WHAT IS CHARACTER EDUCATION?

Factsheet 1
What is character education?

There is increasing interest in character and the role a school, college, university, youth group or sports club plays in shaping a young person’s character. Many of these organisations recognise that this is a part of their role and, to varying degrees, have a set of principles or expectations as to the behaviours and attitudes they would like to develop. Character education however implies a more deliberate approach - a conscious decision to develop certain virtues, behaviours and attitudes and a plan as to how this will be achieved.

“character education ... is an umbrella term for explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people develop personal strengths that we call virtues.”

Tom Harrison, Birmingham University

What isn’t character education?

Current theories around character education stress that it is not about indoctrination; the aim is not to teach someone to fully accept a particular set of beliefs or ideas or to prevent young people from considering other ideas. It should not therefore be aligned to a particular political or religious doctrine.

“Character education is the deliberate effort to develop virtues that are good for the individual and good for society.”

Dr Thomas Lickona, Developmental psychologist and Professor of Education at the State University of New York

Where does it come from?

Current theories and practices around character education have evolved from philosophical discourse, psychological research and pedagogical theory. They are also however informed by research related to labour market demands, mental health statistics, educational attainment trends and government policy. One particularly influential psychologist is Carol Dweck, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University in the US.

DWECK’S MINDSET THEORY

A mindset is an established set of beliefs and can be held about virtually anything. What interested Dweck however was the mindset people hold about their own abilities. Her theory states that people with a growth mindset believe their intellectual skills can be developed and improved whereas those with a fixed mindset believe their intelligence cannot be improved. She has carried out a number of studies which she believes demonstrate that a student with a growth mindset will respond more positively to challenges than one with a fixed mindset. Interestingly, she believes this is true whether the students fixed mindset is that they have a high or a low intelligence level.

Dweck also studied how the way in which we praise children and young people can have a significant impact on their motivation and attainment; in short, praising effort can increase motivation and attainment whereas praising intelligence can have the opposite effect. See the link below for a visual summary of her study on praise.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWv1VdDeoRY

“Most importantly, character is the foundation for improved attainment, better behaviour, and increased employability. Research has demonstrated that it results in improved academic achievement and a series of pro-social behaviours, such as cooperation, respect, and compassion. Character empowers students and is liberating. And it promotes democratic citizenship.”

Professor James Arthur, Birmingham University

Why teach it?

The increasing attention and practice of character education has led to an increasing body of research into its potential benefits:

- Parents support it
- It builds positive relationships
- It improves attainment
- It improves behaviour
- It increases employability
- It promotes democratic citizenship
- It is good for the individual
- It is good for society

“Students can be taught that their intellectual skills are things that can be cultivated – through their hard work, reading, education, confronting of challenges, etc. When they are taught this, they seem naturally to become more eager for challenges, harder working, and more able to cope with obstacles.”

Dr Carol Dweck, Stanford University

Shaping Characters is a European funded project under the Erasmus+ programme which aims to develop and embed approaches to character education in schools and youth groups to benefit young people.

It brings together local authorities, schools, career services and youth groups from Basingstoke in the UK, Gävle in Sweden, Riga in Latvia and Olomouc in the Czech Republic.
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Theories of resilience

Resilience is about how we deal with the adversity we all face at various times in our life. Resilient people are able to work through the difficulties they face, learn something from them, become stronger and better able to cope the next time they face adversity. Educators and employers often cite resilience as a key desirable attribute in young people but, at the same time, report that this is missing in many young people they teach or interview for jobs.

There has been much psychological research carried out around why some people are more resilient than others.

This has generally focused on 3 questions:
1. what is in the environment that can cause people to be less resilient?
2. what attributes do some people have that make them more resilient?
3. what process do people go through to overcome rather than be broken by adversity?

The research draws upon our understanding of how the brain works when faced with a perceived threat and the knowledge that our brain reacts in the same way whether this threat is emotional or physical by preparing the body for fight or flight.

This research has led to models of how to teach resilience in young people. These can be based around increasing young people’s awareness of themselves by helping them to recognise the physical, emotional, behavioural and thinking clues which indicate they are under stress. Young people can then be given strategies to deal with stress and encouraged to try out different techniques and importantly, to reflect on what work works for them.

To provide baseline data for the Shaping Characters Erasmus + project, partners from 4 cities carried out research with 13 year olds (102 respondents), 16 year olds (94 respondents), teachers (105 respondents) and youth workers (16 respondents). The questions were informed by Mindset and character education theories and research and aimed to better understand the respondents’ attitudes and potential receptiveness to character education programmes.

We found that the majority of the young people surveyed were concerned about their future and hated to make mistakes. They largely agreed that they were responsible for their own behaviour, agreed that good character can be taught and did not feel their future was largely determined by luck.

Among the teachers and youth workers surveyed we generally found high levels of confidence in their skills as role models, their ability to make positive changes in the lives of young people and in discussing moral issues with them. There was a clear commitment to developing character across the cities and 64% of the teachers responded that character education either is or could be taught in all subjects. However, a significant number of teachers felt that when a student is exposed to negative influences at home there is little they can do to impact upon that child’s character. Far fewer youth workers shared this view. The majority of youth workers across the countries did not believe that intelligence is fixed. There was however more disparity in the response to this statement among teachers with more choosing undecided and noticeable differences in responses between the countries.

A full report of the results is available at: www.shapingcharacters.eu/

“We are trying to encourage and equip young people with the ability to see adversity and failure as an opportunity to challenge oneself, grow, learn something.”

Michelle Spirit, Spirit Resilience
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Character education in practice

There are a variety of ways in which schools, colleges, universities, youth clubs and sports clubs have implemented character education programmes. A few are listed below and the following case study provides an example of the whole school approach. Further examples and case studies will be presented in subsequent factsheets and made available on our website as the project progresses www.shapingcharacters.eu/

- Whole school approach - embedding character development into everything a school does
- Taught courses in specific classroom lessons or via informal youth settings
- Embedding character development into the way the curriculum is taught
- Extra curricula character building activities
- Schools/colleges/universities working with local businesses to develop and deliver programmes
- Creating and implementing a guiding sports philosophy that promotes core values
- Employability activities which bring employers and young people together

The ‘resources’ section of this factsheet also has links to further information, practical guides, lesson plans, research and further case studies.

CASE STUDY

Schools of Character

In 2002, Kings Langley School in Hertfordshire, UK, was placed in the bottom 3% of maintained schools nationally. Over the following ten years, the school has been utterly transformed and in 2014 was placed in the top 29% in the country.

The school recruited a new Head Teacher, hoping they could turn around a school that was on a downward slope. The new head, Gary Lewis, told governors that it was his intention to transform the school by focusing on the character development of all the students in the school. The character education within the school is based around 3 key character traits: stickability, self-regulation and empathy. Gary believes that “If you don’t truly believe in what you’re doing in terms of character education— developing moral standing, basing everything you do on virtue and the determination to do what’s right for the children, and to enable them to make the best choices going forward— then I’m afraid it’s doomed to failure.” The school leaders, including governors, have to have a shared passion for character education.

Gary stresses the important role the ethos and culture of the school play in developing character alongside what is actually taught in lessons. The on-going development of personal inner strength and constant referring to the fact that we all have to take responsibility for our own actions should be reflected in the classroom wherever there are opportunities. All teachers need to contribute to this ethos.

You can read more about this and 6 other schools in the Jubilee Centre’s publication - “Schools of Character”, which showcases seven UK schools that make character education a conscious part of their day to day practice.

www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/character-education/SchoolsOfCharacterPDF.pdf
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CHARACTER EDUCATION

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at Birmingham University

www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/1610/character-education

Programmes of study for Primary and Secondary level, research, cases studies and publications available to download

Character.org

http://character.org/lessons/
Lesson plans relating to character ogh’s 11 principles of character education

Association of Character Education (ACE)

www.character-education.org.uk/
Run by teachers for teachers, 9 principles defining excellence in character education, resources and Character Matters e-journal

MINDSET

Mindset

mindsetonline.com/whatisit/about/
Information about the theory, an online test and links to relevant articles

Mindset Kit

www.mindsetkit.org
Set of free online lessons and practices to help teach and foster adaptive learning mindsets

RESILIENCE

Resilience

Lesson plans for building resilience in young people produced by the Jubilee Centre

Positive Psychology Resources

www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/pp/overview.php?
Information on resilience in young people and Edith H Grotberg’s model for building childhood resilience

Reach Out

Information, lesson plans and classroom resources

Resilience Research Centre

http://resilienceresearch.org/
Research and international projects including the Child and Youth Resilience Measure

Boing Boing

www.boingboing.org.uk/
Information, research and Resilience Framework
SHAPING CHARACTERS

This is the first in a series of 4 factsheets through which we will share the resources and best practice examples explored during the project. These factsheets and other resources will be added to the project website as they are developed.

www.shapingcharacters.eu