Character building: Why character is essential for career readiness

By Baroness Morgan of Cotes

This paper outlines the importance of character development in education, and considers what policymakers can do to ensure it is prioritised appropriately.

KEY POINTS

- For all the vital progress made in the English education system, with a more rigorous curriculum and more students securing foundational knowledge, an excellent education is about much more besides.
- It is increasingly clear that to ensure young people are career ready requires the education system to develop their 'character'
    - Traits like self-belief, determination, self-control and coping skills are critical to educational success and valued by employers
    - While the careers and education system is increasingly holistic, young people's confidence in key skills tends to dip in secondary school – suggesting further to go
- We should seek to build on innovative practice – co-designing curriculum resources with employers, building in more and better workplace experiences and enrichment activities – to ensure more students can benefit from such opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Policymakers should ask themselves three sets of questions:
    - Are there enough opportunities inside and outside the curriculum to develop the character traits young people need for the future? Are these tracked and are they equally distributed?
    - How can we strengthen the role of employers in the system? What further incentives are there to ensure their outreach activities build the traits needed for the future?
    - How best can we support teachers with space, time and development to develop character traits?

At the Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) our mission is to help every young person find their 'next best step'. As the SMF's review of careers education pointed out, this has lots of components.[1] It involves inspiring young people about what's possible (particularly those who face more barriers), giving them powerful experiences with employers and supporting them with specific guidance. As the number of career pathways available to young people evolves to match our fast-changing economy, this work remains as important as ever.

However, to ensure young people flourish when they arrive in the workplace and are truly 'career ready', there is more to do. The long-discussed notion of 'character' – who we are, how we interact with others, the qualities we display – is a fundamental part of preparing young people for the next decade and beyond. Developing positive character traits is good for young people and employers alike.

CHANGING EXPECTATIONS OF WORK

Meaningful work has always involved more than simply performing the tasks set out in a job description. Individuals and organisations thrive when there is a positive culture that everyone contributes to. In fact this is something young people have an increasing appetite for[2].

This is now more urgent, given our changing expectations of how organisations should operate, internally and externally. It is not sufficient for any employer to perform well – they must nurture a strong and ethical culture and contribute positively to our society and communities. Those workplaces that fall short will eventually be found out – by employees, customers, suppliers, commentators and others.

It therefore follows that an improved careers system in England needs to advise on more than just careers and qualifications. We need to have a view on the type of person needed in those careers. We need to help Careers Leaders and others develop the traits and values that students will need to succeed in (and build) flourishing workplaces.

EDUCATION NOW AND NEXT

Since 2010 we have seen huge changes in the English education system. We have new school structures, a new knowledge-rich curriculum, and significant skills reforms. We have the Education Endowment Foundation and the Chartered Institute of Teaching. We have governors who operate across schools in multi-academy trusts.

We have learned a lot. How we think about teaching and learning has been transformed by leaps in cognitive science and our understanding of memory. Research has taken centre-stage.

We have seen significant improvements in standards – particularly reading – thanks to the determined focus on phonics by the (near) ever-present former schools minister, Nick Gibb. More than half of pupils in England now reach the High International Standard in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)[3], compared to an international median of 36%.

But the next decade won't be the same as the last. No service, public or private, and therefore no workplace will be untouched by the trends that surround us. The growth of artificial intelligence, quantum computing, the onset of the 100-year life, the transition to net zero (and the consequences if we don't get there), herald both an age of uncertainty but also an era of possibility. The young people at school today stand on the precipice of this era.

The question for all of us is how we can help them get ready for this future? What will give them the best chance of success?

KNOWLEDGE AND CHARACTER

The acquisition of knowledge and enhancing the rigour of the curriculum has been a focus of the English education system under successive Conservative education secretaries since 2010. We all firmly subscribed to the view that ambitions should be set high for every student and there are some core subjects, such as English and Maths, which remain non-negotiable for all students. They are the building blocks for all further study and work. With knowledge comes confidence, as well as the broadening of horizons – both crucial for the future.

However, an excellent education is about acquiring foundational knowledge and much more besides.

Helping young people develop positive 'character' traits is an old idea that endures. In fact, the more things change, the more important it becomes. From Aristotle onwards, educators have focused on how to develop human flourishing. They considered, as I do, that fulfilling careers (and lives) depend on the skills and traits we have the chance to develop early on.

Character is a complex concept – affected by a wide range of factors – many out of the control of educators. However, schools and colleges build cultures that affect how children feel about themselves and interact with each other. Teachers inspire ambition and resilience. Enrichment activities provide contexts for developing confidence and skills.

When the Education Endowment Foundation looked at this[4] they alighted on a number of character traits that when developed in schools help young people in their studies:

- Self-belief
- Determination
- Self-control
- Coping skills

Employers want similar things. They emphasise what might be called 'applied' character traits – skills of the workplace like speaking, listening and teamwork. Adaptability in the face of disruptive change features too. Character education experts, the Jubilee Centre at the University of Birmingham, talk of 'performance virtues' like resilience and leadership.

And although there can be definitional disagreements, in practice you find broad consensus amongst educators, experts and employers of the need to develop certain key personal attributes that set young people up for the future.

CAUGHT AND TAUGHT

The best schools in England – private or state – see character as crucial. They both teach character explicitly and provide opportunities for it to be 'caught'. In practice this often means a common and repeated language frame for school values, dedicated curriculum time to explore what these mean in practice, and an extensive enrichment programme. In all cases this is supported by dedicated leadership, co-ordination and evaluation.

Since September 2019, Ofsted inspections have recognised the important role schools play in the development of their pupils' character through the personal development section. Character is specifically mentioned in the judgement's criteria and three specific character traits are set out, namely 'resilience, confidence and independence'.

There are wider debates needed around the role of Ofsted and the judgments it makes. But Ofsted inspectors will always need a framework and the fact that the framework now recognises school inputs to developing the character of their students is something to welcome.

CHARACTER AND CAREERS

So what role can careers education play in building the character traits that employers need?

The modern system is already more holistic than it has been in the past – more in the mainstream, less at the margins. There is a common and well supported framework – the Gatsby Benchmarks[5] – which emphasises the importance of employer experiences and the need to weave career awareness into the curriculum. Through the hard work of Careers Leaders in schools and colleges and place-based Careers Hubs we have seen improvements in, amongst other things, awareness of apprenticeships and 'not in employment, education, or training (NEET) prevention.

However, there is space to go further. Through large-scale student surveys[6] we are now able to consider how confident young people are about their next steps and whether or not they feel they have the character traits necessary for the future. Although the data says there is 'more readiness' in general, young people's confidence in traits like 'aiming high' dip during secondary school, despite being high on entry. This is a matter of fairness too. Young people from poorer backgrounds often have less confidence than their more advantaged peers, particularly in areas like leadership.

More specifically, young people don't feel confident about the interview process and their ability to present their best selves. This goes to the heart of the challenge. Young people need both technical speaking skills and the confidence to succeed in these contexts. Employers recognise their role here too, reporting this an area where they struggle to provide the right sort of support[7].

In a sense in this case, and others, career development is character development.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?

We already know that there is some great practice all around. This often involves deliberately utilising opportunities to develop character traits inside and outside of the curriculum. For example, when Pinewood Studios and Academies Enterprise Trust worked together to create Maths curriculum resources, they were able to link classroom learning to the skills required in the creative industries. This included highlighting not only how important ratio and proportion were for film sets – but crucially the role of teamwork and responding to feedback. The impact was young people were more engaged in their Maths, and more aware of the ways they will be asked to operate in the modern workforce. Using this same co-design model, Pfizer have recently launched a new Science curriculum for years 7-10, to secure the same outcomes.

Workplace experiences are important too. The more authentic, the better. The Ladywood and Perry Barr Partnership is part of the NHS in Birmingham. They work with the George Dixon Academy to train students as community researchers and ask them to work on projects related to maternity care and aftercare – feeding back findings to clinical teams. This sort of exposure to employers is more than just learning about jobs and skills. It is about learning the behaviours and values of the modern workplace.

Enrichment activities – volunteering, adventure, sport – also have an important role to play in the development of character. They build skills through practice and experience (and also help to raise standards[8] and influence intentions[9] to stay in education.) And yet these opportunities are unevenly distributed[10]. There are superb organisations across the country delivering brilliant programmes but as the current schools' minister, Damian Hinds, noted when he was last in the Department for Education, there may be ways to ensure more young people have access to enrichment.

WHERE NEXT FOR POLICYMAKERS?

So what does this mean for policy? There are three sets of questions to consider:

- Are there enough opportunities inside and outside the curriculum to develop the character traits young people need for the future? Are these tracked and are they equally distributed? Both the government and the opposition are looking to review the curriculum in the next Parliament. Both have expressed an interest in broadening the offer.

- How can we strengthen the role of employers in the system? What further incentives are there to ensure their outreach activities build the traits needed for the future? There is a huge amount of goodwill and some excellent programmes. The strengthening careers system has some useful data and local infrastructure that could support further development. The CEC's Teacher Encounters programme[11] would allow employers to further explain why character traits are critical for the opportunities they offer.

- How best can we support teachers with space, time and development to develop character traits? There are challenges in the system at the moment, not least those linked to workforce retention. However, as the EEF has noted[12] high quality professional development opportunities make a difference. Equally, it is important to think of character, as very many headteachers do, as part of the everyday life of school – not an add on.

Michael Gerson's phrase 'the soft bigotry of low expectations' captures so brilliantly the need to have high expectations of all young people, regardless of background. Although often seen through the lens of academic achievement or the acquisition of knowledge the same test can be set for the acquisition of character traits and values which we know will set people up for flourishing in life. As we look to the future there are opportunities to fuse character and careers to build a rich and rounded education for young people.

ENDNOTES

[1] Niamh O Regan and Aveek Bhattacharya, "Fulfilling Its Potential?" (Social Market Foundation, 2022).

[2] https://www.deloitte.com/global/en/issues/work/content/genzmillennialsurvey.html

[3] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1156633/PIRLS_2021_-_national_report_for_England__May_2023.pdf

[4] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904333/Character_Education_Framework_Guidance.pdf

[5] https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/careers-leaders/gatsby-benchmarks/

[6] https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/our-evidence/evidence-and-reports/fsq-insight-briefing-2022-2023/

[7] https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/our-evidence/evidence-and-reports/employer-standards-insight-briefing/

[8] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/childrens-university

[9] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/818679/An_Unequal_Playing_Field_report.pdf

[10] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/818679/An_Unequal_Playing_Field_report.pdf

[11] https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/our-evidence/evidence-and-reports/evaluation-of-the-teacher-encounters-programme/

[12] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/evidence-reviews