ENGAGING EDUCATORS IN CHARACTER EDUCATION

Factsheet

Erasmus+
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.

The reality of character education in our schools

Throughout this series of factsheets we have looked at the growing body of evidence supporting the need for character education within formal and non-formal education activities. Governments, academics, education and business leaders have all called for character education programmes to be introduced. In this factsheet we look at the issue from the perspective of teachers and youth workers.

A report published by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues in the UK looked at virtues and character in teaching and was drawn from research carried out with 546 teachers and educators.

The report highlights the issues teachers face in teaching virtues; “Teachers reported that they are not always given the time in the workplace to reflect on the best way to practice moral virtues. They confirmed that this is largely due to increasing workloads, a very prescriptive education system and a narrow focus on academic success… Teacher educators stated that teacher training programmes spend very little time reflecting on the teaching of moral virtues.”

Arthur et al, University of Birmingham ‘The Good Teacher - Understanding Virtues in Practice’

However, teachers involved in developing and trialling character education resources for the classroom reported how focussing on a range of key character qualities affected class behaviour and attitudes to learning as well as having a positive impact on the school climate at lunchtime and breaks. Furthermore, they could see how character education could have a long term positive affect on attainment and employment as well as enabling students to flourish.

“Being a teacher is challenging. It is a role that requires stamina, commitment and constant professional development, and yet research suggests that it is the ethical aspects of teaching which keep teachers committed to their work.”

Belogolovsky and Somech, 2010

“Staff will quite rightly only place value in character education when it has an impact on what they see as the purpose of school life. For many this will be around acquisition of knowledge and understanding, for others it will centre on personal and social growth and wellbeing.”

Matt Bawden, 2016 teacher-in-residence at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham
Similarly, research carried out by Demos with 63 key stakeholders (including teachers and school heads, policy-makers, academics and representatives of third sector organisations) highlighted the importance of having the buy-in of teachers if a school intends to focus on character development. “Many of those who worked in schools that adopted an explicit focus on character development spoke about consultation periods with teachers, ensuring that the ethos and language used to describe their approach to character-building was shaped by teachers’ input.” Birdwell, Scott and Reynolds, (2015) character nation - a demos report with the jubilee centre for character and virtues.

One example of this approach in practice can be seen in how a focus on character was introduced to a school in Bedford, UK. The Assistant Headteacher felt that “There was a danger that staff might see character as a gimmick that would take a lot of work but have little impact. We had to make sure that they understood and believed in the approach.” The staff were therefore asked to identify what factors they felt led to their students struggling and to consider character development as possible solutions to some of these problems. “As staff had identified the areas, they were supportive of character from the outset.” Emma Orr, SecEd (2015) Case Study: Developing students’ character

Opportunities for collaboration between youth workers and formal educators

In May 2013 the National Youth Agency in the UK conducted an inquiry into the role of youth work within formal education. In particular they investigated the benefits of schools engaging with youth work agencies and tested their belief that excellent schools actively seek out external agencies.

They gathered evidence through case studies, group sessions and individual interviews and concluded that youth work has a key role to play in helping to promote young people’s personal and social development. They cite a number of examples where partnerships between schools and youth workers have improved attendance and behaviour, promoted achievement and improved home and community links.

In the most effective examples cited by the commission, youth work involvement was an integral part of the school pastoral team and every member of staff involved was clear of their individual roles and how they contributed to a young person’s development. Youth workers were recognised as being uniquely placed to build effective relationships with students and schools identified areas of the school curriculum that youth workers could enhance and established clear lines of accountability and codes of practice.

National Youth Agency Commission into the role of youth work in formal Education (October 2013)

“Successful partnerships are based on a mutual understanding of roles and are found where youth workers are an integral part of the school team… The most forward looking head teachers recognise the value of helping their pupils to develop their soft skills. Similarly, the most forward looking youth workers use their unique skillset to work with schools and deliver high quality programmes that relate to measurable outcomes.”

National Youth Agency Commission into the role of youth work in formal Education (October 2013)
Shaping Characters Research

During a Shaping Characters project visit to Olomouc in the Czech Republic we brought together teachers, youth workers, and other educational professionals from across four European countries to discuss issues around engaging educators in character education. All agreed that teachers and youth workers play a critical role in the formation of young people and that the best exemplify virtues through personal example. The respondents also however said they believed the role of family, friends, society and the media has a greater influence and highlighted the fast changing nature of these influences. They cite the relatively recent explosion in the celebrity status of ‘youtubers’ who reach huge audiences of young people with no regulation or control measures in place as an example.

When looking at practical ways in which teachers and youth workers could be engaged with character education the following suggestions were put forward:

• Involve teachers in developing lesson plans that teach virtues first and subject second. (See case study section of this factsheet for example.)

• Talk to and inspire the teachers with what you want to achieve. Provide examples of success and reassure teachers that building character also improves attainment

• Demonstrate to teachers that parents, school leaders and governors share the same goal and understand what you are doing and why

• Acknowledge the fact that teachers may have felt under pressure to deliver good grades above all else and are worried of letting the school and students down if grades slip

• Set your vision as an organisation - to convince others you need to believe yourself and demonstrate your passion

• Encourage effective dialogue and enable teachers to raise their concerns without fearing they will be viewed negatively

• Carry out character profiles of students and offer collaborative learning which is based on students learning style rather than their skill level.

• Review existing activities for opportunities to re-focus for character development. (See case study section of this factsheet for example re student-led development discussions.)
This view was also reflected in the research carried out at the beginning of the Shaping Characters project where 54% of the teachers from the 4 countries agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: ‘When a student is exposed to negative influences at home, I cannot do much to impact that child’s character.’

The groups were also asked to consider whether they believed most teachers/youth workers actively think about which virtues they demonstrate and how.

The teachers in our focus group felt that most teachers would see this as part of their role but that fewer regularly and actively think about how they are teaching life skills as well as their subject. The educational professionals commented that the focus on attainment over skills does not encourage teachers to focus on teaching character.

The groups then talked about initial and ongoing training and career professional development for teachers and youth workers. The youth workers pointed out that as youth work encompasses such a broad range of individuals, from occasional volunteers to paid professionals the level of training differs greatly. They felt that a prescriptive and lengthy training programme would be impractical but did feel that all youth workers should have an introduction which looks at understanding your position as a role model and the responsibility this carries with it. The group felt that youth worker training is largely by example, learning from effective youth leaders and reflecting on your own work in relation to this.

The teachers felt strongly that initial and ongoing training was crucial in helping teachers exemplify virtues. They also stressed the importance of sharing ideas within and across schools believing that teachers must always be prepared to carry on learning and that the school environment should foster a lifelong learning approach for teachers as well as students.
Case Studies: An innovative approach to engaging teachers in character education in Olomouc, Czech Republic.

Marasarykova zakladni skola a materska skola Velka Bystrice is a small town primary school for pupils aged from 6 to 15. The school is mid-sized with 365 pupils, 23 teachers and 9 other staff and is located in a rural/suburban area 10KM from the city of Olomouc in Eastern Moravia.

The school were concerned at the rise in the number of pupils showing low levels of responsibility for their own futures and low ambitions regarding what they could achieve in education. Having been a partner in the Shaping Characters project, the Headteacher Mr Mihal, wanted to see if these issues could be addressed by focusing on virtues such as respect, creativity, team work, honesty, friendliness, self-discipline and resilience.

Mr Mihal felt it was important that the teachers in the school supported and felt a part of the changes. Team discussions were therefore held where teachers could work together to identify the potential benefits of swapping the focus to teaching virtues first and subject second. A team of 15 teachers covering different subjects was established, which equated to more than 65% of the teaching staff and ensured a wide impact across the school curriculum.

Each member of the team then created lesson plans to teach a particular virtue via their subject. Through this a bank of resources is being created which can be shared and used now and in the future. The project is currently in its early stages but Mr Mihal is encouraged by the support shown by teachers and the initial feedback from the lessons so far delivered.

Further information will be available in the resources section of the Shaping Characters website.

STUDENT-LED DEVELOPMENT DISCUSSION

In Gävle, Sweden, there has been a move towards student-led development discussion over the past few years, particularly for 13 to 15 year old students. In traditional parent/teacher/student meetings, the teachers assess the student’s progress and behaviour and highlight where they need to improve and how. Student-led development however switches the focus to the student assessing their own performance and identifying where and how they can improve. The student leads the discussion at the meeting and the teacher or mentor writes the Individual Development Plan from the student’s assessment of themselves. This is then reviewed throughout the year.

The aim of student-led development is to encourage the young person to own their own development and to develop self-assessment and reflective skills which they can take forward to higher education and employment.

Student assessment is a feature of all education establishments and is also used in some non-formal youth activities. Student-led development is a way of utilising an activity which already happens for character building, rather than adding additional tasks to already heavy workloads.
Meditation for educators?

There has been a huge growth in the popularity of mindfulness and meditation. Many advocate its use in helping young people to concentrate, deal with problems and avoid stress building up to unmanageable levels. We decided therefore to run a session with the Shaping Characters partners to see how they would feel about running meditation sessions in their classrooms or youth groups.

The response was hugely positive. Some of the partners who were less familiar with these techniques were really keen to deliver sessions in their settings when they returned home. Interestingly, the partners also commented on how personally beneficial they found the session and how these techniques are as useful for the educators as for those they are educating!

The meditation session we used was from ‘The Resilient Classroom’ a set of 20 minute classroom sessions available online at http://www.youngminds.org.uk/

Resources

http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/1568/projects/previous-work/the-good-teacher

National Youth Agency (2013): Commission into the role of youth work in formalEducation.

Matt Bowden (2016) SecEd, Character Education: Engaging School Staff
http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/character-education-engaging-school-staff

Birdwell, Scott and Reynolds, (2015) character nation - a demos report with the jubilee centre for character and virtues
https://www.demos.co.uk/research-area/social-policy

Emma Orr, SecEd (2015) Case Study: Developing students’ character
http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/case-study-developing-students-character/

Sam Taylor, Angie Hart and Hove Park School, The Resilient Classroom, A Resource Pack for Tutor Groups and Pastoral School Staff
https://youngminds.org.uk/resources/tools-and-toolkits/academic-resilience-resources/
This is the fourth 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