Developing character skills in schools

Summary report

August 2017

NatCen Social Research & the National Children's Bureau Research and Policy Team

Contents

The research

This report provides a summary of the key findings from the Department for Education (DfE) research into the provision of character education in schools. The DfE commissioned this research to understand how schools in England currently develop desirable character traits among their pupils, and to explore their experiences of this. The production of robust national estimates and a qualitative understanding of provision provides the evidence base for future policy and research.

The research included a national survey of provision and case studies exploring decision-making, models of delivery and experiences of different approaches to developing character, followed by a workshop to consolidate learning from the research.

This report summarises part of a wider, mixed methods project exploring mental health and character education provision in schools and colleges across England.

Policy context

There has been growing interest in character education over the last decade. There has been increasing recognition of the role that certain character traits or attributes such as resilience, self-regulation, and emotional and social skills can play in enabling children and young people to achieve positive health, education, employment and other outcomes[1][2][3].

The DfE understands character education to include any activities that aim to develop desirable character traits or attributes in children and young people. The DfE believe that such desirable character traits:

- Can support improved academic attainment;
- Are valued by employers; and
- Can enable children to make a positive contribution to British society.

---

[1] Morrison Gutman, L. and Schoon, I. (2013) *The Impact of non-cognitive skills on outcomes for young people* London: EEF and IoE.

[2] Durlak, J., Weissberg, R., Dymnicki, A., Taylor, R. and Schellinger, K. (2011) "The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions" *Child Development* 82(1): 405-432.

[3] Arthur, J. and O'Shaugnessy, J. (2014) Character and Attainment: Does Character Education make the grade? Birmingham: Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues.

Accordingly, since 2014, the Department has announced a number of investments into character education, including funding for provision and research into effective practice.

Research aims

A significant, multidisciplinary field of theory and research is emerging around how best to conceptualise character education[4], identify what works in influencing children's character development[5,6], and explore the relationship between these traits or attributes and academic and other life outcomes[1,2,7]. The DfE commissioned this research to understand how schools in England currently develop desirable character traits among their pupils, and to explore their experiences of this. They intend for this evidence to provide a basis for future policy and research.

The aims of the project were to provide

1. **Robust national estimates** on the **activities and support** provided by schools to support character education;

2. **Qualitative evidence** to explore different approaches to and experiences of developing character traits; and

3. Examples of **specific activities** that schools have found to be **effective**.

Methodology

The research formed part of a mixed methods project investigating mental health and character education provision in schools and colleges in England through a quantitative survey and qualitative case studies.

The survey of character education provision was conducted in the final term of the academic year, 2015-16 (8th June to 1st August 2016). The primary aim of the survey was to gain a representative profile of provision within schools and other educational institutions, as well as providing an understanding of the issues that institutions face in

---

[4] Jubilee Centre (2017, revised) *A Framework for Character Education in Schools* Birmingham: University of Birmingham.

[5] Berkowitz, M. and Bier,M. (2006) *What Works in Character Education: A Research driven Guide for Educators*. Washington, DC: Character Education Partnership.

[6] Early Intervention Foundation and Education Endowment Foundation (2015) Introductory presentation at EEF and EIF *Resilience, Character and Social and Emotional Skills – where next for Education Policy* event, London, 22 October.

[7] Arthur, J., Kristjansson, K., Walker, D., Sanderse, W. and Jones, C. (2014) *Character Education in UK Schools* Birmingham: University of Birmingham.

delivering character education. This is the first time that a robust nationally representative survey based on a stratified random sample of schools has been carried out to assess the provision of character education[8]. Overall, 880 schools completed the character education survey[9] (see Table 1 below). The majority of participants were senior leaders: head teachers or other members of the senior leadership team, meaning that the findings generally reflect the viewpoints of these staff. It was beyond the scope of the survey reflect the judgements of a range of other staff members within the same institutions.

Table 1 Total achieved sample[10]

Institution type	Population	Issued	Achieved	Response Rate
Primary local authority	13,561	2,640	316	12.0%
Primary academy	3,056	667	94	14.1%
Secondary local authority	1,071	970	87	9.0%
Secondary academy	2,076	667	95	14.2%
Independent school	1,861	666	64	9.5%
Special school	1,545	666	137	20.6%
Alternative provision & pupil referral unit	339	291	87	29.9%
Overall Total	**23,855**	**6,567**	**880**	**13.4%**

In order to extend learning from the survey, 11 case studies were conducted in a cross section of mainstream schools, special schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) between September and December 2016. The case study sample was drawn from the sample of schools that had completed the survey, and was purposively selected to focus on mainstream primary and secondary schools that were more actively engaged in provision aimed at developing pupils' character traits. Two special schools and two PRUs were included in the sample to provide transferable learning about more specialist practice[11].

The case studies were followed by a workshop held at the DfE in January 2017. Participants from case study sites were invited to take part in the workshop to consolidate

---

[8] More detail on the quantitative sampling approach is provided in the full report - Marshall, L; Rooney, K; Dunatchik, A; and Smith, N. (2017) *Developing character skills in schools: Qualitative case studies*

[9] Though weighting can eliminate some element of non-response bias, it is important to recognise that schools with more active programmes may have been more inclined to agree to participate.

[10] Independent schools, special schools and alternative provision/PRUs are not reported by phase as the majority of these institutions operate on a combined basis across both primary and secondary phases.

[11] More detail on the qualitative sampling approach is provided in the full report - White, C; Gibb, J; Lea, J; and Street, C. (2017) *Developing character skills in schools: Qualitative case studies.*

learning and further develop practice recommendations and conclusions from the research.

Key findings

How do schools understand their role in character education?

Almost all (97%) schools sought to promote desirable character traits among their students, although fewer (54%) were familiar with the term 'character education' prior to being approached to take part in the research.

In line with this, case study participants did not naturally use the term '*character education*'. However, when prompted, they equated the term with support for pupils' (personal) development as well-rounded individuals[12]. The development of character was seen to be embedded in the school and integral to its overarching aims and purpose, rather than a stand-alone set of lessons or activities. Case study settings viewed their role as being to:

- Encourage pupils to **understand**, **value** and **demonstrate** the positive behaviour traits that would make them well-rounded, grounded citizens;

- Support the development of the **skills** required to function in and contribute to society;

- Support social and emotional development, in order for pupils to better **understand themselves** and work on their weaknesses; and

- Instil pupils with a **moral compass** and skills in understanding and interacting with other people.

What motivates schools to seek to develop positive character traits?

Schools primarily aimed to develop character in order to promote good citizenship (97%) and academic attainment (84%). Across all school types, the character traits most highly prioritised were honesty, integrity and respect for others (a high priority for 94% of schools). Less importance was placed on curiosity, problem-solving and motivation, although these traits were still a high priority for more than two-thirds (68%) of schools.

---

[12] During the case study research participants were asked about developing character traits and attributes but these were not terms or concepts respondents used. Therefore, the term "developing character" was used to describe the holistic approach undertaken by schools and colleges.

Beyond these key objectives, the aims of character education varied across different types of institutions. For instance, secondary schools were more likely than primary schools to link character education to employability (86% vs. 46%). In addition, special schools and alternative provision (including PRUs) were less likely to focus on improved academic attainment, and were more likely to report supporting the development of certain character traits for reasons other than improving academic performance, employability or citizenship.

Priorities also differed according to:

- **The needs of pupils**. Case study PRUs and special schools particularly emphasised the importance of resilience, self-esteem and self-regulation in enabling their pupils to overcome barriers to learning. Schools in deprived areas underlined their responsibility to nurture positivity and self-belief around achievement and combat low aspirations.

- **The religious values of the school**. Faith schools drew upon their heritage and identity to identify particular traits of importance, and to assert the centrality of character development to their purpose as a school.

- **Relevant policy, research, theory and practice**. School approaches had also been influenced and driven by previous government agendas (e.g. British values[13]); and theory, in particular values-based education, the Growth Mindset approach and strengths-based approaches.

What activities and approaches do schools use to develop positive character traits?

Most schools used school-wide, cross-curricular approaches to develop character. Almost all (97%) had a mission statement or set of core values intended to contribute to character education, and assemblies (92%) and subject lessons (89%) were both used to develop desirable character traits among pupils by the vast majority of schools. A significant minority (41%) of schools offered distinct character education lessons. In addition, almost all (97%) schools used extra-curricular activities to develop character traits. Sports and/or performance arts clubs (91%), outward bound activities (72%), hobby clubs (71%) and subject learning clubs (60%) were each used to develop character by a majority of schools. In the state sector, secondary schools were on average more likely than primary schools to use extracurricular activities as a means of developing desirable character traits. In particular, secondary schools were significantly more likely to use subject learning clubs (87% vs. 57%), role model sessions (80% vs.

---

[13] DfE (2014) 'Promoting fundamental British values as part of SMSC in schools: Departmental advice for maintained schools'.

39%) and volunteering or social action opportunities (76% vs. 35%) to develop desirable character traits among pupils.

The qualitative research found that, in case study settings with high level of provision, key messages and values were promoted and reiterated at different levels in order to embed character education across the life of the school. Assemblies, tutor time, PSHE[14] lessons, SMSC[15] and extra-curricular activities were all cited as opportunities to '*drip feed'* the desired messages to students and encourage them to reflect upon, develop and demonstrate character traits. Staff-student relationships were also seen as key, with staff modelling desired traits and being approachable and engaging to encourage students to be open with them and take on board their advice.

What institutional processes are in place to support character education?

Just fewer than one in six (17%) schools had a formalised plan or policy in place for character education. Nevertheless, the qualitative follow-up found that schools without formalised policies were able to point to other documents that evidenced their approaches to developing certain character traits.

A quarter (25%) of schools had a dedicated lead for character education. The case study research found that it was typically head or deputy head teachers or other senior leadership team members that headed up schools' approaches to developing particular character traits, often recruiting a small team with relevant skills to support them in developing and delivering the provision across the school.

In addition to these dedicated staff, heads emphasised the importance of encouraging all staff to take responsibility for developing pupils' character traits or attributes. While these schools were selected because of their high level of commitment to character education, the survey found that a significant minority (43%) of schools offered all staff members training relating to the development of character traits among pupils.

Analysis of survey findings found that the significant minority of schools undertaking highly visible, planned, reflective and specific approaches to character education (including dedicated staffing and explicit character education plans and policies) were most likely to make use of a range of activities to develop character traits and attributes.

---

[14] Personal, Social, Health and Economic
[15] Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development

What challenges do schools face?

The biggest barriers for schools seeking to provide character education centred around competing demands on staff time and capacity. The qualitative research found that the school-wide nature of character education made staff capacity particularly important for successful delivery. Staff time was not only needed to deliver specific provision, but also to ensure that key aims and messages were embedded across the curriculum, and understood and committed to by all staff. Competing time pressures were reported to largely come from the introduction of new curriculum specifications and pressures such as performance-related pay and inspection requirements that encouraged schools to focus on academic subjects and results. Allocating staff time to deliver character education, sharing ideas and resources amongst staff, and having a culture where staff felt valued themselves and could understand the benefit of character education were identified as essential in overcoming this staff capacity as a barrier.

Although other challenges and barriers such as a lack of engagement from pupils or parents and a lack of knowledge or information were reported in the survey, these were only experienced by the minority of schools. The case study research uncovered other challenges and barriers to provision, notably a lack of funding for extra-curricular provision and difficulties in measuring pupils' character development and thus demonstrating the value of provision.

What do schools think is key to success?

Successful character education was felt to depend on **a clear vision and whole school approach embedded across the curriculum**. It needed to be driven forward by **strong leadership**, and delivered and modelled by staff with the appropriate skills, time and access to activities that could be tailored appropriately to the needs of students.

School staff felt that recognition needs to be given to the importance of developing character in pupils. **Resources and skills** are required to support practice in developing character, alongside other requirements for academic success. Teachers needed to be **encouraged, developed and supported** with activities to develop character traits in their pupils.

In addition, participants felt that the **government and wider sector** could helpfully support schools by:

- Investing in teachers' time and capacity to focus on developing pupils' character traits and attributes

- Creating a database of organisations providing guidance, resources and tools for developing character, and a network for schools to discuss and share practice

- Developing a menu or bank of tools and activities that have been proven to work

- Providing tips on how to monitor pupils' character development and the impact of provision

Conclusions

This research aimed to investigate what schools in England currently do to develop character traits and attributes among their pupils, and their experiences of putting this provision into place.

Overall, the study found a strong commitment to character education in schools across England. Schools highlighted the pivotal role they play in providing character education and understood it to be integral to schools' overarching aims and purpose.

The development of desirable character traits was seen to enable children and young people to become well rounded individuals capable of reaching their potential both personally and academically. However, the specific aims of character education differed according to the needs and circumstances of pupils.

Almost all schools sought to promote the development of desirable character traits. Most schools used a range of school-wide, day-to-day activities to develop these traits or attributes, including curricular and extra-curricular provision.

Few schools reported a lack of priority for character education. However, a lack of time and capacity was identified as a key constraint. Key facilitators were a shared vision and strong leadership for character education. Schools reporting highly visible, planned, reflective and specific approaches for character education were more likely to offer a range of provision.

Though this research identified some factors that schools felt were key to success, it did not attempt to capture the quality or effectiveness of current provision. The DfE intend for this work to provide a foundation for further investigation, including research into effective practice and gaps in provision.

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at: catherine.newsome@education.gov.uk or www.education.gov.uk/contactus

This document is available for download at www.gov.uk/government/publications