A Framework for Character Education in Schools

'The aim of our studies is not just to know what virtue is, but to become good.'
Aristotle

INTRODUCTION

The development of children's characters is an obligation we all share, not least parents. Whilst parents are the primary educators of their children's character, empirical research tells us that parents want all adults who have contact with their children to contribute to such education, especially their children's teachers. The development of character is a process that requires the efforts of the developing individual and the society and its schools. A society determined to enable its members to live well will treat character education as something to which every child has a right. Schools should consider questions about the kinds of persons their students will become, how the development of good character contributes to a flourishing life, and how to balance various virtues and values in this process. The aim of this **Framework** is to provide a rationale and a practical outlet for the interest that schools show in the character development of their students.

Belonging to and actively participating in a school community is a deeply formative experience that helps students develop, amongst other things, their character. In a broad sense, character education permeates all subjects, wider school activities, and a general school ethos; it cultivates the virtues of character associated with common morality and develops students' understanding of what is excellent in diverse spheres of human endeavour. Schools should and do aid students in learning to know the good, love the good, and do the good. Schools should enable students to become good persons and citizens, able to lead good lives, as well as become 'successful' persons. Schooling is concerned centrally with the formation of character and benefits from an intentional and planned approach to character development.

Human flourishing is the widely accepted goal of life. To flourish is not only to be happy, but to fulfil one's potential. Flourishing is the ultimate aim of character education. Human flourishing requires the acquisition and development of intellectual, moral, and civic virtues, excellence specific to diverse domains of practice or human endeavour, and generic virtues of self-management (known as enabling or performance virtues). All are necessary to achieve the highest potential in life. Character education teaches the acquisition and strengthening of virtues: the traits that sustain a well-rounded life and a thriving society. Schools should aim to develop confident and compassionate students, who are effective contributors to society, successful learners, and responsible citizens. Students also need to grow in their understanding of what is good or valuable and their ability to protect and advance what is good. They need to develop a commitment to serving others, which is an essential manifestation of good character in action. Questions of character formation are inseparable from these educational goals and are fundamental to living well and responsibly. Character development involves caring for and respecting others as well as caring for and respecting oneself.

Character education is no novelty. If we look at the history of schooling from ancient times to the 20th century, the cultivation of character was typically given pride of place, with the exception of a few decades towards the end of the 20th century when, for a variety of different reasons, this aim disappeared from the curricula of many Western democracies. Contemporary character education, however, is better grounded academically than some of its predecessors, with firm support both from the currently popular virtue ethics in moral philosophy, and recent trends in social science, such as positive psychology, that have revived the concepts of character and virtue. Finally, a growing general public-policy consensus, across political parties and industry, suggests that the role of moral and civic character is pivotal in sustaining healthy economies and democracies.

WHAT CHARACTER EDUCATION IS

Character is a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct. Character education includes all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people develop positive personal strengths called virtues. Character education is more than just a subject. It has a place in the culture and functions of families, classrooms, schools and other institutions. Character education is about helping students grasp what is ethically important in situations and how to act for the right reasons, such that they become more autonomous and reflective in the practice of virtue. Students need to decide wisely the kind of person they wish to become and to learn to choose between already existing alternatives or to find new ones. In this process, the ultimate aim of character education is the development of good sense, or practical wisdom; the capacity to choose intelligently between alternatives. This capacity involves knowing how to choose the right course of action in difficult situations and it arises gradually out of the experience of making choices and the growth of ethical insight.

WHAT CHARACTER EDUCATION IS NOT

The ultimate goal of all proper character education is to equip students with the intellectual tools to make wise choices of their own within the framework of a democratic society. Critical thinking is thus a vital facet of a well-rounded character. Character and virtue are not exclusively religious notions. Character and virtue are not paternalistic notions, either. If being 'paternalistic' means that character education goes against the wishes of students and their parents, empirical research shows the opposite. More generally speaking, the character of children cannot simply be put on hold at school until they reach the age where they have become wise enough to decide for themselves. Some form of character education will always be taking place in school. The sensible question to ask about a school's character education strategy is not, therefore, whether such education does occur, but whether it is intentional, planned, organised,

and reflective, or assumed, unconscious, reactive, and random. The emphasis on character and virtue is not conservative or individualist – all about 'fixing the kids'. The ultimate aim of character education is not only to make individuals better persons but to create the social and institutional conditions within which all human beings can flourish. Social and institutional conditions of this kind require that all members of the society contribute in ways that collectively provide everyone with opportunities to live well. Conversely, the cultivation of individual character is most likely to succeed in exactly such conditions of reciprocity and equal opportunity. Fundamental to these conditions is an ethos of cooperation and mutual goodwill. Other necessities, such as adequate nutrition and good health provisions, are foundational to acquiring the virtues, capabilities and understanding essential to individual flourishing and constructive membership in society.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

The development of character - and how to enhance it through education - must be understood against the backdrop of a theory of moral development. According to a neo-Aristotelian view of the psychology of moral development, in which the current **Framework** is grounded, there are a number of pathways to becoming virtuous. These pathways are described, in as simple terms as possible, in the diagram '**A Neo-Aristotelian Model of Moral Development**'. The Model foregrounds the importance of early family upbringing, although it does not exclude the adjustment of negative moral traits formed in early childhood. Depending on the nature of the education that moral learners receive, they may progress rather seamlessly through a trajectory of habituated virtue, developing into autonomously sought and reflectively chosen virtue, which in turn provides them with intrinsic motivation to virtuous action. Or they may need to take a detour through a pathway of good intentions, undermined by a weakness of will, through practical habituation, which provides them with the self-regulation needed to at least be extrinsically motivated to act virtuously.

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR CHARACTER EDUCATION

- Character is educable and its progress can be assessed holistically

- Character is important: it contributes to human and societal flourishing

- Good education is good character education

- Character is largely caught through role-modelling and emotional contagion: school culture and ethos are therefore central

- A school culture that enables students to satisfy their needs for positive relationships, competence, and self-determination facilitates the acquisition of good character

- Character should also be taught: direct teaching of character provides the rationale, language and tools to use in developing character elsewhere in and out of school

- Character should be developed in partnership with parents, employers and other community organisations

- Character education is about fairness and each child has a right to character development

- Positive character development empowers students and is liberating

- Good character demonstrates a readiness to learn from others

- Good character promotes democratic citizenship and autonomous decision-making

The most important lesson to be drawn from this pathway model is that character educators should never give up the hope that an individual student can be helped on the way to full autonomous virtue. No two people will progress towards virtue in exactly the same way, nor at exactly the same speed. All provisions in the field of character education thus need to take account of contextual and individual differences and seek practical solutions that work for each individual school, class, or student.

WHICH VIRTUES CONSTITUTE GOOD CHARACTER?

Individuals can respond well, or less well, to the challenges they face in everyday life, and the virtues are those character traits that enable human beings to respond appropriately to situations in any area of experience. These character traits enable people to live, cooperate and learn with others in a way that is peaceful, neighbourly and morally justifiable. Displaying moral and other virtues in admirable activity over the course of a life, and enjoying the inherent satisfaction that ensues, is what it means to live a flourishing life.

No definitive list of relevant areas of human experience and the respective virtues can be given, as the virtues will to a certain extent be relative to individual constitution, developmental stage and social circumstance. For example, temperance in eating will be different for an Olympic athlete and an office worker; what counts as virtuous behaviour for a teenager may not pass muster for a mature adult; and the virtues needed to survive in a war zone may not be the same as those in a peaceful rural community. There are also a great many virtues, each concerned with particular activities and potential spheres of human experience. It is, therefore, neither possible nor desirable to provide an exhaustive list of the moral virtues that should be promoted in all schools. Moreover, particular schools may decide to prioritise certain virtues over others in light of the school's history, ethos, location or specific student population. Nevertheless, a list of prototypical virtues – that will be recognised and embraced by representatives of all cultures and religions – can be suggested and drawn upon in character education. The list below contains examples of such virtues that have been highlighted in some of the most influential philosophical and religious systems of morality – and that also resonate well with current efforts at character education in schools:

In addition to such prototypical moral virtues, schools need to promote specific civic virtues, such as civility, service, citizenship, and volunteering, which help students understand their ties to society and their responsibilities within it. Furthermore, all developing human beings will need to possess a host of intellectual virtues, such as curiosity, and critical thinking, which guide their quest for knowledge and information. Among the intellectual virtues one deserves a special mention here. That is the virtue which the ancient Greeks called *phronesis*, but can also be called practical wisdom, or 'good sense' – the overall quality of knowing what to want and what not to want when the demands of two or more virtues collide, and to integrate such demands into an acceptable course of action. Living with practical wisdom entails: considered deliberation, well founded judgement and the vigorous enactment of decisions. It reveals itself in foresight, in being clear sighted and far sighted about the ways in which actions will lead to desired goals. The ability to learn from experience (and make mistakes) is at the centre of it. To live with practical wisdom is to be open-minded, to recognise the true variety of things and situations to be experienced. To live without practical wisdom is to live thoughtlessly and indecisively. Lack of practical wisdom shows itself in irresoluteness, or remissions in carrying out decisions and in negligence and blindness to our

circumstances. To live without practical wisdom is to be narrow-minded and closed-minded; it can reveal itself in an attitude of being 'cocksure' – a 'know-it-all' that resists reality. **Practical wisdom** forms part of all the other virtues; indeed it constitutes the overarching meta-virtue necessary for good character.
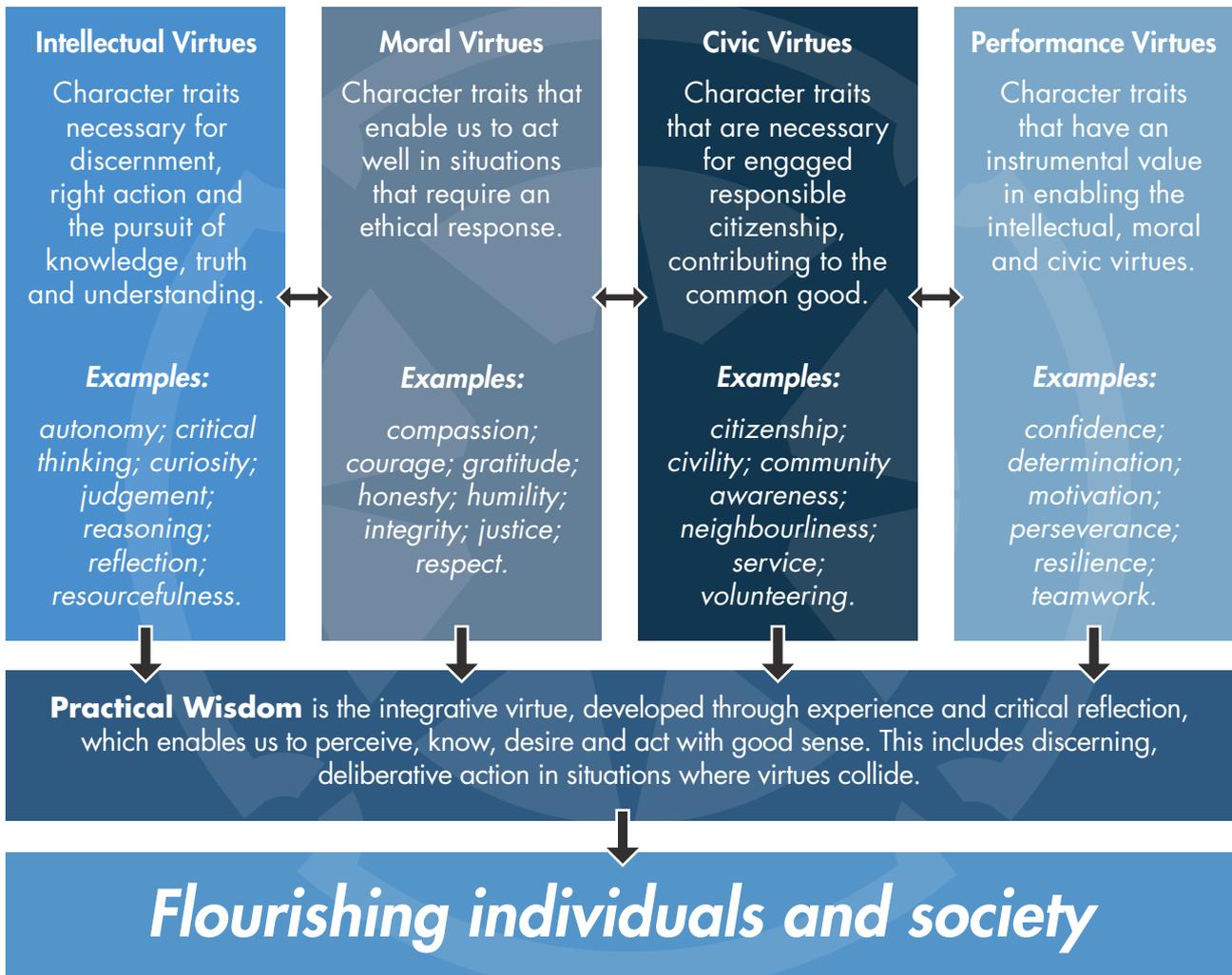
> " *... schools have a responsibility to cultivate the virtues, define and list those they want to prioritise and integrate them into all teaching ...* "

Virtues are empowering and are a key to fulfilling an individual's potential. Because of the foundational role of the virtues in human flourishing, schools have a responsibility to cultivate the virtues, define and list those they want to prioritise and integrate them into all teaching and learning in and out of school. Students therefore need to learn their meanings and identify appropriate practices in which to apply them in their lives, respecting themselves (as persons of character) and being of service to others.

In addition to the moral virtues, all human beings need personal traits that enable them to manage their lives effectively. These traits are sometimes called performance virtues or enabling virtues, to distinguish them from the specifically moral ones. In contemporary school-policy discourse, they are commonly referred to as 'soft skills'. One of the most significant of those is resilience – the ability to bounce back from negative experiences. Others include determination, confidence and teamwork. All good programmes of character education will include the cultivation of performance virtues, but they will also explain to students that those virtues derive their ultimate value from serving morally acceptable ends, in particular from being enablers and vehicles of the intellectual, moral and civic virtues.

Although virtues can be divided up into different categories, they form a coherent, mutually supportive whole in a well-rounded life, and character education is all about their integration, guided by the overarching intellectual virtue of practical wisdom or 'good sense'.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF CHARACTER

Intellectual Virtues

Character traits necessary for discernment, right action and the pursuit of knowledge, truth and understanding.

Examples:

autonomy; critical thinking; curiosity; judgement; reasoning; reflection; resourcefulness.

Moral Virtues

Character traits that enable us to act well in situations that require an ethical response.

Examples:

compassion; courage; gratitude; honesty; humility; integrity; justice; respect.

Civic Virtues

Character traits that are necessary for engaged responsible citizenship, contributing to the common good.

Examples:

citizenship; civility; community awareness; neighbourliness; service; volunteering.

Performance Virtues

Character traits that have an instrumental value in enabling the intellectual, moral and civic virtues.

Examples:

confidence; determination; motivation; perseverance; resilience; teamwork.

Practical Wisdom is the integrative virtue, developed through experience and critical reflection, which enables us to perceive, know, desire and act with good sense. This includes discerning, deliberative action in situations where virtues collide.

Flourishing individuals and society

THE COMPONENTS OF VIRTUE

While the perfect unity of the virtues is an admirable aim for the life-long cultivation of character, most of us will never reach that ideal. This is especially true for young moral learners who are on the way to becoming more virtuous. To complicate matters further, each virtue does not constitute a single discrete trait that one either has or has not. Rather, each virtue comprises various components that may not all develop in tandem. The major components are listed and defined in the **Components of Virtue** table on page 8. A student can be strong on one (say, with Virtue Emotion) but weaker on another (say,

Virtue Action and Practice). Rarely will all those components align in perfect harmony in a single person. Different strategies and interventions in the field of character education target different components and require different methods of evaluating effectiveness. The more of those components that have been cultivated successfully, the more likely it is that the student can master the whole virtue. Character educators need not, therefore, feel disheartened even if they only see progress in some components of virtue at any particular time in the educational process.

A Neo-Aristotelian Model of Moral Development
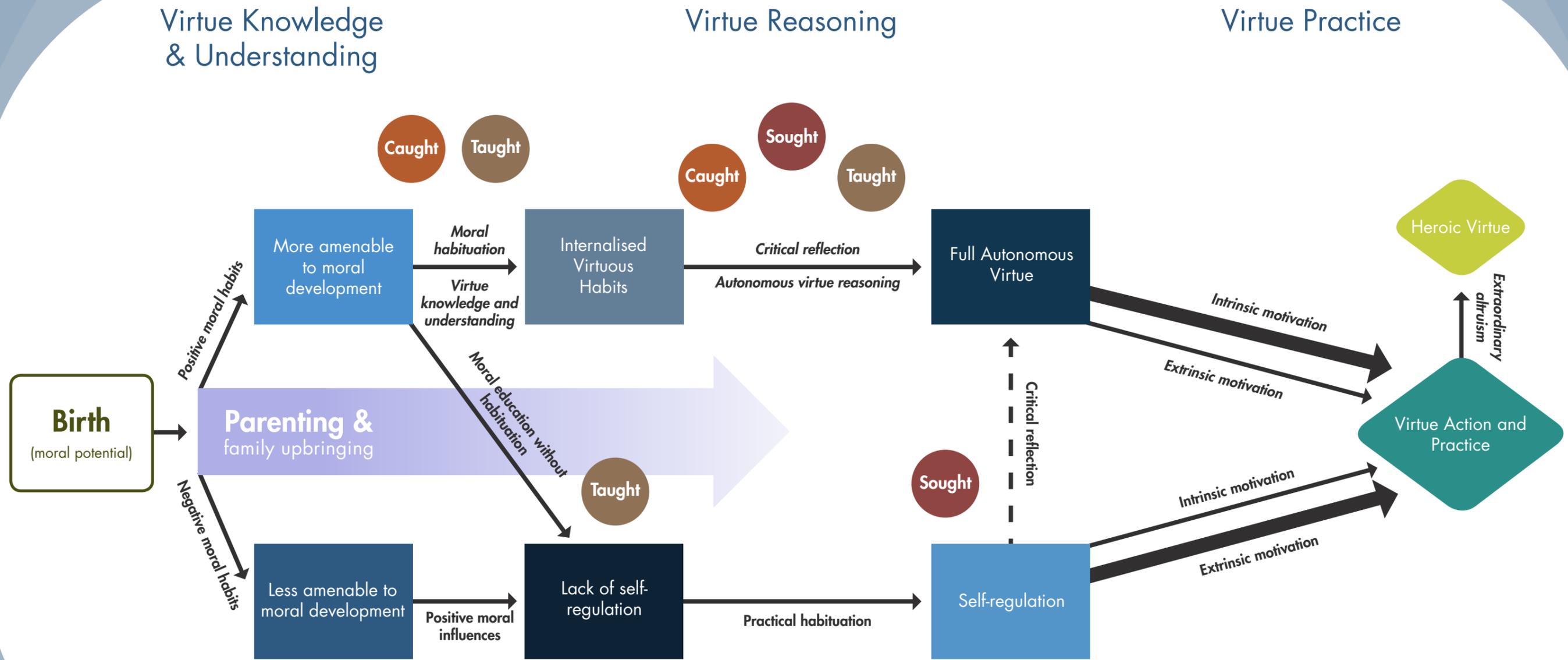
Components of Virtue

A Virtue Perception

Noticing situations involving or standing in need of the virtues

B Virtue Knowledge and Understanding

Understanding the meaning of the virtue term and why the virtue is important, individually and as part of a well-rounded, flourishing life of overall virtue, and being able to apply the virtue to episodes of one's own and others' lives

C Virtue Emotion

Feeling the right virtue-relevant emotion in the right situation in the right way

D Virtue Identity

Understanding oneself as strongly committed to the virtues

E Virtue Motivation

Having a strong desire to act on the virtues

F Virtue Reasoning

Discernment and deliberative action about virtues, including in situations where virtues conflict or collide

G Virtue Action and Practice

Doing the right thing in the right way

"Character virtues should be reinforced everywhere: on the playing fields, in classrooms, corridors, interactions between teachers and students, in assemblies, posters, head teacher messages and communications, staff training, and in relations with parents"

VIRTUE LITERACY

'Virtue Literacy' is a helpful term that can be defined as including components A, B, and F. There are two stages to enhancing Virtue Literacy. The first is developing a knowledge and understanding of virtue terms. The second is developing the ability and will-power to apply the virtues to real-life contexts. Virtue Literacy consists of three inter-related components:

(i) Virtue 'Perception';
(ii) Virtue 'Knowledge & Understanding'; and
(iii) Virtue 'Reasoning'.

The first component is concerned with noticing situations standing in need of virtues. The second component involves acquiring a complex language usage through familiarity with virtue terms. However, knowledge of the virtues themselves will not necessarily change behaviour. The third component concerns making reasoned judgements which includes the ability to explain differences in moral situations. This emphasis on acquiring judgement must be reflective and so allow for the empowerment of the ethical self through autonomous decision-making. A child may acquire some cognitive understanding of what would be the desirable virtue to display in certain circumstances, but be unable to translate this knowledge, understanding, and reasoning into virtuous action. The determination of whether a child is virtue literate should not be reduced to simple outcomes, but should consider all three components. Children need to be persuaded of the moral force of acting virtuously. Schools need to provide opportunities for children to exercise the virtues in practice as well as encourage a rich discourse of virtue language, understanding and reasoning.

THE GOALS OF CHARACTER EDUCATION

It is common for a school to outline the goals of education and a school that seeks to strengthen the character of its students should affirm its commitment to doing so in its mission statement.

Each school needs to describe the kinds of persons it wants to help develop and then outline the philosophy that underlies its approach in the development of its students. The philosophy and approach should involve clear ethical expectations of students and teachers, and modelling by teachers to guide the building of individual virtues in students. Schools should provide opportunities for students to not just think and do, but also understand what it means to be and become a mature, reflective person. They should help prepare students for the tests of life, rather than simply a life of tests.

Virtues can be…

Caught: the school community of both staff and students provide the example, culture, and inspirational influence in a positive ethos that motivates and promotes character development.

Taught: the school provides educational experiences in and out of the classroom that equip students with the language, knowledge, understanding, skills and attributes that enable character development.

Sought: the school provides varied opportunities that generate the formation of personal habits and character commitments. These help students over time to seek, desire and freely pursue their character development.

SCHOOL ETHOS BASED ON CHARACTER

The research evidence is clear: schools that are values-driven have high expectations and demonstrate academic, professional and social success. They are committed and determined to develop the character of their students through the articulation, demonstration of and commitment to core ethical virtues and

to the cultivation of meaningful personal relationships. Because the ethos of a school is the expression of the collective character of everyone, it is important for every member of a school community to have some basic understanding of what character is. Students and teachers therefore need to learn not only the names and meanings of character virtues, but display them in the school's thinking, attitudes and actions. Character virtues should be reinforced everywhere: on the playing fields, in classrooms, corridors, interactions between teachers and students, in assemblies, posters, head teacher messages and communications, staff training, and in relations with parents. Character virtues are critical in extra-curricular activities and should translate into positive feelings and behaviour. The process of being educated in virtue is not only one of acquiring ideas. It is about belonging and living within a community – for schools are, together with the family, one of the principal means by which students grow in virtue. A key feature of school communities that nurture good character is that educators understand that students' experience of belonging, personal growth, and self-determination is foundational to the development of good character and commitment to learning.

TEACHERS AS CHARACTER EDUCATORS

Character education builds on what already happens in schools, and most teachers see character cultivation as a core part of their role. Considerations of character, of the kind of person students hope to become, should be at the heart of teaching and education. The virtues acquired through experience by students are initially under the guidance of parents and teachers who serve as role models and moral exemplars.

In order to be a good teacher, one needs to be or become a certain kind of person: a person of good character who also exemplifies commitment to the value of what they teach. The character and integrity of the teacher is more fundamental than personality or personal style in class, and it is no less important than mastery of subject content and techniques of instruction. Teaching a subject with integrity involves more than helping students to acquire

specific bits of knowledge and skills. Good teaching is underpinned by an ethos and language that enables a public discussion of character within the school community so that good character permeates all subject teaching and learning. It also models commitment to the forms of excellence or goodness inherent in the subject matter: the qualities of craftsmanship, artistry, careful reasoning and investigations, beauty and power of language, and deep understanding made possible by the disciplines. Such commitment is important if students are to learn the value of what is taught and learn to do work that is good and personally meaningful.

Although a clear picture is emerging of the inescapability of character education, teachers often complain that they suffer from moral ambivalence and lack of self-confidence in their (inescapable) professional position as role models and character educators. Repeated empirical studies show that teachers find it difficult to address ethical issues in the classroom. Although many teachers possess a strong interest in moral issues, they are not always adequately trained to reflect critically upon and convey moral views to their students in a sophisticated way. Unfortunately, the recent surge in interest in character education has so far failed to make an impact on teacher education and training. Indeed, contemporary policy discourse, with its amoral, instrumentalist, competence-driven vocabulary, often seems to shy away from perspectives that embrace normative visions of persons in the context of their whole lives. The lack of teacher education programmes with a coherent approach to character education is most likely the result of an overly narrow concentration on grade attainment and classroom management. See the Jubilee Centre *Statement on Teacher Education and Character Education*.

THE EVALUATION OF CHARACTER EDUCATION

Schools are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their effectiveness, but measuring the character of an individual or the impact of a character education intervention is extremely difficult. Because of the complex nature of character, and the specific difficulties attached to observing virtue in practice, it is not feasible or desirable to aim for the aggregation of individual character and virtue profiles, as the results can become counter-productive, philosophically, psychologically and educationally. Discretion and circumspection is therefore required in any aspiration to measure virtues holistically; caution about the use of self-report measures is especially advised. While there is no simple and unproblematic way to 'measure character', it is possible to evaluate the development of particular components of virtue, as earlier noted. For example, different methods will apply to evaluating the development of virtue knowledge/understanding, on the one hand, and virtuous emotions, on the other.

A crucial question to address at the outset is what constitutes a valid purpose for evaluating a given character education provision? There are three legitimate purposes of evaluation in the area of character education. The first is to evaluate how a school's culture and ethos contributes to character education; schools can self-audit or be peer-audited against a set of criteria about what is known about best school practice in character education. Such evaluations rest upon teachers' professional knowledge and judgement and the picture built up by the evaluation provides evidence as to the school's collective strengths and weaknesses, thus highlighting where more effort, resources and time should be directed. The second purpose is to evaluate the effectiveness of a character education strategy, activity, or approach. Different methods, including pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys, observations and interviews with teachers and students can be applied with some success to gain evidence about the impact of a new or existing character education strategy or activity. It is recommended that these are carefully targeted at 'measuring' only one or two components of virtue and it would be preferable to triangulate data by using more than one source of evidence. A third purpose is the self-reflection on 'personal' character and virtues undertaken by students themselves. These might be recorded at regular intervals during a student's educational journey, for example in a journal. Evidence gained from peers, teachers and parents would support this process.

WHY CHARACTER EDUCATION IS IMPORTANT

In summary:

- Character is fundamental: it is the basis for human and societal flourishing;

- Character is largely caught through role-modelling and emotional contagion: school culture and ethos are therefore central;

- Character should also be taught: direct teaching of character provides the rationale, language and tools to use in developing character elsewhere in and out of school;

- Character is sought freely to pursue a better life;

- Character is educable: it is not fixed and the virtues can be developed. Its progress can be measured holistically, not only through self-reports but also more objective research methods;

- Character depends on building Virtue Literacy;

- Good character is the foundation for improved attainment, better behaviour and increased employability, but most importantly, flourishing societies;

- Character should be developed in partnership with parents, employers and other community organisations;

- Each child has a right to character education;

- The development of character empowers students and is liberating.

In the end, as Aristotle said

" *What we are most anxious to produce is a certain moral character in our fellow citizens, namely a disposition to virtue and the performance of virtuous actions* "

FURTHER READING

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TEACHING RESOURCES

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This **Framework** is based on research conducted by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. All research reports can be found on the Centre's website at www.jubileecentre.ac.uk