

The Last Human Freedom: Choice, Character, and Responsibility

Introduction

Every Year 9 pupil at Blundell's has a lesson a week on Character Education. In the very first session, one of the first tasks I set for each class is around choice: do our choices define our character, or is it our character that determines our choices? As we begin to unpack that rather vexing matter, we generally stumble across further questions like whether our character is shaped by our environment or whether it is genetic; something we inherit from our parents? How much agency do we have in determining our character? I ask pupils how they would define 'good character' and also what the point of having a 'good character' is.

These are great questions, and 13- and 14-year-old pupils are very able to engage in a meaningful debate about them. They have an innate curiosity about who they are and why they are the way they are. One of the appealing aspects of Character lessons is that there are no exams or tests, and in reality, there are probably no right or wrong answers. That frees pupils up to explore and, hopefully, to take risks in their exploration of this important subject.

I often tell pupils and parents that grades matter, but character matters more. Frustratingly, it has, on more than one occasion, been fed back to me that parents have interpreted that as meaning that grades do not matter. It is a baffling conclusion to draw from a very important statement. Of course, grades matter. Good grades open all sorts of opportunities and at the end of the day, it is the bread and butter of our profession in this country (not all countries put quite the same emphasis on grades as we do here in the UK). However, I strongly believe that we are not defined by our grades, and whilst they may determine where we start our post-school journey, they will most certainly not be the deciding factor in where we end up.

Other than for the most selective university courses, grades will not be the most significant factor immediately after school. Even for those courses, like medicine, simply having good grades isn't a guarantee of winning a place. Character is far more likely to have a significant impact than our grades on almost all facets of our post-school lives: as employers and as employees, as a spouse or a parent or a friend. Character will play a key part in your work ethic and your attitude to contributing to society. Your character is far more likely, in the long run, to determine the choices you make and what you choose to make of your life.

Choices! That is where we started the conversation: is your character the result of your choices or are your choices the result of your character. My pupils will almost always conclude that the answer is both! Character is shaped by the choices we make. Good choices strengthen our character, whereas poor choices undermine our character. That implies agency. If we can make more good choices than bad ones, then on balance our character will strengthen and grow. So, what do we do with bad choices? Well, my pupils will tell me, if we reflect on our poor choices and we learn from them, then perhaps we can turn them into positive choices. For example, if I have said something unkind about one of my friends behind their backs, that does not feel great – especially if our friend finds out – however, if I take responsibility and apologise and make amends then, ultimately, I will grow from it, and perhaps our relationship will be restored and even strengthened. I will learn lessons about humility and forgiveness and mercy and compassion and lots of other good things.

Tending to our character and taking responsibility for it is one of the most important life lessons we can teach children. At Blundell's, our ambition is to give pupils an emotional literacy to begin the process of learning about and accepting themselves. What a privilege that is for us.

Is Character ‘taught’ or ‘caught’?

Schools like Blundell’s offer a varied and enriching co-curricular programme with one of the key intentions being the development of character. It is assumed that by playing team sport, undertaking challenging physical activities, like Ten Tors, through to the discipline of choral and orchestral music, and the creativity and supportive nature of drama performances, pupils acquire certain character strengths.

I am sure that is true. How can the Grade 8 clarinettist not develop intrinsic motivation and self-discipline? How can you not build resilience and grit when walking 35-miles across Dartmoor? How can you not learn something about teamwork and camaraderie from playing hockey for the UI4C team? There are so many wonderful lessons pupils learn from all these activities, and it certainly is one of the main reasons we do them and why it is such an important aspect of school life.

There is an element of learning by doing. You can’t learn everything from a book.

Viktor Frankl and Choices

Having said that, there is a particular book that I have found inspirational and which we have used as the basis for helping pupils to reflect on the choices that they make. The book is called ‘*Man’s Search for Meaning*’ by the Austrian psychologist and neurologist Viktor Frankl (1905 – 1997). Frankl was a Holocaust survivor and the first part of this short book describes his time in various concentration camps, including Auschwitz, while the second part describes his interpretation of his experiences, which he codifies into a helpful model.

Frankl famously said: “*Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.*”

And so, we return to the theme of choices.

Frankl said that we all have an ability to respond (response-ability) to things that happen to us. That power of choice is what he referred to as “*the last of the human freedoms.*” However, in making those choices he identified four elements that assist us in ensuring that our choices are intentional, and good.

1. **Self-Awareness:** This allows us to recognise our feelings and to manage our emotions. Helping young people to identify what they are feeling and how those emotions affect them is an important starting point in them taking responsibility for their decisions.
2. **Conscience:** This helps us to consider what we *should* do. Helping children to think through the ethical and moral perspectives of a decision is important, and engaging with our conscience helps in that. If “conscience is the inner voice which warns us someone may be looking” (H.L.Mencken) then a *conscientious* person makes sure that if others are watching, they approve of what they see!
3. **Imagination:** This is about being creative in envisioning the outcome that we hope for. Human beings are blessed with the ability to imagine something that does not yet exist and in doing so we can work through different scenarios in our minds eye, intentionally considering different options and imagining their likely outcomes.
4. **Independent Will:** This asks the question ‘how do YOU want to respond’? This takes all the above and integrates them into an outcome for which we can take full responsibility – and then we commit and see it through.

It is a powerful model and a constructive way in which young people feel empowered to make choices – and ultimately it teaches them to take responsibility – because they are able to choose their response.

So, whilst we believe strongly that much of character development comes from experience, there are certain things that we can intentionally do which may enhance or accelerate the learning that comes from those experiences.

Character Strengths

In Martin Seligman's book 'Flourish' he dedicates a significant amount of time to the concept of character strengths. Seligman is popularly known as the father of Positive Psychology, a branch of psychology that looks at pre-emptive positive mental health. He highlights the significance of recognising our strengths, and playing to our strengths, as being key to our mental well-being.

The idea that playing to our strengths is good for us is not novel. We know that if we do things that we are good at and which we enjoy (and often there is a strong correlation between the two) that it requires far less energy – mental and physical – than doing something that we find difficult, or that does not come naturally to us.

From quite an early age, children learn what they are good at and what they find difficult, but they seldom develop a literacy to describe their character strengths until much later in life. I have interviewed hundreds of pupils for scholarships over the years and one of the standard questions is: what is your greatest character strength. Invariably they want to tell me what they are good at; things like maths or singing or tennis. When I nudge them towards their character rather than their skills, they will think quite hard and usually come up with something like kindness or friendliness. Both are admirable traits, but the low range of vocabulary around this subject is notable.

One of the things we try to do as part of our Character lessons is to give pupils the opportunity to explore their character strengths. We use Seligman's free online test called the VIA Character Strengths for Children, although with staff we have used the professional package offered by Gallup's Strengthfinders.

I always enjoy the lesson where the pupils do their online assessment. The feedback they get ranks 24 different strengths in order and they always check their top five and then scan their lowest scoring one. We are often far more fascinated by our weaknesses than our strengths!

Sometimes there is a bit of anxiety involved around their strengths. Some strengths appear to be a bit sexier than others! Who wouldn't want 'Courage'? And is 'Forgiveness' really a strength? 'Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence'. What does that even mean?

There is always the debate about whether character strengths are the product of nurture or nature and the prevalence of 'Humour' and 'Gratitude' as two of the more common traits suggest that there is a degree of nurture involved. Young people value humour almost above all else and they know that they are fortunate to have the opportunities we have at Blundell's, hence the gratitude.

Usually, it does take a bit of thought before the realisation dawns that they do have a 'Love of Learning' or that they are 'Hopeful and Optimistic'. Explaining that not everyone finds 'Forgiveness' easy, or that your 'Sense of Justice' may not be universal, leads to young people beginning to recognise their uniqueness. They also quickly start to notice when they are using their strengths. As with all strengths, the more we use them, the more proficient we become, and the greater the differentiating benefit we derive from them. The first point though, is recognition and awareness, then follows skilful use and implementation.

There is one further lesson to be learned from character strengths and that is that most of our weaknesses are the shadow to our strengths. The person who is a great optimist may struggle to hear and respond appropriately to someone who is a bit more pessimistic, and may not heed the warnings. Someone who is very forgiving may find it hard to take a stance when people let them down repeatedly. The danger is that

life is perceived as a journey where the purpose is simply to acquire strengths and discard weaknesses. Whereas it is, of course, much more nuanced and subtle than that.

The Supercar vs the Sailing Boat

Some people see life as being comparable to driving a car, and success being measured by how far and how fast you travel in your allotted time on earth. According to this theory, a powerful engine and an aerodynamic vehicle are the key ingredients of success. Of course, that analogy works best if the road is straight and smooth and, preferably, wide. In this instance, putting your foot on the pedal and pressing down hard is pretty effective. However, the reality is that the road is seldom straight or smooth, and at times it can be narrow. Rather inconvenient, there may well be other cars on the road too. The powerful aerodynamic supercar may become more of a hindrance than a help if the terrain changes.

I find a much more helpful analogy is that of a sailing boat. The task in life is to learn to become an excellent sailor. The boat is obviously important, but much more important is the ability of the sailor to utilise the instruments that will help them stay on course. Intelligent responses to changes in the information means staying ahead of the winds and the currents. Having a good, strong boat helps, but critically, a good sailor uses the wind and the currents to their advantage. The sailor knows just how their sail needs to be set in order to capture the wind.

To me, character education is about teaching young people to become outstanding sailors: adaptable, courageous, wise, resourceful and generous.

Conclusion

What is it all for? What is the point?

Pope Francis puts it very well:

“Rivers do not drink their own water; trees do not eat their own fruit; the sun does not shine on itself, and flowers do not spread their fragrance for themselves. Living for others is a rule of nature. We are born to help each other.”

We develop good character to be a blessing to others and to make a positive difference to the world we live in. Good character leading to better choices result in more positive outcomes.

And then there is this, from Brigadier General Joshua Chamberlain, who was speaking at the dedication of the memorial at the Battle of Gettysburg, some twenty years after the event. He said:

“We know not of the future and cannot plan for it much. But we can hold our spirits and our bodies so pure and high, we may cherish such thoughts and such ideals, and dream such dreams of lofty purpose, that we can determine and know what manner of men we will be whenever and wherever the hour strikes, that calls to noble action.”

(Joshua Chamberlain’s Address for the 20th Maine Monument at Gettysburg, October 3, 1889)

The future path of our children’s lives is unpredictable, but we all desire for them to be equipped to deal with whatever comes their way. We want them to navigate life with a clear moral compass, guided by integrity, compassion, and an unwavering commitment to doing what is right. This is Character.