

Emerging Practice Guide

Leading Character Education in Schools



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Leading Character Education in Schools: Emerging Practice Guide

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Introduction

This document presents five key features of the effective leadership of character education. These features were identified following visits to five schools which are all past winners of the Department for Education's (DfE) Character Award – an award scheme designed to act as 'a gold standard as to what works in character education' (Morgan, 2016). Commissioned by ASCL and Pearson, and undertaken by a team from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), the research project aimed to address a gap we identified in the evidence base relating to the leadership and management of character education in schools. As a small-scale qualitative study, it was designed to provide the school sector with practical insights and illustrations rather than robust systematic evidence of the impact of different approaches to leading character education. This report forms part of a suite of outputs which includes a bibliography of recent research, reports and resources about character education and a case-study report which presents first-hand accounts of how character education is being led and delivered in a range of primary and secondary schools in England. We hope that by presenting the experiences of recognised leaders in the field of character education, other school leaders and teachers will find ideas and inspiration for developing their own approaches.

What is character education?

Character education or character instruction, as it was referred to by one of the case-study schools, is a debated term. Although there is no universally accepted definition, character education can be broadly described as an approach to developing a set of values, attitudes, skills and behaviours that are thought to support young people's development and contribute to their success in school and in adult life. These qualities include respect, leadership, motivation, resilience, self-control, self-confidence, social and emotional skills, and communication skills (Education Endowment Foundation, 2016). Interestingly, none of our case-study schools set out to deliver 'character education'. However, all of the case-study schools had adopted a whole-school approach to creating a positive school ethos and learning environment considered to help develop young people's character. They also shared a common belief that this would provide the foundations for strong academic achievement and prepare young people for the future.

How to lead character education effectively

We have identified five key features of the effective leadership of character education, as identified from across our five case-study schools. These are set out below together with specific examples to help illustrate each point.

Feature 1: Senior leaders must drive it (but all teachers must deliver it)

Senior leaders are the driving force behind the leadership of character education. They drive it in three main ways, by:

1. Highlighting the importance of character education as being central to the culture, values and vision of the school;
2. Taking a whole-school approach to developing the character of pupils; and

3. Exemplifying and communicating positive character traits themselves in the way they interact with governors, colleagues, pupils and parents.

Senior leaders also give pupils meaningful opportunities to share their experiences, perspectives, insights and views as part of an ongoing dialogue with staff about how well the school is performing.

Heads of department, heads of year and curriculum leaders are instrumental in maintaining the visibility of character education and leading its provision. All teachers and support staff are responsible for delivering character development in lessons and other learning activities. Implementation is often tailored to specific classes or year groups, with staff given varying degrees of autonomy for how to implement character education within their own classes and through extra-curricular activities.

CASE-STUDY EXAMPLE 1: At the Co-operative Academy of Stoke on Trent, work had already started to develop their character education offer prior to the principal joining. However, since taking up his post, the academy's character education work has been driven forward and expanded by him. This has involved the principal taking the 'hard decision' to reduce the lesson time on a Wednesday from 60 to 50 minutes. This has created a sixth period in the school day in which the academy delivers 'The Edge', an enrichment programme for Key Stage 3 pupils. Day-to-day leadership of the academy's character education work is devolved to different staff, while staff from different subject areas deliver it. This distributed approach to the leadership and delivery of character education has meant that the academy has benefited from drawing on the enthusiasm, creativity and diverse skills of the academy's staff, which in turn has helped to ensure that there is widespread staff buy in and support.

Feature 2: Place at the core of school ethos

Character education forms a key element of the ethos of each of our case-study schools. This means that developing pupils' character is essential to the schools' values, culture and purpose and, therefore, is not an optional, 'nice-to-have' or marginal part of the education the schools provide. Both staff and pupils exemplify and apply shared values such as respect and tolerance in their daily life in school. Placed at the core of the school's ethos, character education permeates all aspects of what the school does and how it operates. It is enshrined in the school's principles, policies, planning (e.g. school development/improvement plan), pedagogy and practice.

CASE-STUDY EXAMPLE 2: At Sweyne Park School in Essex the headteacher ensures that character education is at the core of the school's ethos and strategic vision. The school takes an holistic approach to growing and developing the whole pupil. Respect is integral to teaching and learning, pastoral provision and behaviour policy. This whole-school focus on respect is driven by a culture of developing pupils as tolerant, confident, independent-thinking and successful learners. The school has set up a Rights Respecting Group which represents pupils from each year group. It has been working to make sure that everyone associated with the school, staff and parents included, knows about the rights children have and respects them. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has recognised the school's progress with the Recognition of Commitment Award which acknowledges how far the rights of children are embedded in the curriculum and school life.

Feature 3: Take a long-term approach

Senior leaders told us that developing or transforming an institutional culture underpinned with shared values and principles is an incremental process. It benefits from the time and effort invested in building a sustainable learning community which is both robust in its expectations of behaviour and responsive to changing requirements and needs. Effective leadership of character education thus entails taking a long-term approach (based on the evidence from five case-study schools, this is typically five years or more). This appears to be the time it takes to infuse agreed values and principles into all aspects of school life. This journey of development and application is often linked to the school's strategy to improve its reputation, pupil enrolment, learning environment, standards of behaviour, pastoral support, academic performance and wider achievement, and standing in the local community. Gaining pupils' experiences and views on a regular basis provides valuable feedback on the extent to which the school's learning community is conducive to nurturing particular values and traits which pupils consider useful for their current and future learning and development.

CASE-STUDY EXAMPLE 3: Thoresby

Primary School in Hull started their journey into character education in 2008. At that time, they had a particular interest in how to teach mathematics in an enterprising way. To support this, the school joined Rotherham Ready, an internationally recognised education programme designed to transform the aspirations and skills of children and young people by developing their enterprise skills. The programme introduced the school to 'The Big 13 skills': a set of transferable, practical 'real life' skills and qualities that young people need to face the future with confidence. Since then, the school's work has evolved through staff discussions and participation in an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) research project. The school has taken a long-term research-informed approach to developing a positive school ethos which is underpinned by a moral purpose and the belief that character is the most important quality that defines the way people live their lives.

Feature 4: Build a collective understanding and language

Achieving a shared understanding of what character education is and agreeing on character qualities and skills and understanding their meaning are key to developing a whole-school approach. This involves the school community developing a common language to communicate the meaning of key concepts such as 'character', 'values', 'principles' and 'traits'. This collective learning is indispensable for ensuring that character development is integral to the education provided by the school. A common language and shared understanding facilitates communication between staff, between pupils and staff, and between pupils and pupils which is required for putting into action meaningful character development.

CASE-STUDY EXAMPLE 4: Archibald Primary School in Middlesbrough instils in its pupils the belief that everyone can achieve, regardless of their background. They do this by delivering three strands of activity:

- 1) "Golden Rules" - behaviours that are promoted within school;
- 2) "MAGIC" an acrostic for traits that pupils are encouraged to develop and demonstrate, including motivation and attitude;
- and 3) "LORIC" - an approach which uses characters to encourage pupils to develop specific attributes. These three approaches are connected by a common language which is used in every day interactions between pupils and between staff and pupils. This language is also shared with parents as part of weekly celebration assemblies, allowing staff, parents and pupils to contextualise and discuss character development.

Feature 5: Maintain focus, momentum and ongoing communication

The effective leadership of character education is a continuing process which involves retaining a focus on what it is, why it is important and what it aims to achieve. A key related leadership task is maintaining the momentum for sustaining a whole-school approach to providing a learning environment and activities which help to develop young people's character. Communicating the institutional message about character development is part of this process. These actions help to keep and reinforce character as a priority and reduce the likelihood of decline in delivery. Schools can maintain focus and momentum by ensuring delivery of appropriate learning opportunities and updating character development messages communicated through school council meetings, assemblies, newsletters, lessons, staff briefings and continuing professional development.

CASE-STUDY EXAMPLE 5: At Kings Langley School in Hertfordshire the School Leadership Team work on the understanding that the momentum to develop character has to be regularly examined and refreshed to ensure that there is no slippage in the school's drive to provide an education which embraces three main character traits: 'stickability', self-regulation and empathy. All the school's policies refer to character education. The school's vision for character education is communicated in posters placed around the school, letters to parents and use of social media. Pupils are continually exposed to the school's core values and character development themes in school assemblies, in lessons and in extra-curricular activities. Character development is also the focus of the three staff briefing sessions every week. In these, staff share examples of how they write character development into lessons, how they contextualise it in their subjects and make it explicit in their schemes of work.

References

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