“It’s who you are!”

How young people experience values and character formation in the twenty-first century

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A summary of the report of a research project undertaken for the Templeton Foundation: Character Education: the Formation of Virtues and Dispositions in the 16-19 Age Range with particular reference to the religious and spiritual
“It's who you are!” How young people experience values and character formation in the twenty-first century

1 Introduction

This project’s aim was to find out how today’s 16-19 year-old students understand the concepts of ‘virtues and values’ and how they are influenced, both in this understanding and in the formation of their own characters.

The research involved working directly with 551 students and their teachers and support staff in three institutions over a period of nearly two years. There were four phases, each building on the previous one, to develop and validate the theoretical basis of the study before exploring key factors and evaluating their impact on and relationship to ‘character’, academic achievement and the dispositions known to be keys to effective lifelong learning. The final phase looked in depth at the emergent themes with individual students.

The findings and implications of this research are of critical value to anyone interested in or responsible for developing personal and social responsibility and positive identity in young people today. They will strike a special chord with school leaders needing to balance these priorities with those created by the pressure to ‘perform and improve’.

2 Background

This booklet summarises research, which was undertaken in a contemporary context of concern about standards of public morality in general and moral education in particular.

This concern is not new, as the Report’s literature review reminds us. Philosophers and theologians have long debated what is ‘good’ character and how can it be educated? Greek philosophy and Christian theology with their different emphases developed languages in which to discuss the common good and questioned how the State or the Church could best encourage the citizen to aspire to the good life. Was it possible to compel people to behave well?

The Eighteenth Century ‘Age of Enlightenment’ gave birth to insights and experiments in character education, looking at it objectively alongside the development of knowledge, imagination and intellect. It assumed the separation of ‘knowledge-based’ from ‘values-based’ education. This trend was reversed in Victorian times, however, when education was seen as fitting people for their future role in a class-conscious, Christian society, often confusing religious with economic perspectives.
The American public school system was rooted in religious notions of 'godly' citizenship but by the mid-twentieth century, both there and in Europe, cognitive psychology was gaining in influence, emphasising the power of moral reasoning independently of such traditional perspectives, leading to a more open-ended, liberal attention to self-fulfilment.

In the nineteen-eighties, a discourse developed around public concerns about the moral condition of western society, citing moral relativism, individualism, substitution of responsibility with self-interest and dysfunction in the teenage population in particular amounting, in the words of one commentator, to 'a crisis in moral education'.

Contemporary debate includes rejections of such moralist positions as fear-based, believing that every generation has had its own 'litany of alarm' and that there was no 'golden age' of moral behaviour. These differences may explain continuing tensions between didacticism and 'consensus-building' approaches in character education. Thus, for example, some current practice in America are criticized for being based on narrow, pre-modern notions of virtue, traditional teaching methods and an authoritarian approach to behavioural change.

There is a more general consensus that school is only a part of the social framework that impacts on moral development, merely complementing the influences of home, media, peer group and the wider culture. Some commentators emphasise the community basis of all values. Though there is wide recognition that the 'ethos' of the school is a vital dimension of character education and schools may seek to shape behaviour by explicit emphasis on social values, it also seems that adult direction and authority are more likely to be questioned and teachers more wary of being accused of 'indoctrination' than may once have been the case. Concentration upon learning through experience and valuing of the 'student voice' both imply a shift of responsibility for moral interpretation and decision-making on to students, often without recourse to the critical philosophies that might illuminate the purpose and meaning of their learning and how it relates to their development as 'characters'.

A key issue in the research literature concerns the availability – or not – of a shared 'language', for naming and learning about virtues and values through engaging in dialogue about them. It is suggested that one advantage of this would be in helping to make more explicit the relationship between values and rules. Another emphasis has been on the role of the affective domain in such learning: how feelings such as sympathy, love or guilt might link taught concepts and reasoning, on one hand, and action and behavioural change, on the other.
A common related theme in research since the nineteen-eighties has been the importance of the 'informal' climate and culture - the 'hidden curriculum' - in influencing character whether at home or school, with 'fostering' and 'modelling' of good conduct, quality of relationships and collaboration all seen as vital to the development of the dispositions, concepts, behaviours, decisions and skills associated with 'good' character.

What is apparent from the literature is that character is essentially about growth and change. Questions about its relationship to learning are therefore unavoidable. It is in line with much current educational discourse, to see the capacity for 'personal transformation' over time as a key to survival in a constantly changing and spiritually challenging social, moral, political and economic context. It was against this rich theoretical 'back-drop' that the research project was conceived, to see how it matched up to the empirical reality of students' reported experience.

Six research questions were identified:
1. What do students consider to be appropriate virtues and values for life in the 21st century society?
2. How do students understand those virtues and values?
3. What resources do students draw upon in the formulation of their virtues and values?
4. What is the 'language in use' by young people?
5. What are the links between virtues and learning dispositions?
6. How and in what ways do schools and colleges inhibit or develop the formation of virtues and dispositions of character in Sixth Form students?

The research was an in-depth case study of three Sixth Form centres in one city in the south west of England between 2004 and 2006: the A level centre of a general College of Further Education, a Church School Sixth Form and a Community School Sixth Form. The total number of students in the sampling frame was 551.

The research was undertaken in four phases, each building cumulatively on the previous one.

1. Preliminary theory building
Nine student focus groups provided data about how students understand values and virtues. A student from each group was selected for further investigation of their personal constructs using repertory grid technique.

Ten teachers with responsibility for pastoral and academic development were then interviewed about their views of the findings from the student data. This data from teachers and students provided the empirical and theoretical basis for the design and construction of a questionnaire.

2. Questionnaire completion
The questionnaire was administered to the whole cohort of students. It contained 81 items, eliciting data that reflected a holistic, dynamic, critical and emancipatory model of character formation. An exploratory factorial analytic study was performed to explore whether there were any key themes or patterns, which could be understood as elements of character formation.

3. Quantitative cross sectional exploration of relationships
Data were collected from students about their learning dispositions using the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLl) and from schools about students' achievement at GCSE, their gender, ethnicity and religion. Relationships could then be explored between dimensions of character, learning dispositions, achievement, gender, race and religion.

4. Open-ended, in-depth interviews
These were undertaken individually with a small group of students to explore the ways in which they understood the themes emerging from the research.

Main Findings

These 'sweeps' of data from students and their teachers in the three different Sixth Form centres, through focus groups, questionnaires, factor analysis and interviews, provided rich and interesting findings in answer to the research questions.

The main themes to emerge from the findings are three personal dimensions of character which are composite qualities of students' perceptions, thoughts, feelings and actions in the world. They are:

'Spiritual & religious engagement' — awareness of your own spirituality, the importance of religion or faith in developing your values and character

'Living my values and values' — reflecting and acting on your moral values, standing up for what I believe in

'Political engagement' — understanding and participating in our political system and debate

'Identity in relationship' — having a healthy and stable sense of my own identity and relating positively to others

'Ambition, meaning and purpose' — having a strong sense of my own meaning and purpose in life and the will to fulfill it

'Critical social justice' — minding about personal or social injustice and wanting to correct it, caring for the environment

'Challenge and responsibility' — willingness to take responsibility and persevere in challenging others and facing challenge
‘Critical learning and becoming’ – knowing I am growing and changing and can become a better person even if at personal cost; being honest with myself and valuing honesty from others

‘Community engagement’ – getting on with my neighbours and being actively involved with my community

‘Critical values and school’ – seeing my school and teachers as enabling and encouraging me to learn, think critically and develop my values

‘Family influence’ – talking to my parents about what matters in life and being aware of their influence on my values

‘Influence of peers’ – being affected by the opinions and desiring to win the approval of my friends

‘Teacher respect for students’ – believing my teachers respect and value me as an individual and listen to what I have to say

‘Wider family influences’ – being close to and influenced by members of my extended family such as my grandparents

‘Media and community influences’ – noticing and being affected by celebrities and other figures in the media

These dimensions of character amount to a complex and dynamic human process of personal development and self-perception and offer a way of seeing the processes of character formation. The nine dimensions are inter-related and should be seen as aspects of a complex whole.

Alongside these were six further dimensions representing the social, environmental and school factors which can influence character formation:

‘Students’ understanding of character

• Character is ‘who you are’ or ‘what you are’ in any given situation and depends on both immediate context and upbringing.
• Character is embodied in thoughts, feelings and actions in the world.
• Character is a complex and inter-related set of personal qualities and dimensions.
• Students are aware of the reasons why they behave as they do in different situations.

• Students know examples of people with ‘good’ and ‘bad’ character – though these are seen through the ‘lens’ of the media and A level courses.
• Violence and oppression are indicators of ‘bad’ character, whilst love, justice and valuing of human beings and communities are features of ‘good’ character.
• Human beings embody a mixture of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ character.
• Students’ ideal character is a loving, cheerful, responsible and trustworthy grandparent figure.

Detailed Findings

These dimensions were supported by qualitative and quantitative evidence from the four phases of the research, which also elicited detailed findings to illuminate the following areas.

1 Students’ perception of virtues and values

• Students have a strong sense of themselves as moral agents in society, with clear ideas about what matters, a sense of their own growth and change over time and their own unique identity and responsibility.
• There is an inherent set of shared, core moral values: trustworthiness, kindness, care, love, honesty, truthfulness, fairness and respect, being positive, self respect and responsibility.
• Being a good student involves being hardworking, responsible, keeping deadlines, punctual, an independent learner, organised; able to achieve a balance between work and having a social life, respectful; willing to learn; honest; polite; quiet; friendly; tolerant; broadminded; able to show initiative and set a good example.

• Living and being true to core moral values are important in daily life, but there is often a gap between these espoused values and behaviour in practice.
• There is a positive relationship between virtues, values and learning.
• Students spend time reflecting on their values and behaviour.
• Having meaning and purpose in life and a sense of direction is all important for character formation.
• Teamwork and communication skills are also important.
• Students say people are entitled to hold their own opinions but they may challenge them.
• Students say they are personally willing to stand up for their beliefs, will assert their needs and are open to be challenged by others.
• Students report that challenging and being challenged helps them consider the strength and validity of their own beliefs and consider the opinions of others.
• Students are positive, want to take responsibility, be authentic, persevere and, strongly, to do well in their lives.
• Students have a strong sense of anger at social injustice - whether individual or collective - and awareness of the need for environmental responsibility.
• Students perceive that a person should treat others how they would wish to be treated.
3 Teachers’ perception of students’ virtues, values and character

- Students do live their values in practice, though this can be influenced by negative self-esteem and low confidence.

- Students’ understanding of their values is usually personal and individual rather than applied to the wider community and society.

- Students value self-expression and self-confidence more than modesty and self-control.

- Students lack a language of forgiveness, social responsibility and higher order concepts of self-awareness and self-knowledge.

4 Spiritual, political and community engagement

- Students were more spiritually aware as younger children.

- Students have a sense of spirituality but many have antipathy towards organized religion, and dogmatic belief systems.

- A sizeable minority of students does not belong to a religious tradition.

- Spiritual and religious practices help students cope with the stresses of their daily lives.

- Many students do not believe religious faith plays a role in their lives or values.

5 Influences on character formation

- The majority of students do not attend places of worship or follow any spiritual practices with few students reporting a strong sense of practice of personal ‘spiritual and religious engagement’.

- Some students are exploring their spirituality through an eclectic mix of faith and spiritual traditions.

- Students differentiated between developing their religious life and their spiritual life; fewer students reported they were developing their spiritual life through their faith than those who just said they were developing their spiritual life.

- A very small percentage of students stated they were engaged politically but most want to vote when they can.

- Some students know their neighbours and greet them, others say they do not see or know who their neighbours are.

- Fewer students reported being engaged in their communities, with the majority of students saying they do not help in their local community.
Students see the biggest influence upon their values as their mother, their friends and then their father. Siblings, grandparents, extended family and teachers come next, with community and media figures last.

Some students indicated that the lack of a father influenced their values.

Students’ references to influences of local and global communities are least evident.

Geographical location has an impact on the influence of the extended family on values, especially where families are in different parts of the world.

Students are aware of the complexities of trying to fit in with their friends and also trying to be an individual.

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Students are now trained to meet lesson objectives as defined by their programmes of study and teachers have to ask students to trust them if they go off at a tangent in order to explain or expand upon an issue within a subject.

College students believe the college system offers them greater responsibility towards their studies.

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7 Teacher-student relationships

Teachers see their relationships with their students as ‘vital’, ‘fundamental’ and they build trusting relationships through being consistent, supportive, reliable, competent, being available, straight and honest and following through words with actions.

The most important feature of school for students is that their teachers respect them, like them and value them as individuals.

Teachers who encourage students and lead by example have most impact on students’ values. Students relate to teachers who connect with them by sharing relevant stories from their own experiences, by being firm and fair and respectful to their views, even the ‘oddballs’.

Teachers think that good relationships are those where the teacher makes time and space to sit down to communicate and connect with students, keeping an open door and are competent to get them through the examinations.

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Teachers say that it is crucial consistently to model good virtues, values and behaviour through their daily conduct in their interactions with students and with their fellow teachers especially when in front of students.

Teachers say they treat their students as they would expect their own children to be treated in school.

Students connect good relationships with their teachers with their success in learning.

Staff and students indicate that Sixth Form education offers opportunities for more relaxed and informal relationships of mutual respect and trust.

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8 Pedagogy for character, virtues and values

Character, virtues and values are best formed through a responsive whole school approach.

Teachers communicate virtues and values through their teaching by highlighting and discussing appropriate and inappropriate behaviours and when these arise.

Teachers believe they should avoid alienating or patronizing students by imposing values upon them.

Staff say values are mainly ‘caught’ but can be ‘taught’ in assemblies, tutor time and through role-play in lessons in the compulsory core programme.

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Students disagree, saying that assemblies and tutor times do not help them develop their values or spirituality; they do not take non-qualification subjects seriously.

Activities such as residential trips, the Duke of Edinburgh scheme and students organising their own clubs, societies and discussions groups are instrumental in developing character, virtues and values.

In school, the biggest influence on students’ values is their teachers, but home/school contracts, teachers’ and parents’ expectations, information in planners, posters affirming positive behaviour and listing school values in classrooms also have an impact.

There are fewer opportunities to discuss character and values across the curriculum because of pressure to meet national curriculum requirements and the assessment regime.
What these findings give us

6.1 A clearer concept for 'character', 'values' and 'virtues' in education?

The findings offer an integral, dynamic and critical vision for character education, by bringing a contemporary and grounded perspective to the question 'What is character?' and by clarifying the notion of 'virtue' in this context. Virtue can be understood as a set of shared core values, attitudes and dispositions, which are intrinsic to and lead towards human wellbeing.

This vision is integral, relational and holistic, because it is about students' awareness of their own thoughts, feelings and actions in the world as whole people located in widening networks of social relationships, which influence character. It has to do with intra and inter-personal elements of 'being in the world'.

It is dynamic because it involves history and hope and a trajectory over time. It is about the aspiration to become more fully human, to fulfil one's potential and achieve personal and social wellbeing.

It is critical because there is a tension between the tendency towards violence and the aspiration to value each human being. Students recognize and articulate about this tension or 'gap' in their own lives as well as in other people. They recognize, too, the complexity of most situations, where there are seldom easy 'right' or 'wrong' answers.

6.2 A clearer sense of how these notions of character relate to and are represented by young people today

The notion of character education that emerged from these findings was informed by the following tendencies in our student population:

- A strong sense of the spiritual and the religious, despite their general disengagement from organised religion.
- A set of core values or virtues that shape their 'moral identity', which are understood as dynamic and applicable to personal and public life. These are trust, caring, justice and truthfulness.
- Expecting to vote, but being disengaged from organised politics.
- A strong sense of social justice, expressed through anger at injustice and a desire to act on behalf of the marginalized or oppressed.
- Being and seeing themselves as 'persons in relation' with a history and hope for the future, who persevere, enjoy challenging and being challenged. They have a strong sense of learning and changing over time and 'becoming a better person' through reflecting on the gap between their values and their actions in practice and taking responsibility for their own growth as human beings.

6.3 A clearer view of the influences on young people's character, values and virtues

This vision for character education is also informed by what the findings tell us about the influences upon students, in particular those of the family and the school.

Students' immediate families have had most influence on their values, particularly their mothers, but they are much less engaged with their wider communities and traditions.

Schools are seen as places that do help to shape students' values, but not through assemblies, tutor time or in non-examinable subjects. The quality of relationships between teachers and students, characterised by trust and respect, is of central importance in character formation, with modelling being the most important pedagogical strategy.

6.4 Some clear 'signposts' for character educators

The findings echo a theme found in the literature review, that there is a marked lack of a formal language with which to express the cognitive concepts of values and virtues, which belies a strong sense in these students of 'experienced' and 'embodied' values and virtues.

Analysis of achievement data and responses to questionnaires relating to dimensions of character and learning dispositions provided some useful indicators: firstly, that character dimensions are differentiated between students, gender and schools and, secondly, that there are positive associations between 'high' values in the character dimensions, students' levels of achievement and the strength of their learning dispositions.

Implications

The implications of these findings are potentially far reaching, for researchers, policy-makers and practitioners.

7.1 Implications for Research

Methodologically plural

One of the key findings has been the interactivity of aspects of 'character'. This study was methodologically plural and interdisciplinary. It is clear that no single model of research, whether theoretical or empirical, qualitative or quantitative, is adequate on its own. There is a need to have a strategy for research into Character Education that illuminates the issues from many different points of view. Linked to this is a need for a more integrated 'model of the person' to inform pedagogy.

Language

Any research in this field needs to pay attention to the use of language, which changes and varies over time and across cultures, not only in register, but 'popularity'. In the field of character education there is a language that goes in and out of 'fashion'. For
example young people (and many teachers) are unfamiliar with the language of ‘cardinal virtues’. There is a need for a language to evolve, in use, that creates the space for the sorts of dialogue and relationships which facilitate character formation, in a manner which is culturally relevant.

Potential for further research

Key areas requiring further research emerging from this study include:

A pedagogy for Character Education

The spirituality of young people in the 21st Century

The nature and role of personal relationships in education

Political and religious engagement of young people

7.2 Implications for Policy

The nature of policy

One implication of this study is that if they are to engage and enhance the values of young people in the twenty-first century, education policies relating to character should avoid being prescriptive, focusing only on ‘measurable outcomes’ and overtly determining the curriculum content. To be effective, policies need to be evolved through partnership with those involved in their realisation, with an openness that allows relationships to flourish and based on the idea of ‘ordered freedom’, encouraging diversity and locally devised solutions in a context of self-evaluation. They should allow scope for interpretation that is related to time and place and avoid being too narrowly defined and over-controlling, in tone or requirements.

A holistic model of human development

Policies should attend not only to cognitive development, but also to the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of human development. To ignore the holistic nature of the human condition is to run the risk of missing key relationships and dimensions of ‘character’. Without this integrated approach, the system might educate people quite successfully about ‘good character’, without developing much understanding of what it means to be one.

Relationship to the curriculum

Education for character formation will only be meaningful to the young people for whom it is intended, if they experience it both through the way they are taught and through explicit and significant linking to the curriculum itself. This means it has to go on throughout the curriculum, rather than consigned to the ‘non-qualification’ slots that students say they have little time for.

Innovative approaches to ‘personalising’ learning are beginning to emerge in schools, which make the ‘person’ and ‘learning competencies’ of the learner central to curriculum design, involving choice and learner-driven pathways to relate ‘new’ knowledge to ‘what is known’ and ‘what is required’.
These might be difficult, but are not impossible to achieve within a prescribed national curriculum. The consequence of failing to make the links clearer and richer between a student’s character formation and her daily learning experience, will be the marginalisation of the former, in her eyes and the narrowing of the latter to the simple requirement to pass her exams.

7.2 Implications for Practice

A Culture of Participation

The ethos of participation and of “student voice” should be integral to school practices and to school development planning. Schools ought to be places in which the students have, and feel that they have, a stake in their own learning. This requires special attention to the nature of the leadership of the school which is community of intellectual and social engagement.

Relationships

The attention given to relationship should be considered in terms of “a curriculum of relationships” in which attention is given to matters of: balance; progression; coherence and relevance. This is to take a view of the curriculum and culture of learning that is not driven by “subject matter” but is informed primarily by developing relationships.

Personal and Social Justice

Throughout the study there is a theme of young people wishing to ensure personal and social justice in its different forms. There is a very strong attachment to these values and ideals, and they ought to be mirrored in the practices for schools and classrooms. This may also take the form of encouraging personal and social responsibilities supported by others. That lies at the heart of character development.

8 Conclusions

The research has produced rich data: it is not only rich, but unusual, complex, incisive, far-reaching and relevant, to educators, parents, carers, researchers, policy-makers and young people themselves. Anyone who has felt moved to make observations or judgements about the ‘state’ of the younger generation today can learn something from this. It is difficult, however, to sum up succinctly.

Headlines must start with the delineation of the nine personal dimensions of character. As well as up-dating and contributing new language to a discourse in need of it, they have the authority of being drawn from the perceptions and constructs of the students being educated, which have hitherto generally been made the ‘objects’ of research, rather than the ‘co-creators’ of it. They also highlight key principles that deserve to inform all research and discourse in this area.

The first principle is about being holistic – recognising that these nine dimensions are about whole people, their thinking, feeling and actions and far more than simply cognitive and intellectual development; also in seeing them not as discrete characteristics, but inter-related aspects of a complex whole.

Secondly, they are dynamic: recognising that character, correctly understood, is always disposed and susceptible to growth and change. Thirdly, the nine dimensions of character are critical, because they reflect a disposition to self-awareness, self-judgement and aspiration to grow and change ‘for the better’.

The report also helps us to distinguish six ‘dimensions of influence’ on ‘character’ which are drawn from the widening layers of social relationships that make up young people’s social world and the growing knowledge and experience of interacting with it. They confirm the paramount importance of family influence, especially the mother and including the extended family. From family, friends, school and the media together, young people acquire this very clear spectrum of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’, on which they judge themselves and others, expecting to encounter both and being very aware of the difference.

It is untrue, therefore, to suggest that young people these days ‘don’t seem to know right from wrong’. Whilst it is acknowledged that severe socio-economic conditions were not a factor in this study, the students researched for this report display a high level of moral awareness and observation, including reflection on their own values and behaviour, never better illustrated than in the list of ‘what makes a good student’. What is crucial, though is that this awareness includes being aware of ‘The Gap’. The students aspire, as they grow and change, to close ‘the gap’ between what they know as virtue and how they judge their own actions: in other words, to ‘live’ their values. The complexities they report of trying to ‘fit in’ with their friends whilst also trying to ‘be themselves’ may have a bearing on this. The ‘gap’ seems to be evident, for instance, in the difference between their loving, caring, voting, socially responsible ideal character and their general lack of political, community or neighbourly involvement. This desire to change for the better represents a deep-seated ‘learning energy’ that all teachers should surely be able to seek out, trust and foster, in the cause of character education.

Another fascinating area of the report is its exploration of spiritual and religious awareness in the young people. Contrary to some expectations, perhaps, they have a very clear sense of their own spirituality – how otherwise could they perceive it as having declined since childhood? That may in turn be related to the ‘stresses of their daily lives’, which some see as able to be ‘helped by spiritual or religious practices’: yet they have an antipathy towards organised religion and dogma and seem to be more eclectic in their explorations than previous generations, distinguishing between ‘spiritual’ and ‘religious’ lives.

So, what are the messages for schools? Students report the main influences on the character formation being outside school but see school as a place where they learn about values and ‘being a good citizen’. Schools are ‘stressful’ places, mainly about
passing exams' and meeting objectives defined for them – their own values even felt to be at risk of being 'squashed' by those of the school! College students, on the other hand, feel they are given more scope to exercise personal responsibility.

The first and key message has to do with the power and nature of teacher-student relationships. Teachers understand this and their 'crucial' role in modelling trustworthiness, care and fairness. They know how 'fundamental' it is to be consistent, supportive, reliable, available, straight and honest, following through words with actions. Where students feel liked, encouraged, trusted, valued and respected by their teachers, who keep an 'open door', make time and space to sit down with them, listen to their point of view and teach them well enough to secure their good exam grades, they see such relationships as amongst the most important features of their school life and a key to success. The interesting point here is that students are talking about all their teachers, not necessarily or particularly those with formal responsibility for their 'character education'. Another key message, then, is that character education is actually, for better, for worse, going on everywhere in the school.

Teachers differ from students in this, expecting greater impact from dedicated time such as assemblies and general, non-qualification subjects than students report. What seems to count is a style of pedagogy, throughout the curriculum, that is not imposing but responsive, modelling an inclusive and generous morality, including opportunities to take responsibility and organise themselves, experience values in practice and have their importance reinforced by explicit highlighting of their rationale and relevance. Classroom teaching appears to have a long way to go to match residential and other out-of-school activities in this regard.

Nowadays, opportunities for schools to exert positive, direct influence on character are at a premium. The language of values, ethics and moral philosophy needs to be developed and integrated with the specialist knowledge and language of all subjects and it is no longer viable to rely on the images or precepts of a single faith or tradition. It is no longer about teachers 'having the answers', but about providing opportunities and modelling learning and growth. Aspiration to self-improvement is strong in these students; their awareness of personal, moral and spiritual issues is more sophisticated than their capacity to be articulate about them, their reflection on them deeper than their sense of efficacy in doing anything about them. The challenge is to provide more opportunity for engagement, involvement, self-direction, responsibility to organise, on a whole-school basis. Sometimes teachers are so conscientious, leaving so little to chance, that their students get little 'look-in' when it comes to determining the real transactions of their learning, through which values and character are implied, modelled, practised and validated. It requires teaching, curricula and management more flexible and open, in design and practice, than are usually found at present; schools need to be places where personal, spiritual and moral values are shared, modelled and reflected on by all adults, drawing on the shared, human experience of their impact in the world, without a scent of the didacticism that would be associated, mistakenly or otherwise, with rejected dogma. The distinction needs to be made much clearer between 'learning about citizenship' and character education aiming to support positive growth and change. There is no substitute for dialogue and the genuine, open exchange of 'what it means to be me – what it means to be you – what it means to be us'. In the present climate of performance and accountability, the sad possibility is that work and progress towards such a goal may go on being relatively marginal, ad-hoc and fortuitous.

The last word in this report should be given to the young people themselves. They are telling us something! Are we listening? This research shows them to be deeply reflective and strong in their sense of themselves as learning and changing over time. The stronger their attitudes and dispositions towards learning, the fuller are their profiles on the nine dimensions of character. The final message must surely be about trust. It is easy to agonise about perceived deficits in virtue, values, character or political and community engagement. This research offers powerful support for a much more optimistic and positive view. If adults, forming and leading learner-centred communities, can trust themselves to be who they are, true to their own human values, interested in and engaging authentically with young people in so doing, then they can trust the young people in return to accept the influence on offer, reflect on it, aspire to live their own loving, responsible values more fully and have the energy to learn, grow and change in the right direction. For students in our survey, growth and change are 'givens' in the human condition, paradoxically fostered by trust and acceptance of 'Who you are'.