Empowering Student Voice in a Secondary School: Character Education through Project-Based Learning with Students as Teachers

Introduction

Can we teach students to be 'good' people and, if so, how? Theorists, philosophers, scholars, educators, parents and others have all questioned who should be responsible for character development and whether or not 'good character' can be taught. Whilst Greek moralists agreed that a virtuous character can be cultivated, defining what made an action virtuous was highly controversial (Homiak, 2016). Nineties America saw the debate on virtues return to the shores of education with a revived national focus on Character Education. This Character Education movement has gradually made its way to the UK, marked by the introduction in 2015 of 'Character Awards' and grants for schools (DfE, 2015). At the same time, the UK has also witnessed an increasing focus on student voice, which, when considered in light of Stenhouse's views on curricula (1971), can be seen as key way of developing Character Education in schools. Student voice is defined as 'every way in which pupils are allowed or encouraged to voice their views' (Cheminais, 2008, 6) and many schools are now appointing student voice coordinators.

However, in the UK a tension exists between developing Character Education and the government's emphasis on a 'knowledge-based curriculum' (Gibb, 2017). Whilst the 'spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils' (SMSC) has been part of education law in the UK since 1944 and forms a key part of inspections, increasing pressure on results has seen SMSC 'sliding to the margins', with many schools not including Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) in their provision (Peterson et al., 2014, 20). As of 2020, however, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education are statutory in all schools (DfE, 2019a), making it likely that schools will find more space for PSHE.

Against this UK context, this paper draws together literature from three distinct areas to put forward a new way in which Character Education can be developed in schools. Firstly, a position on Character Education is taken through consideration of critiques of an 'indoctrination approach' to education (DeVitis and Yu ed., 2011). This is set alongside a more progressive view of Character Education as underpinned by 'meaningful' student voice development (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). Secondly, a link is made between student voice development and research in America which advocates empowering students as teachers (SAT) (Emdin, 2016). Thirdly, a further link is made between student voice development and democratic classroom theorists (Morrison, 2008), which leads to Project-Based Learning (PBL) as a means of student empowerment (BIE, 2018; Peruzzi, 2018).

In relation to this framework, this paper explores the following questions:

1. How can student voice be developed through the Character/PSHE curriculum?

2. To what extent do project-based student-led Character lessons increase engagement and empower students to speak out and be community-minded?

These questions are explored through the evaluation of a small-scale action-research project conducted at Author 1's former school, an urban secondary Academy School in one of the poorest areas of England. The evaluation analyses data from Author 1's teaching of Character lessons with her Year 9 class as well as data generated from two Year 10 classes where students taught the lessons.

The evaluation demonstrates how a project-based student-led approach to designing the Character / PSHE curriculum develops student voice. Furthermore, the results indicate that project-based student-led Character lessons hold the potential to empower students and increase engagement, enabling students to speak out and be community-minded.

Literature Review

Character Education and Shared Values

As the report of the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in the UK states, 'there is no universally accepted definition' of Character Education. Broadly speaking, Character Education is understood to be 'an approach to developing a set of values, attitudes, skills and behaviours that are thought to support to support young people's development and contribute to their success in school and adult life' (NFER, 2017, 4). Despite the aforementioned focus on a knowledge-based curriculum in the UK, in 2015 the Education Secretary Nicky Morgan declared that Character Education was 'vital for preparing young people for life in modern Britain' (DfE, 2015). Character Awards were established for schools in 2015 and the government issued non-statutory guidance for schools on Character Education in 2019. Yet, as the guidance recognises, Character is a 'complex concept' (2019b, 7). The question of how to develop these values attitudes, behaviours or skills, and indeed what they are, is as 'age-old' as the question of whether or not Character should be taught (Berkowitz, 2009).

Nucci defined the debate as between those who see 'morality in terms of norms' and 'developmentalists' who view 'moral action as a product of moral judgement' (1989, xiii). According to Wynne, sitting in the former category, it is 'one of the most important responsibilities of adults' to 'transmit proper values to succeeding generations' (Nucci ed., 1989, 19). This is echoed in the mainstream US approach to Character Education and the approach of the Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) running Parsley Academy Brownwood, which we shall refer to as Parsley MAT (MAT and Academy names are pseudonyms). Parsley MAT follows the views of Character.org (2016) and other American Character Education proponents that teachers must explicitly 'teach core ethical and performance values' to their students (Sutton, 2009). Aspects of this approach are also reflected in the UK government's

guidance, which states that the 'learning and habituation of positive moral attributes, sometimes known as 'virtues'', is a key aspect of Character Education (2019b, 7).

Living and applying 'shared values' is generally considered best practice for effective Character Education in the UK and US (NFER, 2017, 40). However, a wealth of critiques of this mainstream approach exist, including DeVitis and Yu (2011), who criticise the influence of Christian ideology on Conservative proponents such as Wynne and Lickona (1997), and a radical critique of Character Education as an 'ideological and political movement' (Purpel in DeVitis ed., 2011, 43). More specifically, Kohn and Ryan argue that promoting values such as 'patience and 'self-control' masks an aim to 'protect the status quo of social relations' (in DeVitis ed., 2011, 162; Ryan, 1993). Demanding 'self-control' and 'patience' of students in marginalised communities arguably leads them away from the criticality, passion, perseverance and 'grit' required for them to overcome barriers to achieve social mobility (Duckworth, 2016). This critique rings true for Parsley Academy Brownwood, which serves an area with a level of deprivation that places it within the highest ten per cent of English wards - Parsley MAT as a whole serves schools located in the poorest wards in the country.

Character Education and Empowerment

In contrast to the mainstream American approach to Character Education, we align with Nucci's view of Character Education as developmental and we believe centred around the principle of empowerment. According to Stenhouse (1971, 156), who saw students as growing 'towards adult responsibility by adopting it', empowerment of students is inextricable from the development of character. In this sense, empowerment becomes a process which 'fosters capacities in individuals, groups and communities', 'takes into account the felt needs of the actors' and 'encourages collective involvement' (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014).

Smyth and Wrigley (2013) develop Stenhouse's proposition, proposing that 'voice and agency' of students are fundamental to an empowering Character curriculum, with

'democracy' necessarily at the heart of moral education (Dewey in DeVitis ed., 2011, 173).

As an example, Kohn proposes 'perspective taking' as a form of Character Education, combined with 'regular class meetings', in order to enable students to become 'active participants in democratic society' (in DeVitis ed., 2011, 134-141). Building on this, the movement of student voice provides a framework for grounding Character Education and PSHE in the needs of the students.

At a time in the UK of widespread media campaigns to decolonise the curriculum, increasing child poverty (Children's Commissioner, 2020) and continuing systemic racial bias in the education system (Shand-Baptiste, 2020), it is essential that we challenge the status quo of social relations by designing Character curricula that empower young people to speak out, collaborate and realise their potential.

Student voice in education today

This progressive form of Character education is linked to a global emphasis on promoting student voice in education. This can be traced back to 1989, when the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) declared that children should have the 'right to freedom of expression' 'in all matters affecting the child' (1989, 12.1 and 13.1). In nineties America, authors such as Erickson and Shultz (1992) spoke of a need to help young people voice their own ideas and participate in decisions about their education. Whilst the UNCRC was not immediately ratified by the UK, the government has issued several documents supporting student voice since 2000, including statutory guidance (DfE, 2014) on 'listening to and involving young people' and paying 'due regard to the Convention'.

However, in a climate of 'high-stakes accountability' (Earley, 2016, 28), emphasis on exam results leaves little room for listening to students' views. 'Performativity' within a neoliberal context marginalises student voice, as education becomes an auditable commodity (Ball, 2003). In the UK, whilst the inspectorate values student voice, the 'climate of intimidation' created by the culture of surveillance can inhibit such initiatives from

developing (Smyth and Wrigley, 2011, 182). At the same time, research demonstrates that students are less likely to disengage from their learning if they feel involved in school life and feel their views are respected (Shields, 2004, 122). Indeed, feeling voice-less is damaging for young people, increasing 'passivity' and failure (Smyth and McInerney, 2012).

Developing student voice: students as teachers and project-based learning

In the UK, one traditional approach to developing student voice is through a school council. According to a government report on sustainable schools, school councils provide 'young people with practice in genuine participation and leadership' (DCSF, 2010, 6). Yet school councils can be criticised for their narrow focus. As Barratt and Barratt-Hacking (2007) argue, school councils focus mainly on addressing behaviour or social issues, which can be defined as student 'perspectives'. Such consultative activities are often not empowering, as without consultation on the terms of participation, these approaches can become tools for control (Lukes, 2005).

Rancière demonstrates that the social order determines whose voices are heard (2000, 13; Davis, 2010). In an education context, Fielding states that school leaders must first ask the questions 'who is listening?' and 'why are they listening?' before student voice can be meaningfully developed (2001, 134). Instead of a consultation, Character lessons can provide a 'special space' for students to 'debate issues' and develop agency (Flutter and Ruddock, 2004, 103), thereby promoting student voice. This could enable students to move towards 'influence' and 'visibility' (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, 152). Fielding describes the transition for schools from 'students as data source' to students as 'co-researchers', arguing that only at this final stage is the school actually listening 'to learn' from the students (2001, 136).

Two approaches to developing student voice during lesson time will be explored in this paper -'students as teachers' (SAT) and 'project-based learning' (PBL). Aside from papers on peer-to-peer tutoring (Cohen et al., 1982) and peer mentoring (Lander, 2016), little has been written about SAT. One American teacher, Emdin, has championed the benefits of

'coteaching', which helps to build 'respectful relationships with students' and 'increases student engagement' (2016). Emdin's use of SAT has been described as 'engaging' and 'empowering', increasing the 'relevance' of the curriculum and building students' confidence (Kressler & Marzocchi, 2017).

SAT has not been explicitly written about as an approach to developing student voice, but it could be argued that Tobin (2002) and Emdin's use of 'cogenerative dialogues', alongside 'coteaching', incorporate elements of Fielding's (2001) final stage of 'students as researchers'. Emdin's approach exemplifies this by enabling students to put into action the changes they want to make. Whilst the potential for SAT to empower the student teachers is clear, the question remains as to how to ensure their lessons empower everyone. This led Author 1 to PBL.

PBL is a 'teaching method in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem or challenge' (BIE, 2018). Based on Dewey's 'learning by doing' theory (1909), PBL is described as a '21st century strategy for education', addressing 'core content' alongside the development of team-work and critical thinking (Boss, 2011). It is founded on the belief that these skills and knowledge must be 'activated through experience' (Markham, 2011).

Student voice is an integral part of PBL - as Peruzzi states there are 'multiple opportunities for students to express their voice' (2018). Terada argues that students develop responsibility for their learning in PBL lessons (2018) and some American educational bloggers for Method Schools (PBL charter schools in California) have begun to advocate PBL as an approach to teaching Character. Their approach of 'service learning' combines 'community service' and 'learning objectives' (Walbert-Gawron, 2016). They argue that this develops students into 'caring and compassionate' people who are 'aware of the world around them' (Spallino, 2017).

The lack of research into the impact of SAT and PBL within Character Education can be offset by consideration of the effectiveness of 'democratic classrooms' to promote project-based student-led learning. 'Democratic classrooms' grew out of the freedom-based education movement, grounded in the notion that giving students choice engages them in their learning (Morrison, 2008). By placing trust in students, students are likely to listen actively and feel empowered by their responsibility towards society. Pearl and Knight (1999, 99) argue that democratic classrooms encourage students to be leaders, respect the 'right to disagree' and place students in situations where they have to 'develop plans of action', reflecting on their progress.

The use of SAT and PBL to deliver Character Education in this evaluation, therefore, is in part inspired by research into 'democratic classrooms'. In the next section, we illustrate what these Character lessons looked like in practice and how the evaluation was designed.

Methodology

Project-based Character lessons

Character lessons were introduced at Parsley Academy Brownwood in 2017, following a top-down initiative from Parsley MAT to develop 'people's character' in the communities they serve. All students in years seven to eleven had a fortnightly hour of Character Education and each lesson focused on one virtue.

In order to contribute to their vision in a developmental rather than indoctrinating way, Author 1 ran a series of PBL Character lessons with her year 9 class. Author 1 also wanted to explore the potential impact of a SAT approach and asked year 10 teachers to volunteer to support their Character classes – two teachers were willing, supportive participants and Author 1 then recruited a group of six volunteering students from each class to lead these lessons. The projects lasted for three to four lessons and after week 1 a student withdrew from Group 2 (see Table 1). These eleven student teachers from year 10 met once a week for

fifteen minutes for a planning meeting. Author 1 met with the student teachers after each lesson for fifteen minutes to reflect on the lesson in a focus group.

To give the students in the classes some guidance, Author 1 developed a framework for the Character lessons based on the 'Design for Change' model (2018), in which students work together to: 'feel' problems which bother them in the local or school community; 'think' about solutions; and 'act' on them. Author 1 selected this framework as it is empowering, encouraging students to bring about positive change in their school or community. The loose structure also enabled students to take a lead with the lesson planning and steer the direction of the research project.

Given the role students had in leading the project, the approach can be classified as 'researching collaboratively with children' (Barratt Hacking et al., 2007). Whilst resources were provided, the students were the creators of the lessons, which gave more meaning to their experience (Liamputtong, 2011, 24).

[INSERT TABLE 1 NEAR HERE]

Data collection: 'look', 'act' and 'think'

Inspired by Stringer's interacting spiral model for reflective action research (2007, 30), Author 1 used a multi-method approach to data collection, structured by 'look', 'act' and 'think'. The 'look' stage, questionnaires, gave an overview of student perceptions of the Character lessons and student voice at Parsley Academy. The 'act' stage, the action research project, provided answers to research question 2 by trialling these projects and observing the results. The 'think' stage, reflective focus groups, provided the students' perspectives on the success of this approach.

Two questionnaires were designed to find out students' views on Character Education and student voice at the Academy prior to the project. There were ten statements

per questionnaire, such as 'my school listens to what I have to say'. Students were asked to select between 'strongly agree' and 'strongly disagree'.

To involve students in the action research project design (the 'act' stage), a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework (Bradbury and Reason, 2008) was employed so that participants became 'co-researchers' who had 'a voice in the process of decision making and can play a concrete role in solving their own problems effectively' (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014). This method, in line with our view of Character Education, enabled students to lead the project. The planning meetings were integral to this PAR approach as the students decided what to do next. Teacher guidance was optional and Author 1 kept a research journal to record observations. Alongside observations, the research journal was also used to record reflections of Author 1's own Character lessons with year 9.

As Fine states, marginalized people can become 'constructors and agents of knowledge' (1994, 75) through focus groups. The focus groups enabled the students to construct their own views on what Character Education should be (the 'think' stage), whether this method was effective and to what extent it helped develop student voice. This meant that the students were building their own answers to the research questions (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014). The volunteer students who planned and led the lessons for each year 10 class were also the students who took part in the focus groups. The year 10 class teachers were informally interviewed during lessons and at the end of the projects. At the end of the year 9 Character lessons, Author 1 also undertook focus group discussions with students to find out their perceptions.

Data analysis

The focus group discussion gave a space for the students to evaluate the lessons and be co-researchers. The themes identified in these discussions were then triangulated with diary entries and lesson observations. Following a deductive-inductive approach, some of these

findings, e.g. engagement, were anticipated; others, e.g. active listening, emerged from the focus group discussions. The five core themes coded across the data sets were: Student engagement; Students speaking out; Students being community-minded; Students being empowered to act; Teacher led vs. Student led lessons.

Ethical considerations

All data collection followed the British Education Research Association's ethical guidelines with informed consent gained by Author 1 from the headteacher, parents and Year 10 teachers. Author 1 also sought assent from the students and the student teachers in an 'on-going' way (David, 2013), giving participants the right to withdraw their data from the project at any time, without penalty. Pseudonyms are used for the teachers; students are referred to by their teaching group (1 or 2), a letter to distinguish them and their gender (e.g. Student 1A (male)).

Findings and Discussion

Student engagement

Part of Author 1's motivation for beginning this project was student feedback that Character lessons were 'pointless'. Survey data from the questionnaires brought to light that only 13.7% of students surveyed agreed that 'Character lessons have an effect on my behaviour'. The majority of students also neither agreed nor disagreed that discussing or being told about virtues helped them develop as an individual. Furthermore, most students disagreed or remained uncertain as to whether Character lessons developed their leadership and teamwork skills. This feedback is paralleled in Romanowski's study, which also indicates a lack of student engagement in a curriculum focusing solely on the instruction or discussion of character traits (in DeVitis ed., 2011). The final focus group data demonstrates a general consensus amongst the student teachers that student-led Character lessons were more

engaging. Students commented that the 'old lessons were just a bit useless', whereas now 'this was actually something you wanted to (do)'.

Here student engagement is defined as 'intellectual, emotional, behavioural, physical and social' (Great Schools Partnership, 2016). One example of heightened engagement in student-led lessons was Group 1's debate on gang violence. The intellectual and emotional excitement of the student teachers influenced other students, with Student 1A (Male) announcing, 'oo this is going to be a good debate'. Behavioural, emotional and social engagement were evident when all students moved without instruction to sit on the front row of tables to have the best view of the debate.

Moreover, focus group transcripts indicate the increased emotional engagement of other students in this class. Student 1F (Female) observed that after students had seen the first debate 'it inspired them to be passionate about the debates and subjects' and then they 'wanted to keep going'. Other students also commented on the relevance of the debate topic impacting on engagement: drill music, the final topic, directly affected many more people in the class than carrying knives. These findings echo Emdin's argument (2016) that SAT increases student engagement by making the subject feel more relevant. The impact of relevance on engagement with Author 1's class is apparent in research journal entries, with one entry demonstrating how students were 'motivated and engaged by the idea of questions they wanted to ask' after voting to interview family members about their journey to England.

Interviews and observation data also suggest that the PBL method had a positive impact on student engagement. In an interview, Miss Richards commented on the more 'active' participation of class 2 during the project, echoing Terada's findings (2018) that PBL encourages active engagement. This active engagement was evident in many student-led whole class discussions, for example when both classes were deciding which issue to tackle.

However, the data indicates several limitations to engagement in student-led Character lessons. Behavioural engagement was at times limited by a lack of teacher authority. This can

be seen in Student 1F (Female)'s observation that sometimes 'you engage more when it's a teacher, because of the authority they have'. Student 1F (Female)'s observation links to Morrison's reflection on the obstacles faced in democratic classrooms (2008). Morrison differentiates between positive freedom, the 'freedom to work together to overcome obstacles', and negative freedom, 'freedom from rules' (2008, 56). She states that when students are used to the school rules, they risk seeing democratic freedom as negative freedom only, using freer lessons as an excuse to misbehave. This is not highly evident in the data, however can be noted during Group 2's second lesson, when the boys were disengaged and off-task. The focus group reflected afterwards that other students 'didn't take it seriously'. Conversations with Miss Richards and a comparison with Class 1's data suggest that the lack of male student teachers and group cohesion impacted negatively on behavioural engagement in Class 2.

Overall, the data suggests that student-led project-based lessons were most conducive to heightened engagement when topics were relevant. As Student 1A (Male) said, these lessons were 'more intriguing' for the students and active participation could be witnessed.

Students speaking out

The analysis of focus group data echoes Peruzzi's findings that PBL provides opportunities for students to speak out (2018). After the first lesson with Class 1, Student 1A (Male) reflected that the class 'had so much more to say because they weren't tied down to this one topic or writing'. The pressure of a GCSE-results-focused 'high-stakes accountability' environment can marginalise discussion, favouring direct instruction of content - Student 1A (Male) indicates the benefits of integrating open discussions into the curriculum.

Moreover, the data reflects Peruzzi's findings (2018) that students speak out in PBL lessons as they are actively involved in decision-making. In keeping with student engagement, the relevance of the projects impacted upon the extent to which students spoke out. For example, one normally disruptive student in Class 1 contributed passionately to the final

debate on drill music. In contrast, Student 2A (Female) reflected that students were less keen to speak out in Class 2 because they did not care about the topic of littering.

In terms of PBL limitations, Author 1's research journal entries bring to light how a freer arena can allow dominant personalities to silence others. These entries suggest the importance of structuring open discussion with clear objectives. Author 1 also reflected that 'giving everyone a turn to vote was an effective way of allowing people to speak'. This is echoed in the focus group data, with Student 1C (Male) recognising the importance of 'pushing people to speak' after teaching his first lesson. Students reflected innovatively in this focus group on games that could develop speaking further.

The focus group data also shows that students did speak out more in student-led lessons. For example, Student 1B (Male) reflected that 'people who don't usually talk are speaking'. His conclusion is reflected in Author 1's observations. In the second lesson, the students were surprised to witness a quiet group of girls volunteering to present their homework first, one boy volunteering to present alone and one student with SEN delivering a PowerPoint presentation. Student 1D (Female) stated this transformation was due to the lessons being student-led - 'it's because we're the same age', whereas for Student 1C (Male), it was more due to the 'fun' nature of the lesson.

Limitations of the student-led approach to encouraging students to speak are apparent from one lesson observation of Class 2. During this lesson, in contrast with Class 1, students were reluctant to present in front of the class. Student 2A (Female) reflected that people spoke out less because the aims of the lesson were less clear. Author 1 reflected that the students needed 'more resources' and 'more support' in order to be able to effectively lead the project and encourage students to voice their views.

Overall, the findings of this theme demonstrate that the democratic, active nature of PBL can enable more students to speak out in Character lessons. As Student 1B (Male) stated, 'you can tell they felt more free'.

Community-mindedness

Analysis of the focus group and observation data demonstrates the benefits of SAT in encouraging community-mindedness. For example, when Class 1 discussed knife crime, the students were able to come up with solutions independently. Student 1D (Female) reflected openly that it was up to the students to 'speak to their siblings to try and convince them otherwise, or refer them to youth groups'. Class 2 similarly thought of a range of ideas on social issues and how to solve them. Their growing community-mindedness was reflected in the final lesson, in which students thought critically about how to solve the problem of littering.

A comparison with the research journal entries brings to light the resistance that can emerge when this kind of discussion is led by a teacher 'outsider'. One entry evokes the frustration Author 1 felt after the first lesson when vocal, disengaged students challenged ideas that Author 1 had raised about the local community. For example, on the topic of food banks, they retorted that the mum in the video 'should've worked harder at school'. Author 1 reflected on the difficulties, 'for me, as someone not from the community, to talk about how we can help the community'. Author 1 went on to write that 'this reinforced my view that it had to come from them, but how?'

Moreover, the student teachers were better able to rebut expressions of disenfranchisement. In the second lesson with Class 1, one student called out 'we can't do anything, it's the government who has to do something', to which Student 1F (Female) responded 'we might not have the power to make certain decisions but we can influence the decisions'. The student seemed convinced by this, whilst Author 1's class continued to resist her reiterations that they could bring about change.

Lesson observations and focus groups also brought to light how the student teachers developed a sense of community-mindedness towards their peers. For example, one student teacher, who had previously been excluded for violence, shared a thought-provoking film on

the dangers of gang violence. This caring spirit could also be seen in the focus group discussion on how to encourage quieter students to speak out, echoing Morrison's (2008) argument that trusting students increases responsibility.

An analysis of later journal entries shows how an integration of student-led activities more effectively encouraged community-mindedness with year 9. When Author 1 asked two students to lead the discussion on interviewing family members, the class 'were sensitive to what their parents would have to say and keen to interview them'. After the lesson, one quiet boy talked of his surprise that 'for once the class agreed on something'. With this class, however, it remained a challenge to guide them away from thinking about school-focused problems.

Overall, whilst students felt comfortable talking about issues facing the community, they were less confident in devising community-focused solutions, preferring to remain in their comfort zone of making posters or writing letters. Whilst the projects did promote community-mindedness, this was limited in relation to bringing about community-based solutions.

Student empowerment

The focus groups and lesson observations demonstrate that leading the lessons was an empowering process. Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014) define empowerment through three different concepts of power: 'power with' (collective transformational power), 'power to' (individual power) and 'power within' (the capacity to imagine and have hope).

Firstly, focus group data demonstrates how the student teachers developed their 'power within'. For example, when Author 1 asked students in the final focus group if they felt more able to change society, Student 2C (Female) replied 'we've done it before in school so we can do it outside of school as well'. Moreover, students became increasingly aware of the importance of action, as demonstrated by Student 2A (Female)'s reflection that 'talking

about bullying and going out and helping someone are two different things'. The empowering aspect of SAT or 'coteaching' for the student teachers is echoed in Emdin's research (2016).

Moreover, the student teachers developed their sense of 'power with' over the course of the lessons, beginning to empower their peers. Reflecting on the challenges of overcoming the divisions in Class 2, Student 2D (Female) stated that the group of student teachers needed to start by 'believing in our students and our class'. This statement shows Student 2D (Female) taking on the role of empowering others. An example of this in the classroom was Student 1F (Female)'s action-focused response to a classmate's point: 'that's good, but what can we do?'

The impact of students empowering other students is evoked in the observation of Class 1's homework presentations on gang violence. During one student's presentation, Author 1 remarked that he echoed the techniques of his peers by asking the class questions about what to do to prevent the rise of gang violence. The focus group data brings to light how the student teachers transitioned from initially directing their comments to Author 1, saying 'I think you could', to reflecting on how they could act as a collective: 'I think we could'. This transition suggests that the focus groups themselves were empowering for students, echoing Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014)'s findings that reflection in action research helps individuals to affirm and recognise their 'power to' and 'power within'.

The element of choice in the PBL method also helped develop 'power to' and 'power with' in all classes. This was suggested by Miss Richards in our informal interview when she commented that students were taking more 'accountability', rather than being passive. However Miss Richards also expressed regret that the student actions were not able to flourish at the end of the projects, stating that students needed the opportunity to 'act'. We envisaged that, with more time, the projects could have developed into whole school initiatives, such as assemblies on gang violence, or a litter-picking drive.

Furthermore, the focus group data shows the challenges of instilling 'power to' in such a short space of time. Student 1F (Female) reflected at the end:

"Obviously if you're passionate about it now, that can continue till when you're older, and when you're older you can make more of a difference, because you have money, there's more things that you can do. However I don't think one person can change everything…"

Student 1F (Female) recognised the importance of student action, but she remained cynical about its limitations. Journal entries also evoked the challenges for Author 1 to empower the Year 9s, especially at the end of term. Whilst the democratic PBL approach helped harness motivation, in the last lesson they were not empowered to act, with one student stating, 'I'm too tired I don't want to do it'.

Overall, this case study demonstrates the potential of student-led community-focused project-based Character lessons to empower students. Group 1's second focus group illuminated this potential. In the eyes of the students, working on a community project allows you to see 'how your thinking, your ideas, affect someone else'. This project alone did not succeed in wholly transforming students' sense of 'power to'. Yet, as Student 2A (Female) said, 'that's something Character could change, (like) us not being able to do anything'.

Student Teachers vs. Teachers

Lesson observation and focus group data bring to light the innovative ideas of the students, for example a 'random debate' tournament at the end of Group 1's debate lesson. In both classes, the student teachers adopted a student-led approach to teaching, with table or pair discussions then feeding back to the class. As the student teachers grew in confidence, they also embedded other teaching techniques, with Student 1E (Female) asking students to 'elaborate on your point' and Student 2D (Female) praising student achievements to encourage others ('you're on point!'). As they circulated the rooms in both classes, the quantity of student teachers compared to one lone teacher meant that they could interact with

most tables, giving students sentence starters when they were struggling and building analytical skills.

Furthermore, the students were insightful in their reflections on ways to improve teaching and learning. For example, after the debate lesson, Group 1 agreed that they should avoid giving students the answers, instead aiming to 'inspire' and prompt, like a parent teaching a child to 'ride a bike' then 'letting go'. Similarly Group 2 reflected on how to improve their timings, suggesting that they would benefit from putting a timer on their PowerPoint.

From observations of student-led lessons, it became clear that students generally listened well to their student-teacher peers. Indeed, the evaluation brought to light that this approach can encourage better peer-to-peer listening. For example, it was unusual to observe the whole class listening in silence for half an hour at Parsley Academy, however during Class 1's homework presentations students were not only actively listening but also applauding, creating a supportive atmosphere that in turn encouraged others to speak out.

Moreover, the lesson observations showed that attentive listening by student teachers can encourage active peer-to-peer listening. In the focus groups, the student teachers commented on how they enjoyed the opportunity to listen to their peers when circulating the room. Student 2B (Female) remarked that she really enjoyed 'getting to know people' and 'getting to know their ideas'. In contrast, some lesson observations demonstrate that when student teachers stopped listening to each other, their peers stopped listening too. Student teachers act as role models to their peers, therefore if they listen well this can have a ripple effect, without the need for rewards or sanctions on which teachers sometimes rely.

There are, however, limitations to a project-based Character curriculum being student-led. Lesson observations and focus groups bring to light certain moments when a lack of control infringed on learning in student-led lessons. Group 2 expressed frustration about students who were 'just shouting out'. Behaviour management training for student teachers,

alongside training for supporting staff in facilitating SAT, could help empower student teachers to manage classroom behaviour and establish clear ground rules.

More pertinent when considering the design of the Character curriculum is the issue of planning. In the focus groups, students reflected honestly that they were sometimes 'winging it' and had not 'pre-planned'. As discussed, their ability to improvise on the spot sometimes made for more engaging lessons. Yet an analysis of lesson observations as a collective suggests that when Author 1 provided the student teachers with more resources, the lessons were generally more successful. For example, the students reflected in the focus group that a prompt sheet 'helps us a lot'.

Conclusions

Although small-scale, the evaluation of this project indicates a number of potential affordances which can occur when Character lessons are taught using both SAT and PBL. These include: an increase in student engagement, especially when topics are relevant to the majority of the class; active listening; and the development of student voice, particularly in relation to problem-solving and community-mindedness, which leads to empowerment. The potential for this community-mindedness to affect change was not harnessed, however, and remains an area to be developed as a result of this project. There is also evidence to suggest that students' reflections on teaching and learning both enhance the curriculum and develop student voice.

In order to maximise the potential for Character lessons to promote student voice, we would recommend that:

1. Oracy training, inside or outside the Character curriculum, would support the development of student voice in these lessons by helping all students articulate their views (Mercer, 2014);

2. This approach to Character / PSHE education must be combined with a wider push for meaningful whole-school student voice integration, supported by relevant teacher training;

3. Projects must be embedded within an empowering wider school culture that values making connections with the local community, to ensure action becomes real.

As Character begins to take hold in the UK, it is also important for schools to be aware of the debate surrounding value-based instruction in the United States, which has shown the indoctrination approach to be ineffective. This evaluation has indicated that progressive Character lessons which utilise SAT and PBL have the potential to be more empowering and engaging for our students. Within a PSHE or Character framework, a space should be preserved for projects to occur that allow student voice to develop. As alluded to at the start of this paper, Hoyle and Wallace (2007), Earley and Greany (2017) and many others point to the challenges for school leaders in the midst of the 'accountability movement' (2007, 9). Within this current climate of 'externally imposed demands' (Ritzer, 2000), PSHE, Character and student voice can fall by the wayside, or even become externally measurable targets (DeVitis ed., 2011). Yet if school leaders truly want to empower their students, they must preserve a space aside from knowledge-acquisition that allows students to work together, connect with the community and develop their communication skills, resilience and critical awareness through project-based actions. To be successful, this approach should be one part of a wider school culture that supports extra-curricular activities, student-led actions, student voice and connections with the local community. In the UK, for example, this approach could contribute towards the government's vision of students volunteering in their local communities (DfE, 2019b).

To conclude, in a context where Character Education is regaining ground, the findings of this research project have some implications for policy makers, curriculum leaders and researchers. Policy makers need to consider the feelings of disempowerment amongst young people in disenfranchised communities. Developing student voice is integral to addressing this, and Character / PSHE lessons provide a space to do so. Curriculum leaders should integrate a student-led project-based approach to Character Education to develop student

voice, within an empowering wider school culture. Finally, researchers should further explore ways in which approaches like SAT and PBL in Character lessons can develop empowering whole-school cultures that nurture student voice. Specifically, it would be beneficial to trial and analyse how targeted staff and student training programmes, as well as a longer-term approach to fostering community links, may impact on the effectiveness of the student-led projects.

Acknowledgements

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