



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM
SCHOOL

CHARACTER BY DESIGN

Why character education

Introduction



The tests of life, not a life of tests.

Broadly speaking, Character Education refers to educating the part of the self that makes difficult and moral decisions. As a school, we believe that our job is to prepare the children in our care for “the tests of life, not just a life of tests”, meaning that we commit to offering planned learning opportunities and an environment that enables our pupils to flourish in the widest sense. It is our mission that people in our communities, children and adults, flourish and inspire other citizens to build better communities and a better world. Character education is a conduit for this mission as we aim to create the space to nurture happy, engaged and fulfilled citizens.

For us, this means a lived commitment to forgiveness; we do not let what a child has done limit where they can go. We practise our own integrity and bravery as we work hard to be a space where children feel loved, safe, happy and are able to flourish.

Character education

Aristotelian virtues ethics

We are what we repeatedly do



We follow the Jubilee Centre model for Character Education which is neo- Aristotelian in nature. Aristotle emphasised the importance of developing excellence of character (virtue) so that we do the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, for the right reason.

Virtue is practical, so there is little point in knowing what is theoretically virtuous if it is not practised. Practising virtue requires practical wisdom (Greek: phronesis) as opposed to theoretical wisdom (Greek: sophia) so a school that commits to cultivating practical wisdom must offer spaces where virtue is practised, errors are made, mistakes reflected upon, and decisions made again. Aristotle considers what dispositions a person of excellent character has. These dispositions become virtues when they are practised wisely, in the right place, at the right time, for the right reason. All virtue can be practised unwisely, leading to the vice of excess and the vice of deficiency.

For instance with the virtue of kindness one can be too excessive and be too indulgent and lenient, or one can be too deficient and become hard and cold. Kindness also looks different in different scenarios: kindness includes holding a behaviour expectation and saying a firm "no, whereas it can lead one to be wisely permissive in another situation. This is where the meta-virtue of practical wisdom is required as it helps us make these decisions and try to achieve the Golden Mean of right place, right time, right reason.

Character education theory

Jubilee Centre Framework

Taught Caught and Sought

In Character Education, people can catch good character from those around them, be taught it theoretically and find it through sought opportunities.

Taught character

This begins with a focus on virtue literacy; if people don't have the language to think about and discuss virtue, then they will struggle to engage in the reflective process and thus struggle to grow. Particular virtues are taught and challenging situations modelled to explore what practical wisdom may LOOK like in different places.

Caught character

This is the absorbing of character virtue from others through interaction. It is almost an accidental process, although here we make a concerted effort to act with wisdom, patience and consideration, ensuring that every interaction is a place for good character to be caught.

Sought character

Having begun to gain virtue knowledge and understanding, an individual then seeks opportunities themselves to habituate virtue and develop their character. In a school this may look like a series of opportunities placed in front of a child (and adult) to practise, make mistakes, reflect and move forward.

This framework is further detailed on the Jubilee Centre's website as A Framework for Character Education in Schools and informs our practical approach to the exploration of character and virtue



Character education theory

Common Vocabulary

Virtue Literacy

As a school we aim to speak the same language around the topic of character. We talk about wise decisions by thinking through “too hot” or “too cold” reactions and decisions (vice of excess or deficiency).

Phrases like “use your virtues” are not meaningful as they are too vague and have an implicit assumption that virtue is fixed and is a tool to be used and not used.

Rather individuals are encouraged to think using virtue language and the adult may direct them to consider their application of a particular virtue or their practicing of wisdom.

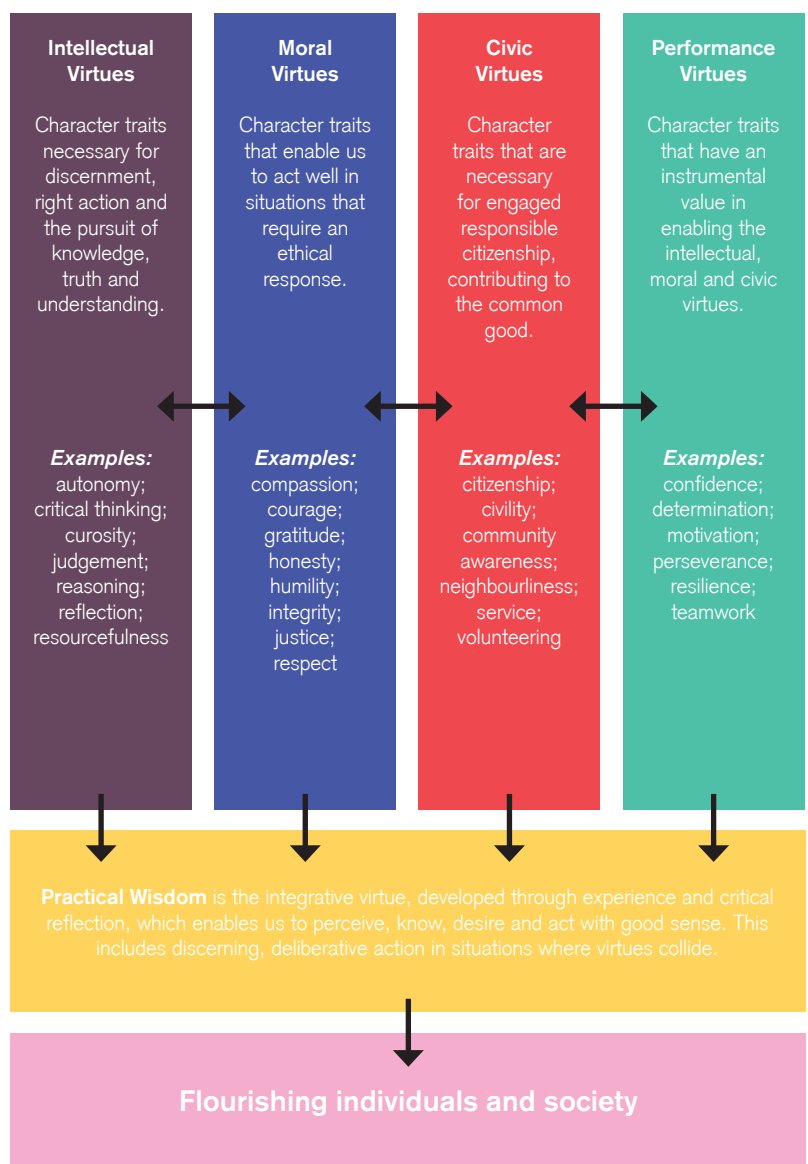
Your character is never complete, so we give pupils opportunities to practice, then reflect, and try again.

There is no definitive list of virtues, however the Jubilee Centre has provided a list of several key ones divided into helpful categories. This is noticeably more extensive than a narrow focus on just performance virtues like grit or determination.

A limited focus will not lead to the flourishing of the whole person. There is nothing wrong per se with a focus on performance virtues alone as it may lead to improvement in exam results, however it doesn't necessarily lead to progress in other metrics. We value the social and emotional growth of our pupils, as well as their academic outcomes.

Happy, engaged and fulfilled citizens don't just know how to persevere, they wisely do this with integrity, humility and reflectiveness.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF CHARACTER



What character education is not

Common Misconceptions

Character Education has existed and exists today in various iterations in different places. Neo-Aristotelian Character Education has previously been criticised for being paternalistic indoctrination to condition children to obey within a particular system.

Whilst some projects called "Character Education" have sought similar aims, these claims are not true for this project.

Character Education is not about promoting the moral ideals of one particular system, religious or otherwise. Universal virtue is explored in different contexts and the importance of wisdom is a notion that exists cross-culturally.

The goal of Character Education is to give pupils the wisdom to work out what the wisest action is, in a particular situation, have the courage to do it and the integrity to do it for the right reasons. These intellectual and practical tools are far from blind obedience and mindless conditioning and seek to undo the dangers of indoctrination.



Curriculum Lessons

Character in Classrooms

Planned opportunities

Our lessons contain planned opportunities to develop character. These may be the explicit teaching of virtue, exploring an applied situation where wisdom is required, or creating a classroom-environment where character is caught.

A topic might lend itself to an exploration of virtue in an overt manner. Mathematics explores integrity when looking at statistics, Geography considers justice when studying patterns of migration and RS studies service when looking at Sikhism.

Other classes may focus on curriculum content but use character as part of their pedagogy. In Languages, pupils are encouraged to practise courage as they study their new language. PE has a full scheme of learning on character through sport, where virtues like empathy are used when learning to give feedback.

Behaviour management can be virtue led. When setting up a silent or discussion activity, a moment can be taken to reflect with pupils on which virtues will be useful during the activity to support the class. Pupils choose virtues that will help discussions take place calmly and respectfully, share their reasons and then managing the class is not about 'shushing' but reminding pupils to practise the virtues they need.

There is a fuller document that offers thoughts across 14 subject areas that has been published by the Jubilee Centre; 'Teaching Character Through the Curriculum' has suggestions for activities and planning that offer a good jumping off point.



Learning for Life (L4L)

Character as the conduit for delivering Personal learning and development

We meet our CEIAG, SRE, PSHE, SMSC, Safeguarding and Fundamental British Values requirements as part of our L4L programme,

Our focus often lies in exploring the 'why' behind decision-making, for instance our CEIAG provision begins with exploring not just what you want to be but how you want to be in the world.

We apply the principle of right place, right time, right reason to SRE work too, where wisdom and integrity take the fore in decision making about sex and relationships. Similar principles apply to our work on Safeguarding and work on knife crime and gangs.

Our PLAD programme is carefully curated to meet statutory requirements and remain flexible to explore emerging needs in our community. By focusing pupils on the kind of person they want to be as opposed to narrow instruction on the acceptable way to behave, our L4L programme has wider applications for pupils outside of narrow situations studied in classrooms

Wisdom is the key virtue here as pupils work through scenarios and consequences safely and bravely so they are better able to make the right decisions at the right time, for the right reasons.



Enrichment

Space for practising practical wisdom

Opportunity for taught, caught and sought character

Enrichment is an integral part of our curriculum. All pupils, students and adults take part in elective and rotational enrichment programs that are designed as opportunities for them to take risks, become experts and learn something new.

As previously mentioned, practical wisdom is performative and enrichment has to be a space for the practising of virtue. We ask staff and guests to plan opportunities that broaden the experiences of young people and give the space for them to seek out new spaces and challenges.

From British Military Fitness to feminism, henna to Egyptology, and knitting to lacrosse, pupils get opportunities to practise virtue and foster a sense of unity.

Our Challenge Week is an integral part of this offer, as well as running the Duke of Edinburgh programme for all pupils in year 9.



Outside of lessons

How do pupils “catch” character around school?

Corridors, duty, the atrium



In our school we share nearly all of our spaces with pupils and students. This is because we, as excellent role models, can be hugely influential in the character development of the young people in our care.

In corridors we are attentive to how pupils are moving around the school. We smile and say good morning. We catch a pupil to say thank you or well done. We notice if someone is lost and needs help. We compliment smartness and hold the line with uniform, headphones and being purposeful. On break duty we smile and say good morning. We ask pupils how their day is. We are not jailers looking to catch people doing things wrong, but when we do see bad behaviour we challenge it. With loving kindness we inform pupils that boundaries have

been broken, continue to hold them in positive high regard and begin with an assumption that pupils want to do the right thing.

In the atrium the space gets quite crowded. We live the behaviours we expect to see - benches tucked in, trays cleared, calm and quiet voices. We have pleasant conversations with each other and with children, we are attentive to unkindness and loneliness. We hold the door for one another, we don't queue jump at the canteen. Learning happens in all corners of our building and how we conduct conversations with children and each other is absorbed and held on to by all in our care.

Behaviour Systems

Where does character fit when holding pupils to account for their choices?

Holding the line, no excuses, loving kindness

We expect the best of people at all times, remain stubbornly optimistic that they will do the right thing and hold them in positive high regard. We endeavour to be a space where adults and children can do their best work but recognize that unwise choices will be made. Sanctions are immediate, centralized, with staff visiting pupils to discuss which virtues may have helped them make better decisions. Pupils are forgiven, each new day starts afresh.

Positive recognition

Green stamps are given to recognise a child who has demonstrated character, leadership and excellence. There are weekly celebrations in form time where pupils nominate their friends who have shown good character. There are termly assemblies where form tutors nominate those who have shown good character and an annual 'Celebration of Character and Excellence' held in the great hall at the University of Birmingham.

Holding children to account

The virtues that lead to respectful and scholarly behaviours are clear in every classroom. We refer to them regularly, narrating the behaviours we want to see. Pupils who are doing the wrong thing are shown that they need to act differently, and then receive an amber stamp and then a red stamp if they do not make correct choices. We use the language of character to consider the impact that behaviours have on the rest of our community, reminding pupils of the importance of compassion, empathy.

Impact

Of course, character education is not a panacea for exemplary behaviour and pupils will still make mistakes, but it provides a vocabulary for reflection, a way of framing what wise choices look like, and enables pupils to acquire and develop the moral, civic and intellectual virtues they need to live a flourishing life.





DIANA LEVYAN

I felt lucky to be given countless opportunities in enrichment every week. I know pupils my age in other schools wouldn't get to experience led by professionals each with a unique skill of their own.

From making candles from scratch and huge mosaic artwork now displayed as one of the first main pieces of art in school to training for the sports competitions, I gained many experiences and skills I couldn't have done solely.



KYLLIAN DJOUMESSI

My experience at UoBS has broadened my understanding and my views of virtues.

During my time at UoBS, I have had first-hand experience of trying new things which at the time I had never dreamt of doing. These consisted of speaking in front of a crowd, competing as a representative, or pushing my limits to obtain a win at a sporting event. All of these events have shown how different virtues could be represented, such as courage, being humble, perseverance, sportsmanship, and how they can shape you as an individual, developing as you grow up.



CAMERON MATUVABGUA - FERNANDEZ

Being able to take part in so many things that have stuck with me and have served as a spring for new interests, has been significant.

That brings me onto character education. We have all worked to understand what it is and now that I've come to the end of the full cycle at UoBS, I realise that I am able to put it into practice whenever and wherever.

I would like to think it has taken part in shaping who I am and it's important to understand that I have made character education my own by adapting it to me, through experiences and extensive reflection throughout the years. I've been able to apply it in life not only in school, but outside of school too and I will most likely be carrying it with me throughout my life choices and milestones.



CALLUM STEELE

A particularly enriching experience for me was volunteering at a Covid vaccination centre for the volunteering section of my gold DofE. This gave me another opportunity to meet a diverse group of people and learn how they were affected by the pandemic. Although the pandemic was a very negative and stressful time for lots of the people I met, their resilience and willingness to persevere despite the challenges inspired me to do the same throughout the rest of my life.

Another of the standout qualities of UoBS is the enrichment scheme. This has allowed me to partake in multiple different activities that I never would have otherwise.

To conclude, I will always cherish my time at University of Birmingham School, and the opportunities given and lessons learnt will stay with me forever.

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