

Helping Young People Lead With Character in a Post-Covid World



A resource from
The Archbishop of
York Youth Trust

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Community Matters: Helping Young People Lead With Character in a Post-Covid World is a series of reflections from experts in the education sector, focussing on the increasing need for the prioritisation of character education.

Over the past two years, we have seen the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our children and young people's education and well-being. Our authors reflect on the need for educating the whole child and provide a fresh way of thinking about character education in a post-Covid world.

About The Archbishop of York Youth Trust

At the Archbishop of York Youth Trust, we are passionate about developing opportunities for young people to grow in leadership, faith and character, in partnership with schools, churches and communities. Through the Young Leaders Award, we have empowered over 120,000 young people from over 1,000 schools to learn and practice key leadership skills and character virtues and to transform their communities through social action.

For more information on the Youth Trust, visit abyyt.com



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1. Leading with Character

The Most Revd and Rt Hon Stephen Cottrell

“ Now we are at a different phase of living with Covid where there are different priorities, and I think the priority now should be to our children, young people, families, and schools. ”

++Stephen Cottrell, the Archbishop of York.

Earlier this term, I wrote in the Daily Telegraph backing their [Campaign for Children](#), calling on ministers to put children and young people first as the country recovers from the devastating impact of this pandemic. We know that young people's mental health, well-being, and educational opportunities have been seriously affected. They have also had to suffer huge disruption because of school bubble policies and enforced periods of self-isolation.

A [recent survey completed by Young Minds](#) with just under 2,500 young people aged 13-25, found that 67% of them believed that the pandemic would have a long-term negative effect on their mental health. Given that we are now in a different phase of living with Covid, I think the priority should be to our children and young people, ensuring they have the help and support that they need to make up for what has been lost. However, we also need to be mindful when speaking about children and young people that we don't continually approach them using a deficit language, suggesting that they are a problem to solve or a statistic to update and bring back up to our expected levels.



Young people are full of creativity, immense potential and represent both our present and our future. Often we spend too much time talking about them as opposed to talking to them and asking what they think and how they might be able to play their part in helping us to recover from the pandemic. Over the past year, I have been [bowled over by the stories](#) shared through the Archbishop of York Youth Trust, of young people continually taking the initiative, standing in the gap, and serving some of the most vulnerable and isolated in our communities. Yes, we know young people's mental health is at serious risk and we must attend to this, but we also know that most young people are motivated and want to help our nation recover from the pandemic; they want to have a voice in the debate and practice social action, which in turn, will only help to have a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing.



For this reason, I endorsed the National Younger Leadership Groups within the Church of England, that have been run by the Archbishop of York Youth Trust and the Church of England's Foundation for Educational Leadership. Over the past year, hundreds of primary and secondary school students have joined termly Zoom calls to meet others, discuss important issues and amplify their voices about the impact of the pandemic. These young people have shared with me their desire to act against racism, combat the climate emergency and create a world where we all have equal chances in life. This is another reason why in the Church of England's strategy for the 2020s we are putting children and young people at the heart of our vision.

When Jesus walked the earth there was a radical moment in his life when he also put children front and centre. It was a time of political turmoil, significant unrest and much poverty, and whilst others held the children back, thinking of them as less important, Jesus said; “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Luke 18:15-17). I am reminded afresh of the need to respond in this time of recovery as Jesus did, by prioritising children and young people – including them in debate and letting them play their part in re-building our communities post-pandemic.

The truth is that in all the hardships of the past year, children and young people have responded and led with character. They've developed patience and resilience like never before, they've grown in kindness and compassion as they sought to respond to those in need and they've been encouraged to reflect on what is important; being thankful for the small things that have helped them to keep going.

“ The truth is that in all the hardships of the past year, children and young people have responded, and led, with character. ”



I believe it's time that we all now lead with character too, as we seek to re-build our communities post-pandemic, and the best way to do this is to start by putting children and young people front and centre. Let them not be seen as cogs in an economic system that we need to get turning again, but instead as unique and creative individuals whose voices must be heard, and character put into action as they play their role in re-building our society.

2. Leading with Character in Community

Ruth Le Breton, The Archbishop of York Youth Trust

School communities have been particularly badly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. For some, the idea of school as a place of safety and belonging where teachers and other school staff are seen as trusted adults has been undermined by frequent changes to [rules, routines and expectations](#). Full school closures and the need to rapidly move to online learning, followed by stop-start re-opening, the implementation of teaching and learning 'bubbles', extensive cleaning and testing regimes, and dramatic changes to national examinations, have put a significant strain on teachers, parents, and pupils.



“ Rebuilding that sense of the school community as a place of safety and belonging is now essential and any pressure to plunge headlong into academic catch-up should be resisted. ”

As the boundaries between home and school, private and professional lives blurred, parents struggling to teach their children, complained that schools should be providing more support and there were reports of a rise in the verbal abuse of teachers, [often during online lessons](#). Teachers struggling to meet the needs of key workers' children in the classroom, and children learning online at home, felt some parents were [abusing the system](#). As for the pupils who'd been led to believe that education was all about cramming facts and doing practice tests in preparation for exams, they felt let down and [fearful about their futures](#).

While teachers, parents and pupils were urged to show empathy and kindness towards one another, and often did in [wonderful and extraordinary ways](#), the impact of the pandemic has taken its toll on relationships and the whole [school community](#). Rebuilding the school community as a place of safety and belonging is now essential and it is widely acknowledged that time spent re-establishing personal relationships will be time well spent.



We know that even before Covid-19, children and young people's [happiness was in decline](#) and there were growing calls to make mental health and wellbeing a priority in schools. Just as anxious brains find it hard to take on new information, [make connections or be creative](#), unhappy children don't learn well or thrive. Focusing on children and young people's wellbeing will also help them [catch-up academically](#).

So how can schools ensure they support the mental health and well-being of both pupils and staff, and rebuild any damaged relationships between members of their school community? Time should be set aside for reflection and for processing the feelings and experiences that have arisen during the pandemic. An effective character education programme can support this by helping to develop 'virtue literacy', an understanding of the language used to describe character virtues (such as honesty, integrity, or courage) as well as the ability to notice these virtues in others and practice them ourselves in everyday situations.

While exploring their own experiences of the pandemic, pupils might also examine the stories of others, perhaps those in the public eye both locally and nationally, and consider the character virtues displayed through their actions. For example, pupils might consider how the footballer Marcus Rashford has used his voice to campaign for families to continue receiving free school meals during school holidays showing both kindness and perseverance. They might also reflect on initiatives such as the ‘clap for carers’ and the displaying of rainbows to support the NHS and key workers during lockdowns.

“ Now, as schools return at the start of an academic year, effective character education has perhaps got an even greater role to play. ”

Character education aims to draw out and develop the positive character virtues children already possess as well as developing their moral reasoning so they can make wise choices, get along with others and hone the skills needed to choose the right course of action, especially when navigating social or moral dilemmas. Pre-pandemic, character education programmes were already helping schools to implicitly and explicitly develop the character virtues individuals and communities need to thrive, with increasing support from the government. Statutory DfE guidance on [Relationships and Sex Education \(RSE\)](#) published in June 2019 states that a “growing ability to form strong and positive relationships with others depends on the deliberate cultivation of character traits and positive personal attributes” and in November 2019, the [Framework Guidance for Character Education](#) was also published for schools.

Now, as schools return at the start of a new academic year, effective character education has perhaps got an even greater role to play. Living through a pandemic and time of great change, the character virtues of flexibility, open-mindedness, creativity, resilience, and kindness, to name just a few, have been necessary to ensure both our individual and collective survival. They will also be necessary as we re-build our school communities, prioritising constructive and secure relationships. Developing these virtues must not be left to chance.

3. Leading with Character in the Classroom

Sajeela Shah, Teacher at Bingley Grammar School

I believe that Character Education is more relevant than ever in our schools and classrooms. The pandemic has highlighted how important it is to support others in your community, carry out acts of kindness and check in on your neighbours. This is the essence of the Young Leaders Award (YLA).



The pupils at Bingley Grammar are ethnically diverse and come from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. The YLA supports students in engaging with people in the community, giving them the opportunity to develop and hone crucial communication and teamwork skills. Given how much learning and social interaction has taken place online over the past 18 months, these are fundamental skills in developing our students for life after education in the workplace.



Each year, my students surprise and inspire me with their passion and enjoyment for this Award. The YLA educates pupils in a different way, alongside academic subjects, and plays a key role in allowing students to build their confidence and self-belief, helps them to develop social skills and allows them to see the benefits and impact of being the change and helping others. It encourages students to decide the projects that they want to work on: they come up with ideas, they plan events and all I do is facilitate the projects (within reason of course!). It may seem a simple action but, one of my students learnt how to make a cup of tea, so they could help at our annual garden party. Another asked for help and ideas to engage an elderly person in conversation.

These are skills that perhaps have become less commonplace, as communities have grown and become less connected. Some of our students may not have experience of speaking with the elderly. Through running the YLA, I have seen the importance of working alongside other organisations. In our previous partnerships with elderly residential homes, the impact has been profound, on both pupils and residents. For students, pottery painting with residents with dementia was an incredible experience, an afternoon full of care and laughter and they are memories they will all share forever.

As part of the YLA pupils learn about different inspirational leaders, both past and present, and the positive impact these leaders have on communities locally, nationally and internationally. One of the people that stands out to me and I think is a huge inspiration for students, is Amika George, who campaigns for period poverty. Her story is one that can inspire pupils to make a difference, as they start to look wider than themselves and see the needs that people in community might be facing. We have also been privileged at Bingley Grammar to be visited on several occasions by Holocaust survivor, Arek Hersch. His story of courage is incredibly powerful and moving. How he has used his experience to bring unity and hope to others is truly inspiring. I believe this is so important for our students to have these experiential learning opportunities, examples of people in community who are living out core values and leadership skills that are central to being an active member in any community.

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The pandemic has brought many challenges and difficulties for our students. While it has encouraged all of us to look after each other, to be kind and supportive, it has also put a lot of our social interactions on hold and meant that lots of our young people have become more isolated and withdrawn. The YLA is one way in which we can address these issues. It encourages kindness, compassion and thankfulness whilst also encouraging self-belief, confidence, determination and perseverance. I strongly believe that this kind of education is something that all schools should implement within their curriculum and that it is essential for rebuilding and reforming connections within and outside of our school community.

4. Leading with Character in Faith

Dr Ann Casson, National Institute for Christian Education Research

How do you bring faith alive for young people? For the last seven years, I have been researching secondary and primary church schools investigating how young people understand faith/spiritual development and what they believe helps them flourish spiritually. One of my conclusions is that for young people, faith involves both being and doing.

- 'Being' in terms of having time and space to reflect, to think about life's big questions, reflect on who you are, and wonder at creation and God.
- 'Doing' in terms of helping others, as one student said, "you can change the world with your actions if you put faith before everything".

For young people, faith is not just something to be studied and understood but something to be put into practice. It is living out the message in the parable of the sheep and the goats, within their school community, their local community and wider. It is an understanding human beings are made in the image of God and called to love God and neighbour, to serve each other.



“ For young people, faith is not just something to be studied and understood but something to be put into practice. ”

As we emerge into a world shaped by the ongoing impact of the Covid pandemic, the need for faith in action is even more acute. Within school, rooting calls for social justice within a faith context provides the opportunity to bring faith alive for young people. Many young people felt isolated during the pandemic. One school chaplain reported students were frustrated that they could not respond as a school community to issues in the local community or global issues.

I have been moved by the enthusiasm and hope of young people engaged with faith in action in my research. In one church secondary school in the north of England, the students told me of the charity work they undertook from their initiative. Their experience of the Archbishop of York Youth Trust Young Leaders Award in school had given them skills that they were now using in campaigning for the homeless, supporting the local food bank, or playing an active part in Citizens UK. One student explained that they wanted to raise awareness that young people can make a difference in their community.

“ Empowering young people to be involved and take leadership roles enables them to see faith in action and understand faith as lived out in everyday life. ”



School leadership teams have a vital role to play in enabling an environment where young people can put this enthusiasm to make a difference into practice. As a primary school head explained, she talked to the school about the Christian response to the refugee crisis and asked the pupils 'how we as a school might respond'. The children suggested a variety of activities, which they then instigated. Empowering young people to be involved and take leadership roles enables them to see faith in action and understand faith as lived out in everyday life.

Schools and churches must pay attention to young people's understanding of faith and listen to their questions about faith and social justice.

One of the most important aspects of bringing faith alive for young people is having a holistic, integrated response. Collaboration between school, church and home is critical here. The Faith in the Nexus research project found that where a robust and active relationship between church and school was perceived, there was more evidence of faith-related activities at home. For many children and their parents in the Nexus study, faith was not confined to worship activities or Religious Education in school. Faith was primarily about how you lived your life, the values espoused, and what you did – caring for others and creation.

Schools and churches must pay attention to young people's understanding of faith and listen to their questions about faith and social justice. Schools and churches should be places that enable young people to see faith lived out in the community, and they should provide young people with opportunities to engage, respond and lead.

References

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5. Leading with Character in Education

Dr Tom Harrison & Joe McDowell, Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham



As the pandemic, lockdowns, and adaptations to learning have all developed over the last two years, one thing has become abundantly clear. While classrooms might have been empty or emptier than normal, schools were never closed and teaching never stopped.

...it is problematic that the impact of the pandemic only be cast in narrow, negative terms, with pupils viewed as being 'behind' and needing to 'catch up'.

Teachers continued to teach, often in exceptionally difficult circumstances. School leaders continued to innovate, at pace. Pupils continued to learn, albeit often via video lessons or in much-depleted bubbles. While parents and carers, alongside navigating the pressures of their own lives, became emergency educators, ensuring their children's continued success.

Initial conversations on the required educational responses to the pandemic initially focussed on addressing the academic impact of lockdowns on young people's educational attainment and the need for catch up tutoring. Yet it is problematic that the impact of the pandemic only be cast in narrow, negative terms, with pupils viewed as being 'behind' and needing to 'catch up'. Such a portrayal is detrimental to pupils' mental health, which has already suffered during the disruptions caused by lockdowns.

Missing from such exchanges was any national attention to the impact on character development of all parties, pupils, teachers and parents, both in terms of character being a central tenet in any educational response, but also learning from the past year and realising any positive opportunities that have arisen. The [Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues](#) published its [Statement on Character and the Pandemic](#) in March 2021, broadcasting a call for character to be placed at the heart of recovery. Good education cannot exist without good character education and many have expressed the view that social development and well-being should be at the heart of the recovery initiatives. Indeed, Anne Longfield OBE, the former Children's Commissioner for England, noted that we must focus on,

“ ...Enabling every child, from whatever background, not just to learn in the classroom, but also to develop their own interests at weekends and in the holidays. Finding joy in finding out, with confidence and resilience by forging their own path. ”



Aristotle, and many others since, have taught us that a community is made up of human relationships. Living together with others and forming positive relationships can help us to lead richer, more meaningful, and more fulfilling lives. Whether they be with immediate peers or more distant connections to others in their communities, most of the relationships that sustain pupils have been, at best, limited or suspended and, at worst, cut off altogether.

Many parents and teachers are aware that there has never been a more important time to prioritise character education. And those communities with schools at their centres, that focus on character in a meaningful, intentional and reflective way, are more likely to re-forge the social bonds fractured by the events of the pandemic.

The flexibility, determination, critical thinking and community awareness needed to adapt to the uncertainty of these new learning settings, or the compassion, civility and patience shown by so many to ensure pupils continued to achieve, and indeed often by the pupils themselves as well, while challenging we should not lose sight of the fact that for many this has been a time of positive character development.

And yet, thus far, a character focus has been almost wholly absent from policy and press attention. This is certainly a missed opportunity. The recovery curriculum could be framed as an opportunity for creativity, courage and adventure, reconnecting with local communities through social action and service, while also providing the space to reflect, consolidate and celebrate those positive character traits exhibited by so many people, in so many different ways over the past 18 months.

“ The recovery curriculum could be framed as an opportunity for creativity, courage and adventure, reconnecting with local communities... ”



Taught in classrooms, caught in communities and sought by pupils who have benefited from positive role models and the opportunities to thrive, character provides a language for young people to act with purpose and to fulfil their potential. We must support young people by helping them to learn in creative ways, together with others, enabling them and those around them in their communities to build back stronger, toward a shared, flourishing future.

Weblinks

www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/

www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/characterandthepandemic

Find Out More About Character Education

At the Archbishop of York Youth Trust, we have lots of ways that you can learn more about character education and social action.

- Join us for a [free webinar](#)
- Download our [free Community Matters resources](#) for KS1, KS2 and KS3 pupils
- Find out how the [Young Leaders Award](#) can be embedded within your school setting

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