Character and Resilience: A Call for Evidence

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

A. Introduction

1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 19,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.

B. General comments

2 We welcome this consultation and agree entirely with the premise that young people need to develop character and resilience as they grow into adulthood, alongside academic achievements.

3 However, we believe that the consultation pays insufficient recognition to the fact that many young people experience highly traumatic, difficult lives. Young people in this situation would find it extremely difficult to engage with character development, in the form envisaged here, before a good deal of intervention had taken place.

4 We would also caution against any suggestion that character education can, in itself, have a significant impact on the current, concerning, increase in youth violence and gang membership. This is an extremely complex issue, and the advisory group must be cautious about making recommendations which may be perceived as failing to recognise the broader social and financial realities of life for many young people in the UK in the 21st century.

5 Providing a complete definition of 'character' is difficult. Whilst we would agree with the four points identified by the Secretary of State as necessary, we note that attempts by others to provide a sufficient set of criteria have varied in their success. *Leading Character Education in Schools*[1], an NfER case study report commissioned by ASCL and Pearson in 2017, cites five key features of the effective leadership of character education. These emphasise the need for schools to:

- ensure that senior leaders drive character education and involve all teachers and support staff in its delivery

- place character education at the core of the school ethos, rather than view it as a 'nice to have'

- take a long-term approach to promoting and developing character education

---

[1] www.nfer.ac.uk/leading-character-education-in-schools-case-study-report

- build a collective understanding and language to facilitate dialogue between staff, between pupils and staff, and between pupils and pupils

- maintain focus, momentum and ongoing communication to help keep and reinforce character education as a priority.

6   We would suggest that any attempt to create a definitive list of character attributes is a distraction. Instead, support should be given to all schools to develop a broad range of activities and opportunities that would appeal to all young people regardless of background. We believe the output of the advisory group should be practical and illustrative of approaches that schools could take.

7   Whilst activities and clubs that run outside the classroom can certainly contribute to the development of character and resilience in young people, it is pupils' daily experience in schools and colleges that really makes the difference.

8   The idea of a 'passport' has merit. However, if schools and young people are to buy in to this approach, it must be something to which government is prepared to commit over the long term, rather than a short-lived initiative. It should be developed in consultation with young people themselves, to ensure it includes activities which represent genuine achievements, which resonate with the people it is designed to help.

C.   With regard to your specific questions

Question 10: To what extent do you agree that character and resilience are important in enabling young people to be successful and to thrive in later life?

9   We strongly agree with the importance of character and resilience in enabling young people to be successful and to thrive in later life.

Question 11: Thinking about the aspects of character and resilience that you think are most important in order for people to be successful in life, are there any that you feel are not covered in the list included? If so, please list these and tell us why you feel they are important.

10   We agree that the listed aspects of character and resilience are important.

11   Resilience, as described in bullet point (d) ('the importance of being able to bounce back from the knocks that life inevitably brings us'), is of crucial importance. However, as indicated in paragraph 3 above, it is important to recognise that young people with challenging lives, or who have undergone traumatic experiences, will inevitably find this more difficult, and may need specialist help and support to work through these experiences. The advisory group, and schools and colleges implementing its eventual recommendations, must be careful not to appear glib about the challenges many young people face. 'Bouncing back' from the 'knocks' that some young people face is often difficult and traumatic. The language used here risks trivialising and dismissing too many children's lived experience.

Question 12: Which aspects of character do you think are most important in the workplace, or most valued by employers?

12   We believe bullet points (b), (e) and (f) are the most important in the workplace, or most valued by employers, from the list provided. However, we feel there are additional aspects of character that are not listed that should be considered, some of which are key personal attributes. These are:
- social skills
- teamwork skills
- compassion (kindness)
- tolerance

Question 13: What activities and approaches do you think are most effective in supporting the development of character and resilience? What evidence do you have to support this?

13   We believe that many activities and approaches already undertaken routinely in schools are effective in supporting the development of character and resilience. In sport, for example, young people develop understanding of winning and losing. Those working with young people can see the impact of such activities, but they are virtually impossible to measure in data terms.

14   Examples of activities that place young people in situations they have not been in before strongly support the development of character and resilience. These include public speaking, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and combined cadet forces.

Question 14: We are keen to understand how access to character building activities can help make the greatest positive difference to groups of children and young people vulnerable to poorer life outcomes, such as those living in poverty/with economic disadvantage, having a disability or SEN, being a young carer, living in care and others.
   What examples of good practice do you have that demonstrate how barriers to participation in activities can be overcome for these groups?

15   Character-building activities are particularly important for children and young people vulnerable to poorer life outcomes. Schools and colleges are skilled in ensuring these young people have access and opportunity to such activities, and in giving them the confidence to take participate.

16   Participation in character-building activities must, of course, sit alongside the core work schools and colleges do with vulnerable children and young people every day. Reading, for example, is one of the most important ways in which children develop understanding and empathy. Supporting disadvantaged young people to overcome the word gap and become keen readers is, arguably, the most important way in which schools help them to build character and achieve high outcomes.

17   It is important for the advisory group to recognise that schools' and colleges' capacity to provide these types of experience for young people is being severely compromised by the current chronic under-funding of education.

18   School funding per pupil has fallen by eight per cent in real terms over the past eight years, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies[1]. ASCL analysis has shown that the level of per pupil funding needed to deliver the basic expectation on schools in

England in 2019/20 currently has a shortfall of £5.7 billion per year[2]. In our sixth form and FE colleges the situation is even bleaker.

19   Pressures on High Needs Funding are creating further pressure on all schools, particularly those with high levels of pupils with SEND. We know that this is leading to significant and unsustainable overspends in the High Needs Block in many areas.

20   These cuts are having a devastating impact on school and colleges' ability to deliver the education that children and young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, need and deserve. They have been forced to reduce staffing, leading to larger classes, less one-to-one and small-group support for pupils with additional needs, cuts to the curriculum, cuts to extra-curricula activities, and reduced support such as specialist mental health support. An ASCL survey in 2017[2] found that almost all respondents were having to make budget cuts, with 60% saying these cuts were severe and many expressing particular concern over the impact on the provision for the most vulnerable students. Things since then have only got worse.

21   Whilst we welcome the government's desire to support schools and colleges and developing character-building activities for children and young people, we cannot do so without making it clear that the barrier to this is rarely a dearth of good ideas, but a chronic lack of money with which to implement them.

Question 16: We are keen to understand how developing character and resilience in children and young people may contribute to reducing the likelihood of gang membership and youth violence (e.g. knife crime), and preventing anti-social attitudes. Are you aware of any character-related work focused on this area?

22   The reasons behind the growth in gang membership and youth violence in some of our cities and regions are myriad and complex.

23   ASCL's response to the recent government consultation on Serious violence: a new legal duty to support multi-agency action[3], outlined some of our views on the role schools should, and should not, be expected to play in contributing to addressing this issue. The main point we made in this response is that serious crime is primarily an issue of organised adult crime in which some of our most vulnerable children can become 'collateral damage'.

24   Schools can certainly play a role in helping children to develop strong character and, to some extent, to resist partaking in anti-social or violent behaviour. However, it would be naïve in the extreme to believe that character education can play more than a very small part in halting the disturbing increases in violent crime and anti-social behaviour we are currently witnessing.

25   Alongside the cuts to school budgets, we have also experienced severe recent cuts to both local authority and police budgets. Schools and colleges are having to carry to deal with the effects of the drastic reduction in the network of support services that used to sit around a school/college and the communities they serve.

26   Developing character and resilience in young people in hugely important and, as we've made clear through this response, we welcome the establishment of this working

[2] www.ascl.org.uk/news-and-views/news_news-detail.survey-finds-class-sizes-are-rising-as-a-result-of-funding-crisis.html
[3] www.ascl.org.uk/policy/consultation-responses_news-detail.serious-violence-new-legal-duty-to-support-multi-agency-action.html

group. We would sound a warning, though, about over-playing the role that character education can play in addressing some of the acute societal issues we are currently facing. These issues are deep and complex, and require more than a sticking plaster to solve them.

D. Conclusion

27   We are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this call for evidence.

28   We hope that this response is of value to the process. ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

Tiffnie Harris
Primary Specialist
Association of School and College Leaders
5 July 2019