



THE
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Insight Series

Being of Good Character

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Being of Good Character

Calls have been made recently for the renewal of public and private virtues, not least because of the serious scandals that have beset our banks, political system, as well as our health and social welfare provisions. The public appear to want people to be of good character, and so improve the quality of public life. And yet Britain today is a pluralistic society in which our values and virtues appear to be constantly changing and where children are exposed to a variety of perspectives on moral right and wrong. We seem to regard identifying with any set of virtues to be problematic and we often appear to lack any clear conception of what virtues are, which virtues are to be promoted, as well as knowledge of how to promote them.

This is why Tristram Hunt's urgent call for us to prioritise the teaching of 'character, moral purpose and the education of well-rounded individuals' together with academic attainment must be welcomed. But some will no doubt ask whether or not it is the job of a school to teach character? Should this not rather be the task of parents, or of society broadly defined? Hunt rightly raises the question of what is the purpose of contemporary schooling. Is it simply to prepare young people for a life of tests, or should it actually be to prepare them for the tests of life? The answer, of course, is that we have no choice in the matter. Through its very existence, every school already models a set of values to its students. It is far better that this process be a conscious one, rationally organised, so that it becomes possible to evaluate what the school is saying and doing and how it says and does it.

Character education is an umbrella term for all explicit and implicit teaching that helps a student develop positive values and virtues. It is about the acquisition and strengthening of virtues which sustain a well-rounded life and a thriving society. Schools should aim to develop confident and compassionate students who are effective contributors to society, successful learners and responsible citizens. Students also need to grow in their understanding of what is good or valuable and their ability to protect and advance what is good. They need to develop a commitment to serving others, which is an essential manifestation of good character in action. Questions of character formation are inseparable from these educational goals and are fundamental to living well and living responsibly. Character development involves caring for and respecting others, as well as caring for and

respecting oneself. Students need to decide the kind of person they wish to become and to learn to choose between alternatives. In this process, the ultimate aim of character education is the development of *good sense* or practical wisdom: the capacity to choose intelligently between alternatives. There is nothing “soft” about this process; most schools recognise their responsibilities in this area and therefore some form of character education, implicit or explicit, takes place in every school in the UK. However, it is important that this character education is intentional and planned rather than assumed and random. All schools should make character education a visible and conscious part of their day-to-day practice.

Developing children’s characters is an obligation on us all, not least on parents. Although parents are the primary educators of character, empirical research shows they want *all* adults who have contact with their children to contribute to such education, especially their children’s teachers. Although many teachers possess a strong interest in moral issues, they are not always adequately trained to critically reflect upon and convey moral views to their students in a sophisticated way. Therefore the education and training of teachers ought to include recognition of the importance of character education. Schooling is concerned centrally with the formation of character and obviously benefits from a planned approach to character development, clearly stated in the mission of the school. Exceptional teachers already see the fostering of the student’s character as a professional responsibility and priority. This is why exceptional teachers build the character of young people, which directly establishes a positive moral climate in the school, which in turn attracts more exceptional teachers. With so much at stake, everyone involved in a young person’s life, including parents and teachers, should be making character development a priority.

We also need to be clear that character education and academic attainment are not mutually exclusive. Common sense tells us that good character is the foundation for improved attainment as well as for other school priorities such as good behaviour and enhanced employability. Nevertheless, the growing research literature shows a clear and positive correlation between character education and academic attainment. We know that variables such as self-reliance and responsibility are related to academic success. Findings indicate that improved social and emotional skills enhance grade attainment, and so do moral ones. We know both instinctively and through research that students’ increased attentiveness in class,

their greater capacity to work independently and cooperatively, taking care and effort in school work and taking more pride in their efforts all impact positively on academic attainment. Quite simply we know that visible and explicit character education leads students to the desire to do the right things at school and therefore leads to school success. Schools that are values-driven see character education as part of everything they do and are committed to promoting core virtues which positively links character to examination success, and more importantly, to the ideal of a flourishing life. Such schools develop and live by a core language of moral purpose which makes space to allow their students to learn about being and becoming young people of good character. The virtues that make up character enable young people to enjoy rewarding and productive lives as well as learn better, and the qualities that make up good character can be learnt and taught.

To sum up, there is a need to re-emphasise the importance of good character in schools and in our professions. Human flourishing is the widely accepted aim of life and this involves fulfilling one's potential. Flourishing is the aim of character education and is critical to its achievement. It requires moral, intellectual, and civic virtues as well as generic performance virtues such as self-management and resilience. Above all, character education is about helping our students grasp what is ethically salient in situations and to act for the right reasons. Every school should therefore aspire to describing the kind of students it wants to help develop and then outline how it intends to do this. Character education is both taught and caught, it leads to better academic attainment and helps students flourish – it therefore ought to be at the heart of a school's culture and ethos.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues or The University of Birmingham.

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