Catholic Character Education Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years there has been a number of studies and reports into character development in schools but there is, at present, very little research or reflection on the place of character education within the Catholic education system in England and Wales. This is surprising given that one of the stated aims of Catholic schools is the education of the whole person through a ‘personal integration of faith and life’, and ‘the gradual formation of conscience in fundamental, permanent virtues’. (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1977: 45; 47) This project aims to make a contribution to that research and reflection.

The report presents the main findings of a study that explored how character education is understood and taught in Catholic schools 1. It investigated the self-reported virtues of school leaders and pupils and how leaders viewed their role in developing good character. It also explored the extent of pupils’ Virtue Literacy informed by *A Framework for Character Education in Schools* (Jubilee Centre, 2017) and via an Ad-ICM moral dilemma test.

While this report is the first of its kind, the research presented forms part of wider investigations, principally through the work of the Jubilee Centre, into how character education is understood and taught in schools.

The purpose of this report is to provide evidence and recommendations for those in Catholic schools to consider when developing their approach to character education in the interest of human flourishing.

KEY FINDINGS

The research demonstrates that a school’s *ethos* is the single most significant element that supports character education; there is no substitute for the ethos because it embodies the purpose and sets the direction of the school. The ethos is characterised by a unity of purpose, high quality relationships and an emphasis on service to the community, all non-negotiable elements of good character education.

* Character education in the vast majority of schools was found to be implicit – a matter of *character caught* – not explicit – *character taught*.
* The reliance on the language of Gospel values rather than the virtues prevented significant opportunities to develop pupils’ Virtue Literacy.
* There was a tendency for Gospel values to be seen as platitudes which have no deliberate or significant impact on character.
* While schools made room for *Reflection* in acts of worship, opportunities for reflection, which support the development of *Virtue Reasoning*, were not an explicit feature across the curriculum.
* When presented with the language of the virtues, school leaders and pupils in all age groups regarded the theological and moral virtues rather than performance virtues (excepting resilience for the former) as most important to their character development.
* Catholic schools placed an emphasis on teaching the civic virtues and understood their role as a service to the Church and to society.
* School leaders believed that resilience is crucial to leadership, teaching and learning.
* School leaders and pupils of all age groups placed little importance on the intellectual virtues.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

**The report makes several recommendations based on the research findings and these are presented below:**

* school leaders, in concert with diocesan education services, should create a shared vision and language of the virtues;
* this shared vision should focus on a broad and balanced range of virtues, including practical wisdom;
* virtues should be incorporated into school leader and staff formation; and, resilience should be recognised as important, but only as one of a number of virtues that are to be developed in pupils and staff.

**Schools should improve the Virtue Literacy of their pupils in the following ways:**

* review the school mission statement and identify the virtues that are essential to the mission;
* do not simply replace values with virtues as this may only exchange one set of words for another – regular and deep reflection on the meaning and application of the virtues should be implemented at all levels of the school community;
* incorporate these virtues into worship, personal and social education, and teaching and learning;
* promote the correct relationship between Gospel values and the virtues in the school vision and mission;
* audit and evaluate the provision for character education, using the *Character Education: Evaluation Handbook for Schools* (Harrison, Arthur and Burns, 2016) to map elements that are character caught and character taught;
* devise and implement a plan which includes significant actions and criteria for what leaders want to see lived out within the school community;
* leaders and teachers should plan explicit opportunities across the curriculum to teach specific virtues in order to increase Virtue Knowledge and Understanding and Virtue Reasoning;
* schools should seek to develop the intellectual virtue of Reflection, a key ingredient of Virtue Reasoning, by embedding it across the curriculum; and,
* Catholic schools should take advantage of their use of bible texts and stories to orientate pupil formation and extend this to the teaching of character and virtues through reading schemes, children’s classics and other fiction.