather than seen as integral to the intellectual life of the school.

Figure 4

School.disciplines.students.found.likely.to.make.them.a.
»better‹.person¡

Perhaps most strikingly, students at neither campus identified history, literature, philosophy or the broader humanities curriculum as shaping their ideas about moral goodness. This pattern likely

reflects both the status of the humanities in contemporary schooling and a more general need to make explicit the connection between humanities learning and moral formation. This is a lost opportunity that may be addressed through virtues education. In Aristotelian terms, *phronesis* involves the cultivated ability to judge well in complex circumstances.

The humanities provide precisely the kinds of encounters that foster this deeper moral work. Literature promotes reflection on characters' moral dilemmas, values and experiences. History invites examination of moral progress, contested narratives and the consequences of human action. Philosophy encourages reflection on justice, responsibility and public life. Yet students in our study school do not perceive them this way. Sanderse (2019) and others remind us that if character education is to avoid simply reproducing the status quo, it must engage with precisely these kinds of complexity. Yet in our context, students do not yet see the humanities in this light. This suggests a communication gap between the intrinsic moral richness of these disciplines and the way they are currently framed or experienced in the Australian school context.

We were also interested to know about students' ideas of what it means to be "better". Although, predictably, most students thought a "better" person is one who demonstrates kindness and respect, a large proportion across both campuses saw responsibility and hard work a more important traits of a "better" person (Figure 5), perhaps reflecting the dominant credentialling view of schooling.

The Australian context

Australian schooling remains deeply shaped by postcolonial histories including ongoing tensions around cultural hegemony and a need to better integrate Indigenous perspectives and the dominance of Western epistemologies (Riley, Meston, Wright, Cutler, & Van Issum, 2025). For a school like our case study school, serving a culturally diverse community, character education must avoid reinscribing unexamined Eurocentric norms. The Jubilee

Figure 5

What.makes.a*»*better*‹*.person?

Centre framework can be adapted for postcolonial relevance when used reflexively: foregrounding student voice, interrogating whose virtues are centred, and ensuring that exemplars reflect diverse cultural and historical identities. In the Humanities, a postcolonial lens can deepen phronetic judgment by confronting students with contested histories, multiple perspectives and ethical ambiguities inherent in Australia's colonial past.

To the future

The narrative accounts provided by students in our study add a significant layer of depth to the survey data, and together they strengthen the conclusion that many young people primarily interpret schooling through a credentialling lens. Across both campuses, students' written reflections echoed the survey finding that the central function of schooling is to prepare them for a future career. This
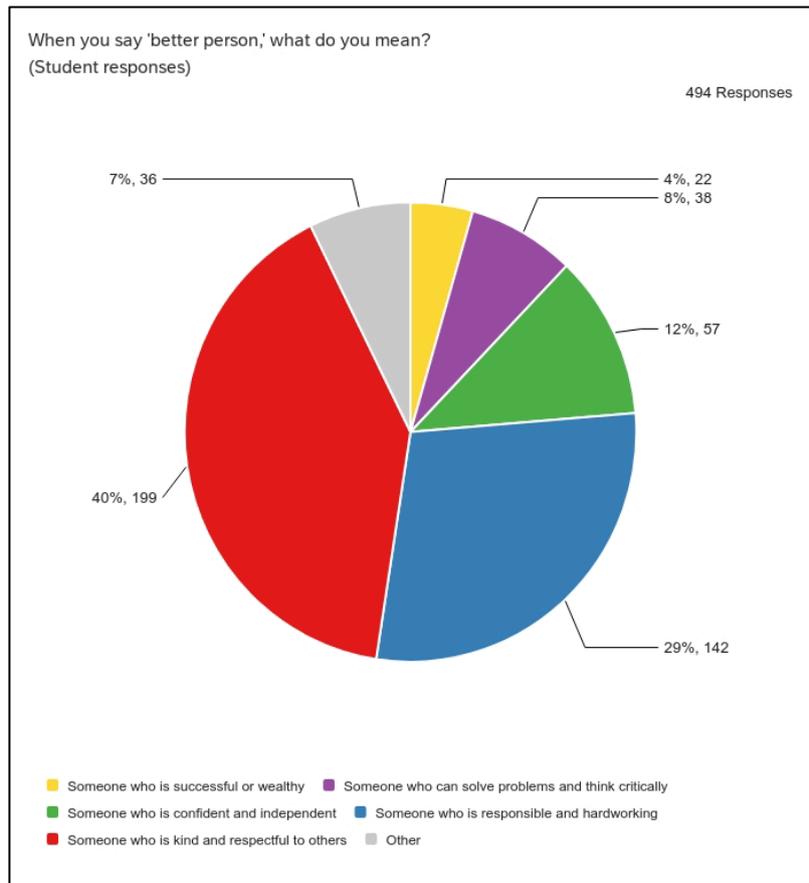
convergence suggests that the credentialling imaginary is not simply a pragmatic assumption but a dominant narrative within which students make sense of their educational experiences. When considered together, these data confirm the strength of this narrative and highlight why character education, if framed only through institutional aspiration, risks being absorbed into an already powerful discourse about achievement, employability and self-investment.

At the same time, students' reflections present a more nuanced picture regarding the place of virtue and character within the school environment. While some students viewed virtues work as belonging within wellbeing or pastoral domains, and some explicitly located it within Health and Physical Education, others indicated that school plays a partial but meaningful role in shaping their ideas about the good life. Although most still viewed home as the primary site for moral formation, their acknowledgement that school "somewhat" influences their understanding of flourishing suggests that character education is not peripheral for them. Instead, students appear open to its influence when it is made visible, coherent and connected to their broader educational aims.

A particularly important finding across both campuses was students' limited sense of how the humanities might contribute to a richer and more reflective conception of flourishing. Very few students articulated any connection between the study of literature, history or philosophy and their evolving sense of what it means to live well. Given the long intellectual tradition in which the humanities are understood to cultivate moral imagination, judgement and critical reflection, this absence is noteworthy. It may reflect the diminished status of the humanities in contemporary schooling and a wider cultural failure to recognise their significance for ethical formation. For our case study school, this insight has been especially catalytic. It points to an opportunity to clarify and strengthen the role of the humanities in shaping not only knowledge but character.

Next steps: A context-shaped character education through the humanities

A context-shaped character education model follows models of *ecological* character education (attentive to the interplay of practices, relationships, narratives, institutional purposes and the lived

meanings student attach to their circumstances. The Jubilee Centre's emphasis on practical wisdom, emotion and the shaping of influences of school ethos already points towards engagement with a moral environment. In this sense, describing context-shaped character education offers a complementary way of naming the systemic, relational conditions that support the cultivations of virtue in diverse educational settings. In Aristotelian terms, context can provide guidance towards the achievement of phronesis, and ultimately eudaimonia.

These insights confirm that analysing context is an iterative and ongoing process. As our understanding of students' aspirations, interpretations and conceptual frameworks develops, so too must our approach to character education. Context analysis is formative rather than summative. It requires sustained cycles of listening, interpreting, theorising and redesign that allow character education to remain responsive to the lived experiences of students in both campuses. At this stage of our inquiry, the central conclusion is clear: There is a need to strengthen the humanities as the intellectual and moral centre of our character education strategy so that students can engage seriously with the kinds of questions that ultimately guide a life directed toward eudaimonia.

Positioning the humanities in this way aligns with the school's values of Respect, Discipline, Confidence, Ambition, Leadership, Kindness, Knowledge and Wisdom. These values are invitations to consider what kind of person one wishes to become and what kind of life one hopes to lead. The humanities support this inquiry by providing conceptual and imaginative tools through which students can examine meaning, purpose and moral complexity. Literature invites them to encounter diverse human experiences. History provides frameworks for understanding moral agency within complex, social worlds. Philosophy opens space for reflection on ethical principles, contested goods and the nature of human excellence. Together, these disciplines nurture the interpretive sensibilities and moral reasoning capacities that underpin practical wisdom.

Our task now is to redesign pedagogical pathways so that students can see and feel this connection. This will involve supporting the school in bolstering the humanities, examining curriculum structures, integrating virtues language more explicitly into humanities inquiry and

offering professional learning that supports teachers to frame their disciplines as sites of moral formation rather than solely content delivery.

These findings do not represent an end point. Instead, they provide a foundation for the next phase of the project. The school is now well placed to develop and evaluate humanities-based approaches that invite students to engage more deeply with questions of purpose, value and flourishing. Through this work, we aim to create a character education framework that is philosophically grounded, contextually responsive and capable of supporting young people as they move toward their final end, a flourishing life shaped by virtue and practical wisdom. Thus, "Context", for us, is Character Education's fourth pillar.

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