Character education in England 2011-2021: A policy analysis, experiment and survey

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Abstract

Since the new millennium, there has been a global resurgence in character education, gaining momentum in England following the London Riots in 2011. In the subsequent decade, a productive but polarised debate has emerged around the role of 'character' in schools and society. This integrated thesis comprises three studies (summarised in three papers) to investigate the language, logic and political implications of character education policies in England. Taken together, the findings indicate that contemporary policy discourse is underpinned by conservative and religious assumptions, that interpretive frames can subtly shape stakeholder preferences, and that public attitudes are significantly out of step with current policy rhetoric. The discussion chapter situates these findings within wider philosophical debates, questioning whether character education might yet be 'rescued' through a more pluralistic, evidence-based conception of moral and civic development.

The moral foundations of character education: A corpus-linguistic analysis
The first study aimed to test the various criticisms of character education against a corpus of policies, published between 2011 and 2021. Using computer software and techniques from corpus linguistics, I conducted a comparative analysis of 19 policies (n=33,434 words) published by the UK Conservative government, as well as 11 policies (n=25,190 words) and 9 stories (n=32,426 words) – intended as teaching materials - published by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. The evidence suggests that government policy can be reasonably classified as neoliberal and conservative, whilst the Jubilee Centre's teaching materials, if not their policies, include significant elements of religious thought. It also highlights different linguistic framings of character education, which inform the following experiment.

Two metaphors for character education: A psychological framing experiment
The second paper aims to establish whether different framings of character education predict different policy responses. In an online experiment, participants (n=861) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, both of which described a problem with education in a hypothetical city. In one condition, the problem was framed using organic, gardening language (cultivate/flourish); in the other it was framed using inorganic, business parlance (build/compete). Participants were asked to rank policies, the hypothesis being that the garden and business frames would predict nurturant or disciplinary responses, respectively. A logistic regression found no significant framing effects, except among Asians, a curious anomaly. The analysis also found strong effects for age, gender, and politics.

Character education in England: A potential sea-change?
The third paper draws on data from a follow-up survey experiment, in which participants (n=400) were asked to recommend a policy response, rather than ranking a list of options. Whilst the first experiment (Paper 2) demonstrated that the UK government's policies were broadly in keeping with the preferences of right-wing (but not left-wing) Britons, in this survey (Paper 3) these differences were less pronounced. Right-wingers still advocated for some typically (small c) conservative policies, such as 'back to basics' or 'tough discipline', but inductive coding revealed that, overall, their responses were similar to the political left, with both opting for more systemic solutions, such as increased funding and mental health provision.

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Chapter one:
Introduction

To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society (Theodore Roosevelt).

Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education (Martin Luther King Jr.).

Knowledge will give you power, but character respect (Bruce Lee).

Rationale

Education serves multiple functions. One is to pass academic knowledge from generation to generation; another is to inculcate children into the norms and laws of society, such that they have the requisite social, moral and emotional skills to function as adults. The emphasis that countries place on the academic versus the sociomoral imperative is historically and culturally variable. Originally, literacy was simply a prerequisite to reading sacred texts, the academic function of schooling very much in service to the moral/religious function. According to Henrich (2020), this was especially the case for Protestants in the UK and US, who placed great importance upon individuals making their own connection with the Bible, rather than relying on received wisdom from the clergy. Although in recent decades the academic function has taken precedence – in accordance with the standards, testing and accountability agenda – *explicit* attempts at teaching social/emotional/moral virtues have also become more prevalent. Over the years, these programmes have masqueraded under numerous guises, such as moral education, values clarification, and social and emotional learning (Noddings, 2019).

Character education has become the dominant approach to children's non-academic development since the 2011 London riots. Speaking in their aftermath, Professor James Arthur – now head of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues – argued that Britain's 'moral rot' might be rectified by an 'aggressive programme of character education' (2011). This dovetailed neatly with Prime Minister Cameron's 'Broken Britain' narrative, and his attempt to re-moralise the country (Cameron, 2011a). Since the riots, 'character education' has grown into a successful policy network, culminating in the new Character Education (DfE, 2019) and OFSTED inspection (2023) frameworks. This move has not been without its critics, however, and the academic literature is deeply divided surrounding the ethics and effectiveness of character education. This study makes an original contribution to the literature in three ways: first, by focusing systematically and objectively on the language of character education policies; second, by combining discursive and experimental approaches; and third, by bringing moral education into closer dialogue with moral psychology. I explain each in turn.

As a key advocate in the House of Lords, Conservative peer James O'Shaughnessy argues that talk of virtue in 2010 would have met with 'questioning looks from MPs, civil servants, teachers and parents' (Arthur et al., 2020, p. 73). His claim is well founded. In 2007, Nick Gibb referred to social and emotional learning as 'ghastly' (Northen, 2012), and in 2014 Michael Gove praised the head of OFSTED for ridding the inspection framework of such 'politically correct peripherals' (Gove, 2014). Central to the network's mission, then, was to develop and legitimise a 'language of character' (Arthur et al., 2020, p. 1), in no small part through a programme of 'virtue literacy' (p. 16). As yet, however, few studies have analysed

this discourse and its ideological entailments. Those who have attended to the language of character (e.g. Burman, 2018) have used small samples, for example single policy documents, thus making findings difficult to generalise. I address this gap by analysing a large corpus of policies, using statistical techniques to minimise motivated reasoning and confirmation bias.

The second contribution is methodological. In a systematic review of the literature (n=109), Boeynaems et al. (2017) delineate two main methods for studying the effects of language on political persuasion. The first is a discourse-based approach and the other is experimental, drawing on evidence from response elicitation tasks. This research combines both, where the linguistic analysis is used to generate hypotheses that are then tested experimentally. The linguistic analysis draws on the 'methodological synergy' (Baker et al., 2008, p. 274) between corpus linguistics and discourse analysis, combining computerised pattern recognition with a more granular analysis of individual texts. The experimental studies follow the tradition of Thibodeau & Boroditsky (2013, 2015), who demonstrated that framing crime as either 'a virus infecting' a city or 'a beast preying on' a city could predict participants' policy responses, encouraging more preventative or punitive measures, respectively. This is the first research to combine both approaches in a single study, lending external validity to the experiment and internal validity to the linguistic analysis.

Finally, this research presents a novel theoretical lens through which to interpret the character education debate. Educational policy analyses are usually rooted in social or political theory; by contrast this study looks to cognitive linguistics and

moral psychology. Together, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and Moral Foundations Theory (Joseph & Haidt, 2006) provide well-evidenced frameworks through which to study the language and moral dimensions of character education policy. Once intimately connected, moral education and moral psychology have drifted apart over the past two decades, with the former based on outdated if not discredited understandings of the latter. As Krettenauer (2020, p. 3) argues, however, 'moral education can shield itself from the larger scientific discourse on morality for a limited period of time only'. This thesis represents an attempt to embed current debates around character education in moral psychology (which is descriptive), rather than relying on ethical or social theory (which are normative). Whilst both approaches are valuable, extant literature focuses almost exclusively on the latter, and thus this study fills a gap by providing a more objective account of character education policies.

Unless we want to raise a generation of 'skilled psychopaths [or] educated Eichmanns' (Pring, 2019, p. 47), children's academic and sociomoral development should enjoy parity of esteem in education. Many will therefore applaud the refocusing of attention on character, but there is also reason to be cautious. Following the Coronavirus pandemic, children's social, moral, spiritual and cultural (SMSC) development has come into sharp focus, and we should welcome a more holistic approach in schools. However, we should also pay close attention to how we frame the vast landscape of children's non-academic development. Given the wholesale [re]introduction of character education into English schools, a conceptual analysis of what character means, the assumptions it embodies, and the policies it prescribes seems timely.

Aims and research questions

This research began with the guiding question of whether character education policies in England are 'neoliberal, conservative, individualist and religiously-tethered' (Kristjánsson, 2013, 2021; Kristjánsson et al., 2024), as argued by critics. From here it developed into an integrated thesis comprising three interrelated studies: a policy analysis, framing experiment, and national survey. Whilst the three studies had different aims and research questions, they converged upon the same object of inquiry: character education in England since 2011. Specific details are reserved for the methodology chapter, but for now I provide a brief explanation of my three research questions, which map directly onto the three studies.

RQ1: How is character education framed in Government and Jubilee Centre policies?

This question was addressed through a corpus analysis of policies published by key actors – the UK Conservative government and the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues – between 2011 and 2021. Given that interpretations of the policies are so contested, the aim of this paper was to provide a more 'objective' measure of their ideological content, employing quantitative and replicable methods. It also aimed to distinguish between the two sets of policies (government and Jubilee Centre), since these are often treated homogeneously in the literature, an assumption the Jubilee Centre is keen to dispel.

RQ:2 Do different framings of character predict different policy responses?

This research question emerged from the preceding corpus analysis, which found that the UK government and Jubilee Centre used different language to frame the issue of character education, embodying different definitions and aims. The

government relied mainly on inorganic, business terms (build children's character so they can compete), whereas the Jubilee Centre used more organic, growth metaphors (cultivate children's character so they can flourish). Based on claims the language we use can influence our understanding of public policy, I designed an experiment to test whether framing a problem in gardening versus business language affects participants' policy choices when faced with a hypothetical scenario regarding children's moral development.

RQ3: What do the public think about character education policies?

The hypothetical scenario to which participants were exposed was carefully constructed to resemble the educational landscape in England, highlighting the lack of funding since 2010, and referencing genuine statistics around exclusions and mental health. In the two experiments, participants were asked to either rank (closed response) or recommend (open response) policies in response to the problem. This research question focuses not on the framing effects of different metaphors, but on participants' responses (independent of framing), by way of establishing whether current policies are consistent with public opinion.

Outline of thesis

Introduction

This chapter introduces character education as a policy problem that has become politically pertinent in the UK since 2000. It first provides some context, before moving onto the specific contributions of this research, and the gaps in the literature it aims to address. It introduces the aims of the research, and describes how the

three research questions and papers emerged. Finally, it provides an intended outline of the thesis, chapter by chapter.

Literature review

The literature review elaborates upon the introductory chapter, providing details of the background for the research, as well as developing its rationale. I begin with an overview of character education, examining its philosophical roots in Aristotelian virtue ethics and its historical manifestations in various social movements. Next, I focus on the re-birth of character education in England following the London riots in 2011. I explore the rise of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues – the first dedicated university department in the country – and I also attend to a range of criticisms from within academia. Finally, I review the literature on policy analysis, which underpins my methodology, before discussing the challenges of analysing moral education policies fairly and objectively.

Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the logic and details of my methodology. I begin by recapping my three overarching research questions and how they map onto my methods and papers. I then provide an overview of mixed methods research and its philosophical underpinnings, before focusing on the specifics of my design. The next section attends to the corpus analysis. I first position my research within this broad methodological tradition, and the remainder of the section attends to corpus-building and my two-step method of analysis. The following section focuses on the two survey experiments: I provide a brief history of these experiments, before focusing on recruitment, experimental design and statistical analyses. I end

the chapter by bringing the three papers together, encompassing validity and reliability, limitations, and ethics.

Paper one: policy analysis

The first paper presents evidence from the policy analysis, aimed at answering my first research question. I begin by providing some context for recent debates around the role of character education in English schools, concentrating specifically on the various criticisms of the movement. I then introduce the theoretical underpinnings of the paper – rooted in psychology and linguistics - before outlining my methodology, consisting of a lexicogrammatical and moral sentiment analysis. Next I present and discuss my findings, before attending to limitations and recommendations for future research.

Paper two: framing effects

The second paper relays the findings of a follow-up experiment, focused on the framing effects of different metaphors (garden versus business) on people's reasoning about education policy. Having introduced the theory and methods underpinning the paper, the chapter proceeds to the findings, which confirm the null hypothesis. The null result is congruent with previous studies and meta-analyses, which suggest that education (as a conceptual domain) appears especially resistant to metaphorical framing effects. Whilst metaphor appears to have little effect on participants' policy preferences, there are interesting demographic effects, which partly explain the political polarisation regarding children's character development.

Paper three: public opinion

The third paper draws on findings from a further survey experiment, in which participants were asked to recommend a policy response, rather than ranking a list of options. This paper focuses less on framing effects, and more on whether UK character education policies are consistent with public opinion. Again, following a discussion of theory and method, I present my findings. The analysis suggests that the policies advocated by the UK government are consistent with right-wing opinion when participants are presented with a menu of options (Paper two), but are less consistent when participants are asked, open-endedly, to generate their own policy responses (Paper 3). Here the preferences of self-identified right- and left-wing respondents become less pronounced.

Discussion

The discussion chapter returns to my original, overarching research question, whilst integrating findings with the existing literature. Although I had initially aimed only to establish whether the ideological criticisms of character education policies were merited, this led to further questions regarding the significance of metaphorical framing, and the degree to which current policies were reflective of public opinion. This chapter discusses these findings, as well as the philosophical issues they raise.

Conclusion

In the final chapter I draw conclusions from my research. First, I examine the implications of my findings, for both schools and policymakers. Second, I explore the limitations of my thesis, and finally, building on these limitations, I recommend future avenues for research.

Chapter two:
Literature review

> Contemporary society faces a crisis of moral character. Most of the major challenges we currently confront, at their root, have moral failures of one kind or another, for which we hold responsibility both individual and collective. Without a hint of hyperbole, these challenges include environmental degradation and climate change, rampant consumerism, poverty and increasing income disparity, ultranationalism, unilateralism, xenophobia, racism, sexism, religious intolerance, gun violence, human trafficking, drug abuse, domestic violence, unequal access to healthcare, humanitarian crises, and wars (Walker, 2020, p. 1).

Introduction

As humanity enters the 21st century it confronts myriad problems, some as old as civilization itself (e.g. conflict and xenophobia), others distinctly modern (e.g. climate change and artificial intelligence). As per the opening quotation, an increasing number of governments, scholars and educators are turning to the language of 'character' by way of response. Throughout history, young people's character has often been framed as the cause of and solution to various societal problems (Arthur & Harrison, 2012), from youth violence and dishonesty to sexual impropriety and substance abuse (Lickona, 1996). Despite falling out of favour following the Victorian era, character education has experienced a global resurgence in the new millennium, gaining traction in the US (Saltman, 2014), Canada (Winton, 2008), Australia (Cranston et al., 2010), Singapore (Tan & Tan, 2014), and Europe (Maccarini, 2016).

In Britain, the discourse around character re-emerged following a series of moral panics, notably the 2008 financial crash and 2011 riots, coupled with scandals

around bankers' bonuses and MP's expenses (Taylor, 2018). Character education has since flourished into a successful policy network and is now an integral part of school inspections in England (OFSTED, 2023). At the same time, it has been subject to widespread criticism from within and without academia. This chapter provides some necessary background and context to current debates around character education, tracing its philosophical and historical antecedents, before focusing on its re-emergence and criticisms. The second section explores the difficulties of dispassionately analysing moral education policies.

Character education

Although it has not always operated under the moniker 'character education', a concern with children's social and moral development has always been at the heart of education (Brooks, 2015; Pattaro, 2016). Since the Industrial Revolution, the academic function has taken precedence, but for most of human history the development of moral rather than intellectual virtue was considered the fundamental purpose of schooling (Brooks, 2015; Kristjánsson, 2015). Notwithstanding its historical ubiquity, character education remains a highly controversial topic (Kristjánsson, 2021), not least due to its 'historical associations with various forms of religious and moral indoctrination of the young' (Grace, 2003, p. x). Albeit traditionally associated with Christianity and social conservatism, neither of these are necessary ingredients, and indeed there have been various ideological manifestations throughout history (Arthur et al., 2020), from progressive civil rights movements to the Hitler Youth (Sayer, 2020). Part of the problem lies in definitions.

What is character [education]?

The academic literature is replete with 'multiple and contested definitions' (Arthur, 2019, p. 1) of character, coloured by different scientific and political convictions. Confusion is compounded by the fact that character education is often used as an 'umbrella term' (Otten, 2000, p. 2) to represent a wide range of programmes aimed at developing various 'soft', 'non-cognitive' or 'social and emotional' skills (Sayer, 2020). In everyday discourse too, definitions are slippery, where character is often used synonymously with good character, thus 'allow[ing] particular normative claims to be hidden' (Sayer, 2020, p. 462). To avoid conceptual confusion, this section aims to establish a working definition of character, thereby demarcating the scope of the thesis.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines character as 'the particular combination of qualities in someone or something that makes it or them different from others'. On this definition, someone might be characterised as boisterous, thus differentiating them from less boisterous individuals, but this seems to miss the moral qualities with which character is commonly associated. In the academic literature, character has been defined as 'the set of psychological characteristics that motivate and enable the individual to function as a competent moral agent' (Berkowitz, 2011, p. 153) or 'the aggregate of the psychological attributes of a person that have moral relevance' (Walker, 2020, p. 2). Both definitions recognise the individual and psychological nature of character, whilst imbuing it with a necessary moral salience. They also agree that character is a package of 'characteristics' or 'attributes', otherwise referred to as traits. The founding father of analytic educational philosophy, R.S. Peters, states that:

> Character traits are internalized social rules such as honesty, punctuality, truthfulness and selflessness. A person's character represents his own achievement, his own manner of imposing regulations on his inclinations. But the rules which he imposes are those into which he has been initiated since the dawn of his life as a social being (Peters & Cooper, 1986, p. 57).

Notwithstanding the gendered language, symptomatic of its time, Peters' definition adds a layer of nuance by recognising the social dimension of character. On Peters' account, character is defined as a property of individuals, but he also recognises that people do not construct their characters *ex nihilo:* virtues are created by society, internalised by individuals, and manifested as character traits. There is an additional sense in which character cannot be reduced to the individual, as in the case of 'national character' (Arthur et al., 2020; Mandler, 2006; Romani, 2002). In England for example, character education policy has overlapped significantly with discussions around Fundamental British Values (FBV). These values – democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, respect and tolerance – can be embodied and enacted by individuals, yet there is a sense in which they also exist at some superordinate, societal level. Bearing these caveats in mind, in the interest of precision, when this thesis refers to character [education], it invokes the following definitions, outlined by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues:

> **Character** is a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation, and guide conduct … **Character education** includes all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people to develop positive personal strengths called virtues (Jubilee Centre, 2022, p. 7).

Others define character more narrowly (e.g. Young, 2014), as synonymous with performance traits such as perseverance or resilience, but these are hollow descriptions that seem to belie many of the key properties of a complex

phenomenon. Whether or not one agrees with the ideological thrust of the Jubilee Centre, their definitions are sound and it makes sense to argue the thesis on these terms, given their influence over policy in England. Finally, by way of specifying the analytical focus of the thesis, when character education is mentioned, it pertains to children and young people of compulsory school age (5-18), unless stated otherwise. In recent years, discussions around character have spread from schools to other institutions, such as academia (Brant et al., 2020), medicine (Thompson & Maile, 2021) and the military (Arthur et. al, 2018). Whilst interesting, these developments are beyond the scope of this thesis.

Philosophical and historical antecedents

> From the Stoics, Plato and Aristotle, to Milton, Samuel Smiles and the Arnolds, the cultivation of character has always been the defining aspiration of a classical, western education (Hunt, 2014, p. 3).

Before examining the rebirth of character education in England, it helps to situate this within the broader tradition of Virtue Ethics. This is important for two reasons. First, to understand the philosophical underpinnings of 'character' versus other approaches to children's development (i.e. moral education or social and emotional learning); and second, because ancient philosophies of character are not as antiquated as they might appear. The Greek and Roman preoccupation with character formed the basis of eighteenth-century education and bears upon cultural standards that still pertain today (Ahnert & Manning, 2011). Moreover, following an intellectual resurgence of Virtue Ethics in the late 20th century (i.e. Anscombe, Macintyre), educational philosophy has experienced an 'Aristotelian renaissance' (Curren, 2010); meanwhile, Stoicism has firmly cemented itself into the 21st

century zeitgeist, propagating a new wave of philosophically-informed 'self-help'. In addition to academic developments, the past decade has also seen the rise of various populist leaders – Boris Johnson in the UK and Donald Trump in the US – who are often criticised for their 'deeply flawed moral character … with frequent allegations of sexual impropriety, conflicts of interest, nepotism, personal enrichment, corruption, blatant dishonesty, gross incivility, intolerance, and obvious malice' (Walker, 2020, p. 1). In theory, policy and practice, character appears to be 'back on the agenda' (Suissa, 2015, p. 105).

Much of ancient Greek philosophy concerned itself with the fundamental question, 'what is the best human life?'. According to Aristotle's theory of Virtue Ethics, outlined in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (350BC/2009), the ultimate purpose of human life is *eudaimonia*, typically translated as 'happiness' but better understood as 'flourishing'. Aristotle defines *eudaimonia* as 'a rational activity of the soul in accordance with virtue' (1098a16–17). Where Plato (380BC/1993) identifies four cardinal virtues - temperance, justice, prudence, and fortitude – Aristotle lists fourteen, grouping them into intellectual and moral virtues. He understands moral virtues as a 'golden mean' between two vices, the famously cited example being courage, which sits equidistant between the vices of foolhardiness and cowardice. Crucially, and herein lies the relevance to education, we are not born virtuous; it is learnt through habit. Developed by subsequent Roman philosophers (including the Stoics), medieval philosophers integrated character education into a Catholic worldview. Following Saint Ambrose and Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas supplemented Plato's cardinal virtues with the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Together, these virtues are similar but not identical to the Seven

Heavenly Virtues, which stand in opposition to the antagonistic Deadly Sins, and remain at the heart of Catholic doctrine. For centuries, Christianity has underpinned moral education in US and UK schools, and it is for this reason that modern programmes of character education are often condemned for being religiously motivated (Allen & Bull, 2018; see Kristjánsson, 2021 for response).

A brief history of moral education in England

From the medieval period until the industrial revolution, moral instruction in England was inextricable from the church. In the 18th century, Walker et al. (2015) argue that children were perceived as 'sinful', the role of moral education to guide them toward virtue, obedience and faith. At the same time, Scottish Enlightenment thinkers began to propose more secular and progressive versions of character education, notably through the industrialist and philanthropist, Robert Owen. Owen and his contemporaries believed that people's characters were shaped by prevailing environmental conditions, and thus by changing the environment it was possible to change people's character (Arthur, 2003). Notably, this puts it at odds with modern approaches, which tend to foreground individual character as a conduit for social reform, rather than *vice versa* (Jerome & Kisby, 2019). Character education reached its zenith in the Victorian era. In the wake of the industrial revolution, and the concomitant requirement to educate the masses (as opposed to just the elite), Victorian education emphasised the 'three Rs': reading, [w]riting and [a]rithmetic, but also prioritised the 'moral training' of students (Bates, 2019, p. 695). The virtues that were sought and taught were those valued by Victorian society, e.g. manners, refinement, and distinction (Klein, 1989), the virtuous child being first and foremost 'polite' (Walker et al., 2015). Notably, the preoccupation with character enjoyed

support from across the political spectrum, with advocates including liberals such as Herbert Spencer and J.S. Mill, as well as socialists such as the Fabian Society (Taylor, 2018, p. 5).

According to Arthur (2003), following the Victorian period character education experienced a hiatus, with few mentions in government policy between 1950 and 2001. Walker (2020) argues that in the aftermath of World War Two, moral education shifted towards more rationalist and secular approaches, replacing nationalistic or religious dogma with an emphasis on universal human rights and the improvement of social conditions. Character education (and its tendency to prescribe a preordained set of virtues) was anathema to the twin pillars of child-centred learning and stage theories of development that dominated psychology and education in the 1960s and 70s (Arthur, 2003). The idea of teachers being moral authorities became deeply outdated, and character education was replaced with the less didactic 'values clarification'. Following another hiatus, successive Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997 attempted to tackle a perceived moral decline by promoting traditional family values in schools. In 1988, the Thatcher government published the Education Reform Act, introducing the national curriculum, stipulating that all schools must promote the 'spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical [SMSC] development of pupils', a requirement that still pertains today. In 1996, Major's government established the National Forum for Values in Education and the Community, which aimed to determine whether it is possible to arrive at consensus regarding the values, attitudes and behaviours that should be promoted by schools. Again, this remains a perennially prescient question.

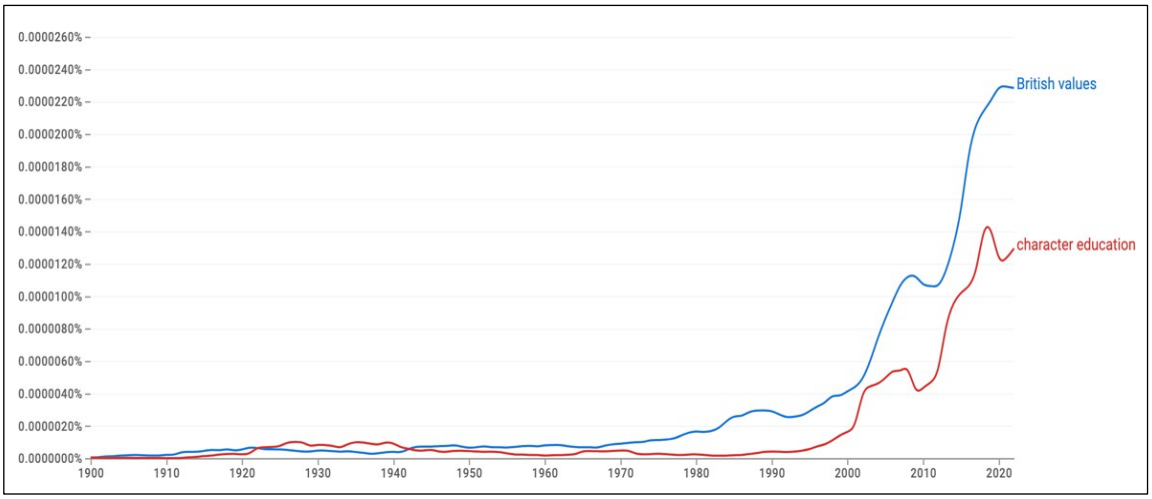
The next milestone was New Labour's publication of the Crick Report on Citizenship Education (Crick, 1998), which specified that all state secondary schools were obliged by law to provide students with an education in citizenship. Labour also aimed to enshrine moral education in the National Curriculum, recommending that schools 'recognise a broad set of common values and purposes that underpin the school curriculum and the work of schools' (DfEE, 1999, p. 10). Subsequent Green and White papers - *Building on Success* (DfEE, 2001) *and Achieving Success* (DfES, 2001) - cemented the status of Citizenship as a compulsory programme, whilst also advancing the importance of 'education with character'. In addition to civic education, the Labour government also launched the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) project, which aimed to develop children's self-awareness, management of feelings, motivation, empathy and social skills, though the initiative was shelved in 2011 due to a lack of measurable impact. Although official Labour policy shifted towards these civic, social and emotional aspects of development, others in the party bemoaned the abandonment of character education as a political project. Speaking at the launch of DEMOS, Frank Field MP (2010, cited in Taylor, 2018, p. 3) argued 'the major reason why Britain is rougher and more uncivilised than it was in the early post-war period has been the collapse of the politics of character'. He need not wait long for its return.

The rebirth of character education

Since the Conservatives gained power in 2010, initially in coalition and latterly as a majority government, 'character' has [re-]entered the educational lexicon (Jerome & Kisby, 2019). The turn to the language of character (and British Values) is highlighted in Figure 1, taken from Google Ngram, with mentions climbing around

1995 and rising precipitously after 2010. The uniformity of the two trend lines is indicative of the coevolution of discourse around individual character and national values.

Figure 1: 'Character education' and 'British Values' 1980-2022



Whilst New Labour paid lip service to 'education with character' (DfES, 2001), they focused their efforts almost exclusively on citizenship, with the aim of developing a more civically engaged, politically literate population. For the newly incumbent Conservative government, the moral indignation following the London Riots in 2011 provided fertile grounds for a rebrand. In the following years, moral education became less about political engagement and more about individual character, whilst civic education was all but subsumed by Fundamental British Values. The causes of the riots have been studied and debated for over a decade, with many highlighting systemic factors, such as the poverty caused by austerity or the fractious relationships between police and ethnic minorities (Drury et al., 2019). Speaking the day after the riots, without the obvious benefit of hindsight, then Prime Minister David Cameron voiced his explanation:

> Irresponsibility. Selfishness. Behaving as if your choices have no consequences. Children without fathers. Schools without discipline. Reward without effort. Crime without punishment. Rights without responsibilities. Communities without control. Some of the worst aspects of human nature tolerated, indulged - sometimes even incentivised - by a state and its agencies that in parts have become literally de-moralised (Cameron, 2011a).

In the aftermath of the riots, character became a staple of Cameron's 'One Nation' policy, and his attempt to fix 'Broken Britain'. In another speech, he claimed 'education doesn't just give people the tools to make a good living - it gives them the character to live a good life, to be good citizens' (Cameron, 2011b). The importance of character was foregrounded not only in Education but across governmental departments, spanning Health and Social Care. *Positive for Youth* (DfE, 2011) set out the government's cross-departmental approach, identifying character and resilience as a key priority, whilst the Child Poverty Strategy (2014–2017) recognised character as a fundamental driver of social mobility. These policies enjoyed broad political support, endorsed by left-leaning think tanks such as DEMOS (Lexmond & Grist, 2011; Lexmond & Reeves, 2009). In 2014 the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility published their 'Character and Resilience Manifesto', citing 'a growing body of research linking social mobility to social and emotional skills' (Paterson et al., 2014). Business leaders were also supportive: the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) published a report arguing that through its narrow focus on achievement, the education system was failing the majority of children in the UK (CBI, 2012). Thus, 'alongside the activities of central government, character education has been promoted by a range of non-government actors' (Allen & Bull, 2018, p. 2). Chief among these has been the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (University of Birmingham), the world's first and largest

centre dedicated to studying character. The head of the Jubilee Centre is James Arthur, a distinguished academic and 'policy entrepreneur' (Ball & Junemann, 2012). Speaking after the riots, Arthur echoes some of the Prime Minister's concerns, albeit in a more religious tenor:

> I was appalled by the looting that raged in our city streets recently. But, sadly, I was not surprised. From my perch as head of education at the University of Birmingham, I've witnessed first-hand for many years as English culture has moved rapidly away from its Judeo-Christian foundations … We've replaced God with the all-seeing eye of CCTV. In the absence of internal restraints, we've turned to external ones – but they have failed us as we've failed ourselves. We may never resurrect God in England. But we must find a way to resurrect virtue (Arthur, 2011).

Whilst Cameron attributes the riots to the breakdown in family structure (children without fathers) and a failing education system (schools without discipline), Arthur identifies the abandonment of religion as the root cause. He recommends that in lieu of a Judeo-Christian ethical framework, a secular alternative be erected in its place. This would become the *de facto* mission statement of the Jubilee Centre, who argue that character education should be *taught* (i.e. explicitly instructed), *caught* (i.e. through habituation and the school environment) and *sought* (i.e. actively pursued by schools). Informed by neo-Aristotelian theory and empirical research, the centre defines character as a mix of intellectual, moral, civic, and performance virtues (Jubilee Centre, 2022). Exactly which virtues should be taught is a thorny problem in increasingly secular, pluralistic societies, a common thread to which this thesis returns in the discussion (Chapter Seven). These disputes notwithstanding, it is certainly true that the Jubilee Centre has exerted a great deal of influence over character education policy in England, which Arthur celebrates:

> Character education has become an explicit aim of the Department for Education, which is now investing millions of pounds in promoting it in schools. The Jubilee Centre has been a major influence on this development … The language used by the Centre is increasingly being adopted and echoed in numerous speeches by policy makers and academics (Arthur et. al, 2015, p. 4).

As a government project, character education was spearheaded by Nicky Morgan during her time as Education Secretary (July 2014 – July 2016) and she has since published various books and chapters (e.g. Morgan, 2017, 2020) on the subject. Morgan launched the Character Innovation Fund in 2014, where schools were encouraged to compete for a £5 million fund dedicated to developing 'grit' and 'resilience'. The aim was for England to 'become a global leader of teaching character' (Morgan, 2014), with prize money allocated to 27 schools in total. Subsequent character education grants (2015-2019) extended this fund, leading to a total investment exceeding £14 million (Marshall et al., 2017).

Following Morgan's departure from the DfE, her successor (Justine Greening) scrapped all character education initiatives, which were subsequently resuscitated by Damian Hinds, Secretary of State for Education between January 2018 and July 2019. Under Hinds, the emphasis shifted towards extra-curricular activities and invoked independent schools as model institutions: '[o]ne characteristic that is often attributed to those who have gone to public school is that they have a thing called 'public school confidence', a kind of 'have a go' assertiveness that you have from certain types of school' (Hinds, 2019). Speaking at the Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership, Hinds spoke of various 'benchmarks' for character, informing the consequent Character Education Framework, which states:

> Schools have an important role in the fostering of good mental wellbeing among young people so that they can fulfil their potential at school and are well prepared for adult life. Schools with clear expectations on behaviour and with well-planned provision for character and personal development can help promote good mental wellbeing (DfE, 2019).

The guidance is non-statutory, and schools are encouraged to rank themselves against six benchmarks, namely:

a) What kind of school are we?
b) What are our expectations of behaviour towards another?
c) How well do our curriculum and teaching develop resilience and confidence?
d) How good is our co-curriculum?
e) How well do we promote the value of volunteering and service to others?
f) How do we ensure that all our pupils benefit equally from what we offer?

Although the initial guidance was non-statutory, it has since been codified in the updated School Inspection Framework (OFSTED, 2023). Personal development is now one of four fundamental criteria upon which schools are judged, the others being 'quality of education', 'behaviour and attitudes', and 'leadership and management'. The recent inclusion of personal development is nontrivial: although the guidance is non-statutory, schools can be (and have been) awarded 'requires improvement' in the 'personal development' category (Morgan, 2020), of which 'character' and 'British Values' are constituent parts. For example, OFSTED stipulate that 'the curriculum and the provider's wider work support learners to develop their character – including their resilience, confidence and independence', whilst also preparing 'learners for life in modern Britain by … developing their understanding of fundamental British values' (2023). To summarise, since the 2011 London riots, character education has moved from relative obscurity to being a fundamental

aspect of school inspections in England. The next section explores the various criticisms of these developments.

Criticisms of character

> A 21st century education should prepare children for adult life by instilling the character traits and fundamental British values that will help them succeed: being resilient and knowing how to persevere, how to bounce back if faced with failure, and how to collaborate with others at work and in their private lives. These traits not only open doors to employment and social opportunities but underpin academic success, happiness and wellbeing (DfE, 2016, pp. 94-95).

The above quotation, taken from the government white paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE, 2016), represents somewhat of a steelman argument for character education. According to this logic, developing traits like perseverance and resilience, alongside an appreciation of British Values, will ultimately lead to academic success and employment, happiness and wellbeing. However, many have criticised the government's approach (i.e. Allen & Bull, 2018; Bates, 2019; Bull & Allen, 2018; Ecclestone, 2012; Jerome & Kisby, 2019, 2020; Suissa, 2014, 2015; Taylor, 2018), and interestingly many of these critics appear to echo Arthur's own concerns about New Labour's previous programme of character education:

> Current versions of character education in Britain are … an unsatisfactory amalgam of liberal, values-clarification, and cognitive-development strategies that are used to fulfil neo-liberal and conservative projects in the classroom (Arthur, 2005, p. 252)

In addition to his claim that New Labour's programme of character education lacked coherence, whilst also promoting neoliberal and conservative values, Arthur cautioned against 'teaching character education as a series of behaviour outcomes taught in a behaviourist fashion' (2005, p. 239). Arthur has been a key advocate of

Conservative character education policies, but the criticisms he identified still hold significant sway today, as reflected in the academic literature. The best way to understand these criticisms, perhaps unintuitively, is through the publications of the Jubilee Centre themselves. In 2013, Kristjánsson, a member of the Centre, published a paper aiming to dispel 'Ten myths about character', namely that it is: unclear, redundant, old-fashioned, essentially religious, paternalistic, anti-democratic and anti-intellectual, conservative, individualistic, essentially relative, and situation specific (Kristjánsson, 2013). In a subsequent article, he distilled these criticisms, rebutting 'claims that the Jubilee Centre's conception of character is neoliberal, conservative, individualist and religiously tethered' (Kristjánsson, 2021, p. 1). This section is structured around these overarching criticisms.

Allen & Bull have been the most vociferous critics of the current character education movement in England. In a 2018 paper, they use Ball & Junemann's (2012) method of 'network ethnography' to map out the character education policy network by 'following the money' from its source. In doing so, they illuminate – according to the authors - the ideological motives of the network, which they argue promote a 'free-market, individualistic and socially conservative worldview' (Allen & Bull, 2018, p. 1). The key actors and connecting sinews are shown below in Figure 2 (Allen & Bull, 2018).

Figure 2: UK character education policy network

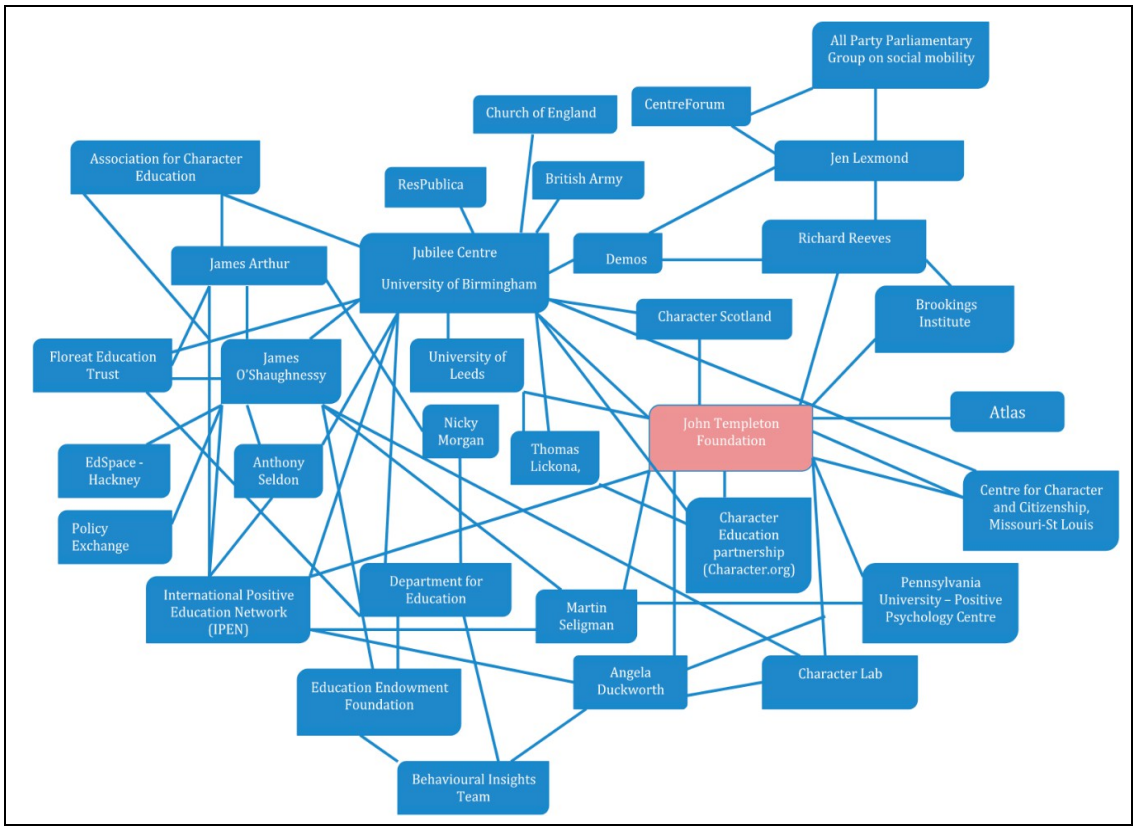


Figure 2 shows the interconnectedness of various agents (individuals and institutions) within the character education network, from the Jubilee Centre and UK Department for Education to other UK institutions, such as the British Army and Church of England, as well as representatives of the US positive psychology movement (i.e. Angela Duckworth's Character Lab). In their analysis, Allen & Bull (2018) are particularly sceptical of the Jubilee Centre's funding source, namely the John Templeton Foundation (JTF), which they describe as a 'US Christian neo-conservative philanthropic foundation' (2018, p. 1). As of June 2017, the JTF accounted for 98% of the Jubilee Centre's grant income, totalling over £16 million. A self-made millionaire and devout Presbyterian, Templeton was knighted by Margaret Thatcher for his services to science and religion (Bains, 2011). The JTF's funding streams are organised around the self-proclaimed 'big questions':

exceptional cognitive talent and genius, individual freedom and free markets, genetics, voluntary family planning, and character development. Although the foundation emphasises the relationship between religion and science, Bains argues the institution is fundamentally 'pro-religion and anti-science' (2011, p. 108), pointing out that the JTF has funded both pro-tobacco and anti-climate change organisations. Politically speaking, the Templetons were also major donors to the US republication party (Ehrenreich, 2010), as well as the anti-gay rights National Organisation for Marriage (Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices, 2014). In a separate paper, Bull & Allen conclude that character education serves a 'conservative political agenda, perpetuating the status quo rather than promoting change and critique … by promoting governments, schools, and adults as sources of legitimate moral authority while ignoring or hiding difference or conflict' (Bull & Allen, 2018, p. 394).

Jerome & Kisby were the first scholars to offer a book-length critique of the current programme of character education (2019), arguing that it individualises responsibility for social problems, whilst neglecting and displacing an emphasis on citizenship and political engagement. They extend previous critiques by focusing not only on abstract philosophical and political analyses, but also the practical manifestations of the movement, concluding that 'character education in Britain is best viewed as deeply flawed in both theory and practice' (p. 3). Chapter four cross-examines Kristjánsson's (2013) ten 'myths' about character education with a collection of the Jubilee Centre's teaching resources, which they argue undermine his arguments. For example, they point to resources which seem to adopt sanctimonious views of addiction and consensual sexual activity by framing these

as individual moral failings, rather than illnesses or legitimate sources of enjoyment, respectively. Another part of their analysis focuses on the Centre's flagship collection of seven stories, the *Knightly Virtues,* accompanied by a teaching pack. Jerome & Kisby (2020) point towards examples such as *Joan of Arc,* where the narrator comments on how unusual it was for a girl to be dressed as a boy, yet reserves little scepticism for the fact that Joan hears the voice of God manifest through angels.

Many of Jerome & Kisby's other arguments chime with Suissa's 2015 paper, *Character education and the disappearance of the political,* in which she argues that current approaches to character education 'often end up displacing the idea of political education and, through their language and stated aims, avoid any genuine engagement with the very concept of the political in all but its most superficial sense' (p. 105). Like Jerome & Kisby (2020), she uses the example of Rosa Parks, whom the Knightly Virtues frames – incontrovertibly - as an exemplar of outstanding moral character. The criticism, however, is that the story included in the teaching pack entirely overlooks the social milieu (i.e. the civil rights movement) in which her iconoclastic views were allowed and/or encouraged to flourish: '[t]he emphasis on the personal character of Rosa Parks in the presentation of and questions about her story suggests a view of the political as something out there and given, with the important questions being questions for the individual' (Suissa, 2015, p. 113). Throughout the paper, Suissa references the work of Kathryn Ecclestone, whose book *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009) cautions against the increasing pathologisation of children's natural dispositions.

Ecclestone is sceptical of what she terms the 'therapeutic turn' in education, 'informed by a "diminished" view of human nature that emerges from, and reinforces, a cultural therapeutic ethos rooted in determinist assumptions about emotional and psychological vulnerability' (Ecclestone, 2012, p. 476). She goes on to argue that this 'legitimises the imposition of psychological interventions that avoid moral and political questions about the nature of well-being and character and the conditions needed to develop them' (p. 463). An example of such an intervention would be Class Dojo, one of the most widely used online educational platforms in the UK. In 2021 alone, the app was downloaded 849,000 times (Clark, 2022), with another report finding that 27% of primary school children had been asked to subscribe by their school (Hooper et al., 2022). Class Dojo is a behaviour management platform that utilises gamification techniques to promote character development through the 'measurement and modification of children's social and emotional learning in schools' (Williamson, 2017, p. 440). Aside from concerns around privacy and data security (Hooper et al., 2022), many are sceptical of interventions such as Class Dojo since they seem to represent an attempt – either on behalf of private companies or national governments – to engineer the psychology and behaviour of citizens, in this case children. Another example would be the Nudge Unit, established by David Cameron in 2010 with the aim of affecting public policy through neuroscientific and behavioural economic understandings of human behaviour. Critics argue such interventions highlight a current trend toward 'psycho-policy' design and state intervention (Friedli & Stearn, 2015; Williamson, 2021) in Europe and the US.

Taylor (2018) shares Ecclestone's and others' judgement that UK character education policies are best interpreted within the context of a 'broader shift in the last decade towards psychological governance … and therapeutic approaches to social justice' (p. 9). Specifically, he draws parallels with the golden age of character education in Victorian England, arguing there are 'productive comparisons [to be made] between character's Victorian legacy and its re-emergence more recently amid increasingly moralised discourses around poverty, inequality, and unemployment' (p. 1). Taylor refers to the work of Victorian economist and social reformer, Winston Marshall, who advocated for thrift, work ethic and parental responsibility as conduits for the betterment of society. Taylor's main argument is that framing individual character as the solution to social mobility – as Marshall did - overlooks various structural factors that might be contributing to poverty and unemployment, namely: 'income and wealth inequality; the power of organised labour; a highly insecure job market; austerity and its effects on the education and welfare systems' (p. 5).

This section has provided an overview of the various criticisms of character education in the UK. It should be noted that Kristjánsson (2021) has been extremely critical of swathes of this scholarship, accusing detractors of politically-motivated attacks. He takes particular aim at Allen & Bull (2018), characterising their tone as 'bullish', and accusing them of 'imputing wilful personal duplicitousness to the actors involved' in the character education network (2021, p. 7). He ends his rebuttal by stating that the Jubilee Centre 'relishes well motivated, theoretically grounded, critiques of its agenda [but resents] the buffet of half-truths, nontruths and conspiracy intimations on offer in some of the recent critical literature' (2021, p. 13).

This thesis represents an attempt to critically appraise recent character education policies in such a way that meets Kristjánsson's demand for fair-minded analysis. The remainder of this chapter reviews the literature on policy analysis – the methodological approach that underscores this thesis – positioning my research within this broad tradition.

Policy analysis

Having provided a potted history of moral education policy in England, as well as dealing with more recent criticisms of character education *per se*, this section explores the difficulties of analysing moral education policies. Public policy aims at tackling perceived social problems, using strategies, guidelines and legislation to bring about an improved state of affairs. It represents 'the principles, often unwritten, on which social laws are based' (Cambridge Dictionary', 2023). There is an intuitive tendency to see policy as a product (e.g. a government white paper or piece of legislation), but it is better understood as a process. As Ozga (2000, p. 1) argues, 'policy is contested terrain … it is struggled over, not delivered in tablets of stone'. All policy is struggled over, but there is usually agreement on the aims: i.e. reducing inflation or unemployment. With regards to character education, the aims as well as the means are often highly contested, and this makes it especially difficult to study objectively. As with character [education], it is useful to provide a working definition of *policy analysis*, since this is the methodological approach that underscores the thesis:

> **Policy analysis** is a process of multidisciplinary inquiry aiming at the creation, critical assessment, and communication of policy-relevant knowledge […] to solve practical problems … Its practitioners are free to choose among a range of scientific methods, qualitative as well as

> quantitative, and philosophies of science, so long as these yield reliable knowledge (Dunn, 2017, pp. 2-3).

Policy analysis spans numerous academic disciplines across the social sciences, and approaches can be categorised into three overarching schools: positivist, interpretivist and critical (Ryan, 2018). Positivist approaches, synonymous with but not exclusive to economics, focus on quantifiable outcome metrics, often involving cost-benefit analyses or randomised control trials. Interpretive approaches focus more on the subjective experience of policies, for example by gathering public opinion through interviews or focus groups. Finally, critical approaches foreground the role of power dynamics in legitimising public policy. Whereas positivist and interpretivist paradigms accept the word 'as is', the critical approach 'stands apart from the prevailing order of the world and asks how that order came about' (Cox, 1981). It aims, in the Marxian tradition, not only to understand society but to change it. This thesis rejects the trichotomy between the camps, incorporating aspects from each, though arguably it sits most comfortably in the interpretivist tradition, which foregrounds the role of language and meaning in social analysis.

Discourse and framing

This thesis adopts a discourse-based approach to studying public policy. For decades, political science has acknowledged the role of discourse in lubricating and legitimising politics (Van Dijk, 2000) and policy (Feindt & Oels, 2005). This is because language and politics are inextricable. As Partington writes, 'it is difficult to conceive of any political action which does not involve using language: political speeches, newspaper editorials, press conferences, Acts of Parliament, declarations of war' (2012, p. 1), and so on. A rhetorical or linguistic analysis of character

education policies is especially salient given that many of its proponents have explicitly foregrounded the role of language in furthering their agenda. For example, Morgan (2020, p. 42) argues: '[w]e need the language of virtues, values and character formation to become part of our national conversation … and we can't be value neutral … we need to invest in explicit and descriptive language about character'. The importance of language is echoed by Arthur and O'Shaughnessy in the same volume, and this thesis begins (in Paper 1) by examining this new language and analysing the values it entails.

In a recent paper, Randour et al. (2020, p. 10) systematically reviewed twenty years of research on political discourse, finding that over fifty percent of articles aimed at 'studying discursive strategies and questions related to the *framing* of political issues, events or actors' (my emphasis). Originally coined studying animals (Bateson, 1972), the concept of framing has taken hold in a wide range of academic disciplines, including artificial intelligence (Minsky, 1974), sociology (Goffman, 1974), linguistics (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), psychology and economics (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Framing is easily understood in the colloquial sense: by 'describing a receptacle as "half-full" or "half-empty", characterising a competitive result as a win for one side or a loss for the other, or discussing a contentious political issue in terms of private rights or public safety', the language in which facts are framed affects our perceptions of the world (Fisher, n.d.). In the context of social policy, 'political scientists have long argued that political elites - how they frame issues and the rhetoric they use - provide an important basis for how the general public understands hot-button issues (Feinberg et al., 2020, p. 6).

Research into the language of policy mostly follows Entman's (1993) classic definition of framing: 'to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (p. 52). For example, the landscape of children's moral, social and emotional development is vast, and different frames pick out different features. The various incarnations of children's moral and emotional development – moral education, citizenship education, social and emotional learning, character education – all focus on different aspects of essentially the same phenomenon, often packaged in different language, reflecting different emphases. For example, 'citizenship education' focuses on the political and collective aspect of moral development, whilst neglecting its individual or emotional qualities; 'social and emotional learning' achieves the opposite. In this sense, naming itself is an act of framing: 'whatever is said of a thing, denies something else of it' (Rein & Schön, 1977, p. 239).

When policy analysis was still in its positivistic heyday, others (i.e. Fischer & Forester, 1993) adopted more rhetorically-informed positions. Notably, Schön & Rein (1994) explored the role of framing in addressing controversial policy issues. They distinguish between policy disagreements, 'disputes in which the parties to contention are able to resolve the questions at the heart of their disputes by examining the facts of the situation' (1994, p. 3), and policy controversies, 'disputes in which the contending parties hold conflicting frames … [and which] are resistant to resolution by appeal to facts' (p. 4). They applied their analysis to US housing policy in the 1960s, arguing that framing problematic inner-city neighbourhoods as 'blighted by disease' led to disastrous urban renewal projects. Schön questions

whether the same communities but represented through a different metaphor – that of a natural community whose growth had been stifled – would have led to different policy outcomes (cited in Pinker, 2007). Since the early work of Schön & Rein, there has been an exponential growth in the study of metaphorical framing in political discourse. Indeed, in their systematic review, Randour et al. (2020) found that of those papers focusing on framing, 12% focused explicitly on the role of metaphor.

Metaphor

As with character education, the study of metaphor began with Aristotle, according to whom 'metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else' (350BC/1991). For over two millennia, metaphors were understood more or less in Aristotle's linguistic sense, where one thing stands for another, either as a rhetorical flourish or explanatory device. Subsequent philosophers dismissed metaphors as distortions of reality (Hobbes, 1651/2016) or embellishments of language (Davidson, 1978; Rorty, 1989; Searle, 1979), whilst Nietzsche (1873) was the first to break with tradition, arguing that all language was metaphorical and thus objective truth was an illusion. Following a century-long hiatus, the interest in metaphor was ultimately rekindled by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), according to whom metaphors are not merely the property of language, they are the currency of thought itself: 'a central cognitive process for abstract conceptualization and reasoning' (Johnson, 2010, p. 412). A considerable body of research now suggests that metaphor is indeed pervasive in both thought and language (Kövecses & Benczes, 2010). Metaphoric expressions are uttered around six times per minute (Gibbs, 1994), whilst figurative (non-literal) language is estimated to comprise around 10% to 20% of natural discourse (Geary, 2012; Steen et al., 2010). As Cochran-Smith

(2005) laments, education reform has become 'highly politicized' (p. 183), informed more by rhetoric than reason; she suggests that that reforming education by 'spinning out dramatic metaphors … is not a new phenomenon' (p. 182).

Metaphor is an especially persuasive framing device because it evokes 'strong emotional responses that may prioritise one interpretation of a text over another' (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 41). This constitutes the 'framing power' of metaphor (Semino et al., 2018, p. 627), which has been shown to be 6% more influential than literal language in experimental persuasion tasks (Sopory & Dillard, 2002). Metaphorical framing effects have been experimentally demonstrated across a range of issues, from economics and the environment to healthcare and crime (Hauser & Schwarz, 2015; Jia & Smith, 2013; Keefer et al., 2011; Landau et al., 2014; Ottati et al., 1999; Robins & Mayer, 2000). To take one relevant example, an article in BioScience (endorsed by over 11,000 scientists) recently declared 'the climate crisis has arrived' (Ripple et al., 2019), representing a shift from the old rhetoric of global warming, which seemed to undermine the gravity of the situation. The framing here is not trivial: a recent experiment found that 'climate crisis' invoked a stronger emotional response in participants, leading to a greater sense of urgency around the issue (Wong-Parodi & Feygina, 2021). Although framing effects have been demonstrated through myriad experiments, they are best illustrated visually. Figure 3 (Pinn, 2011) shows an example relevant to this thesis.

Figure 3: Broken Britain cartoon

The cartoon weaves a narrative around the London Riots, drawing on David Cameron's 'Broken Britain' metaphor, framing events in such a way that some elements are brought into view whilst others are obscured. By including the two men in suits alongside the looter, the author might be implying that Britain's 'moral rot' (Arthur, 2011) is systemic, not confined to the poorest in society. In fact, the vast quantities of cash in each of the two boxes seem to far outweigh the value of the looter's trainers, perhaps suggesting that it is in fact the elite who are most bankrupt, morally speaking. Consider, however, an alternative framing, where the men in suits are removed from view, leaving only the looter bursting through the flag. The image now tells a different story, where responsibility for Britain's moral collapse is laid solely at the feet of the looters, or the more abstract British 'underclass' (Arthur & Harrison, 2012, p. 489). The framing effects of the cartoon are visual, but linguistic framing operates according to the same logic.

Consider the issue of Britain's departure from the European Union, where 'Take back control' is a perfect example of framing effects operating on multiple levels. It takes a complex entanglement of geopolitical relationships and explains them in terms of something physical and relatable, like standing up to the school bully. It taps into primitive emotions around liberty and authority (Haidt, 2013), as well as an evolutionary aversion towards loss (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). It is likely that rhetorical devices like 'Take back control', especially when repeated *ad infinitum*, had a significant effect on framing the 'facts' of the Brexit debate, such as the purported '£350 million for the NHS'. Millar (2019) argues that the architects of Brexit 'honed their dark arts' – or more generously developed their rhetorical abilities - in the Department for Education, where Cummings was Gove's special advisor. Writing after the referendum, Cummings (2017) asserts, 'I've learned over the years that "rational discussion" accomplishes almost nothing in politics', giving some indication of his political tactics. To complete this section, I provide one further example of metaphorical framing, applied to education policy in England:

> School reformers in the past often complained about what was called *The Blob* - the network of educational gurus in and around our universities - who praised each others' research, sat on committees that drafted politically correct curricula, drew gifted young teachers away from their vocation and instead directed them towards ideologically driven theory (Gove, 2013).

Namesake and villain of the 1958 science fiction movie, *The Blob* is a gelatinous, ameboid alien, who over the course of ninety-five minutes gradually ingests everything in its wake. For Gove, *The Blob* served as a powerful metaphor for the supposedly sclerotic and ruinous education elite, whom he described as 'enemies of promise' and 'ultra-militants', 'in thrall to Sixties ideologies', 'hell-bent' on quashing his reforms (Gove, 2013). Craske (2021) investigated the role of populist rhetoric in

legitimising Conservative education policy over the previous decade, defining populism as 'a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and unified - but … ultimately fictional - people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior' (Müller, 2016, p. 13). Gove's framing of the educational establishment as *The Blob* allowed him to dismiss their criticisms of his controversial curriculum and assessment reforms, whilst legitimising attempts to relocate teacher training from universities to schools. Gove and Gibb divided the profession into two opposing camps: 'The Blob' (everyone who disagreed with them) versus the 'pioneers' and 'vanguards' of education (Gibb, 2015), those 'great heads' and 'outstanding teachers' (Gove, 2013), bloggers and activists, who were willing to raise their heads above the parapet and combat the 'worthies up high' (Gibb, 2015). As was the case in the Brexit debate, rhetoric played a critical role in legitimising these politics by simplifying complex issues, appealing to public emotion, and creating an 'Us' vs. 'Them' dynamic, drawing on anti-establishment and anti-expert discourse. Paper one highlights and Paper two tests the framing power of metaphor in the debate around character education.

Conclusion

This chapter has specified the analytical focus (character education) and methodological approach (policy analysis) of the thesis. The genesis of the research, culminating in the first paper, was to understand whether the various criticisms of character education were warranted. Based on these findings, two further papers emerged, aiming to test whether the framing of the policies affected people's perceptions and policy prescriptions, as well as whether the proposed policies

aligned with public opinion. The following chapter details how specific research questions emerged, and how the methodology was designed to address these questions.

Chapter three: Methodology

> No one, on buying a house, refuses to discuss or even know the price, the mortgage repayments, the room measurements or the number of bathrooms. No one, on buying a house, refuses to visit the house, look at pictures of it, walk or drive around the neighbourhood, or talk to people about it. All rational actors … use all and any convenient data to help make up their mind (Gorard et al., 2010, pp. 15-16).

Introduction

This research is motivated by philosophical and sociological questions, which were outlined in the introduction and developed through the literature review. In this chapter, I argue these questions are best addressed through a mixed methods, applied linguistic research design. Specifically, the design hinges on two different but complementary methods, namely a corpus analysis and two survey experiments. In the following section, I describe how the three studies interlock to answer my research questions, thus yielding an integrated thesis that is greater than the sum of its parts. As per the opening quotation, the methodology is underscored by a pragmatist philosophy that eschews *a priori* theoretical or methodological commitments, instead invoking different theories and methods if and when appropriate to the research questions.

Research questions and research design

This research began with the exploratory aim of understanding whether character education policies in England are 'unclear, redundant, old-fashioned, religious, paternalistic, anti-democratic, conservative, individualistic, relative [and] situation specific', as argued by critics (i.e. Allen & Bull, 2018; Bates, 2019; Bull & Allen, 2018;

Ecclestone, 2012; Jerome & Kisby, 2019, 2020; Spohrer & Bailey, 2020; Suissa, 2014, 2015; Taylor, 2018). From this starting point, my research questions and design became increasingly refined. As Gorard et al. (2010) argue, research questions and research design often co-evolve as projects progress. The description below neatly captures the evolution of my research through the corpus analysis and framing experiments, with the latter emerging from the former:

> Specific methods might be used to answer a simple, perhaps descriptive, research question in one phase … then the answer will tend to yield more complex causal questions that require more attention to research design (Gorard et al., 2010, p. 10).

Table 1 presents an overview of the research, but its static layout belies the extent to which the project evolved over the months and years. For example, I had no intention of conducting survey experiments as I embarked upon the policy analysis. At that point, I simply wanted to analyse the ideological content of the policies.

Table 1: Overview of research questions and design

Paper	Question	Analysis	Data
Corpus analysis	How is character education framed in Government and Jubilee Centre policies?	Abductive: quantitative analysis of collocations, key concepts and moral sentiment	Policy corpus (n=91,050 words)
Experiment	Do different framings of character education predict different policy responses?	Deductive: statistical analysis of closed policy preferences	Qualtrics survey data (n=861)
Survey	What policies do the public recommend?	Inductive: manual coding of open-ended policy preferences	Qualtrics survey data (n=400)

Mixed methods research is defined as 'research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or program of inquiry' (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007, p. 4). The argument for mixed methods research is that a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is more fruitful than only using one or the other (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Although this sounds tautological, it does not necessarily follow that combining the two will guarantee greater understanding, with many arguing the two 'paradigms' or 'research designs' are fundamentally incommensurable, founded on irreconcilable premises. For example, quantitively-minded researchers tend to think of the social sciences as akin to the natural sciences and therefore aim for generalisable explanations of social phenomena (Goldthorpe, 2007; Williams & May, 1996). Conversely, some qualitative researchers reject this premise, arguing the social world is laden with meaning and can only be understood through the unique interpretations of research participants and indeed researchers themselves (Hammersley, 2013; Silverman, 2019). Others argue the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research represents a false dichotomy (Pring, 2000). For instance, almost all research uses numbers (most, few, all, none, etc.), and at the same time these numbers 'are only valuable insofar as their behaviour is an isomorph of the qualities they are summarising' (Gorard et al., 2010, p. 14). Gorard et al. use the example of buying a house to highlight the redundancy of the 'schism' between quantitative and qualitative research, arguing it is antithetical to how humans conduct research in any other area of social life.

Epistemologically underpinning mixed methods research is the tradition of philosophical pragmatism (Tashakkori et al., 2021). Pragmatism originated in the US in the late 19th century and is most closely associated with the work of Charles Sanders-Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. In terms of research, Dewey in particular adopted a 'naturalistic approach that viewed knowledge as arising from an active adaptation of the human organism to its environment' (Field, n.d.). On Dewey's naturalistic philosophy, the definition could apply equally to a hunter-gatherer foraging for food, a social scientist conducting research, or a couple looking to buy a house. In each scenario, someone is faced with a problem and they need to identify, investigate or manipulate variables (often using a range of tools) in order to achieve a desired outcome. In essence, philosophical pragmatism is not dissimilar to colloquial pragmatism, defined as 'the quality of dealing with a problem in a sensible way that suits the conditions that really exist, rather than following fixed theories, ideas, or rules' (Cambridge dictionary, 2023).

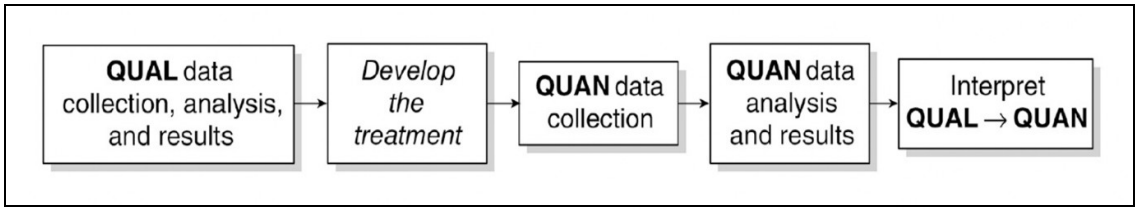
In the case of my research, I began with a problem – the [re]birth of character education in England and its critics - rather than any predetermined methodological, theoretical, or ethical commitments. The research was question-led, and I only chose specific methods and theories as and when they became relevant. For example, I used a corpus approach to discourse because I wanted to analyse policies in such a way that was systematic and replicable, thus minimising confirmation bias. Similarly, I used Moral Foundations Theory (Joseph & Haidt, 2006) because it seemed the most robust framework for measuring moral sentiment in texts. Finally, I chose Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) because it speaks to the relationship between language and reasoning, and its application to social

policy. Although these theories are well-supported by evidence, their epistemological 'truthfulness' is of secondary interest to me so long as they are useful in answering my research questions, which is to say, so long as they are pragmatically valid. The pragmatist philosophy is reflected in the logic of my research design, which I explain in greater detail below.

Sequential exploratory design

Creswell & Creswell (2023) identify six types of mixed methods research, based on four variables: timing, weighting, mixing and theorising. My research follows the logic of a sequential explanatory design, where an initial qualitative phase (the corpus analysis) is used to explore an issue, then those results inform the quantitative aspect of the project (the framing experiments). The generic workflow for this design is shown in Figure 4 (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017).

Figure 4: Sequential exploratory design



An important caveat is that the corpus analysis is not strictly qualitative, in fact quite the opposite. What distinguishes the discourse analysis from the experiments is not the use of qualitative or quantitative data (since both methods use words and numbers extensively), but the mode of reasoning. The discourse analysis is defined as exploratory (as opposed to explanatory) because it is driven exclusively by the data, rather than a predetermined theoretical framework (Creswell & Plano Clark,

2018). In doing so, it applies the principle of abductive reasoning, again rooted in philosophical pragmatism. Peirce defines abduction as 'the process of forming explanatory hypotheses' and argues 'it is the only logical operation which introduces any new idea' (Peirce, 1931, p. 172). (Sherlock Holmes is the archetypal abductive reasoner). On this view, the merit of abductive reasoning 'consists in its function as a search strategy' (Schurz, 2008, p. 205). In my research, the function of the discourse analysis was to search a corpus of character education policies and uncover emergent patterns in the data, which would inform subsequent stages of the project. Abduction represents one of three modes of reasoning; the other two – deduction and induction – feature later in the research design. According to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 'deduction helps to derive testable consequences from the explanatory hypotheses that abduction has helped us to conceive, and induction finally helps us to reach a verdict on the hypotheses' (Douven, 2021). In my case, the first experiment was used to deductively test the findings of the corpus analysis, whereas in the second experiment I inductively coded participants' responses by way of analysing whether character education policy was reflective of public opinion.

Corpus analysis

When using an exploratory sequential design, 'the first question is to ask what we already know given the existing literature' (Mihas & Odum Institute, 2019, p. 3). Having engaged thoroughly with the character education scholarship, it became clear the field was polarised, consisting of advocates and detractors, neither of whom seemed to cede much ground to the other. Whilst some criticisms of character education are objectively negative (i.e. unclear, redundant) and could perhaps be

resolved by appeal to the facts, the majority are normative (i.e. religious, conservative) and therefore seemed less likely to be reasoned away. Given the impasse, I wondered whether it were possible to assess the various criticisms of character education in a more systematic and replicable manner, at least at the level of rhetoric. This led to the discourse analysis, and specifically the corpus approach. Before moving onto the specifics of my design, I first include a brief overview of corpus linguistics and discourse analysis as research traditions. This is important because both fields are broad and, whilst there is considerable overlap, different sub-fields rest upon different theoretical and methodological premises.

A corpus of texts is defined as 'a collection of naturally occurring examples of language, consisting of anything from a few sentences to a set of written texts or tape recordings, which have been collected for linguistic study' (Hunston, 2002, p. 2). There are two main approaches to analysing corpora: corpus linguistics and discourse analysis. Broadly speaking, the former uses large datasets and relies heavily on computerised analysis, whereas the latter is usually carried out by hand, using a much smaller corpus. Since seminal work in the 1990s (Krishnamurthy, 1996; Louw, 1993; Stubbs, 1994), many have increasingly sought to combine the two approaches. Unlike Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which is informed by social and political theories, corpus linguistic analysis 'has no overarching political agenda' (Partington et al., 2013, p. 10). Whether social scientific research can ever be truly apolitical is a matter for debate but, certainly for the purpose of this research, a corpus linguistic approach leaves me less open to accusations of bias, cherry-picking, or being led by intuition rather than data. Using a corpus approach allows me to provide answers to controversial, ideological questions, whilst still

adhering to the principles of '"the scientific method": falsifiability, completeness, simplicity, strength, and objectivity' (Rayson, 2008, p. 520).

Corpus linguistic research can either 'focus on the use of a particular linguistic feature, possibly a word, lemma, multiword expression or a grammatical construction … [or] one can examine the characteristics of whole texts' (Rayson, 2008, p. 520). Biber (1988) categorises these respective approaches as microscopic and macroscopic, and I follow L'Hôte (2010) in combining the two. The lexicogrammatical analysis begins bottom-up, focusing on the word *character*, as well as its semantic environment and collocates. It then moves onto keyword and key concept analyses, which operate from a bird's eye view of multiple texts. The sentiment analysis follows the reverse logic. It begins with an analysis of the whole corpus, categorising all moral words into five foundations, thus providing an overall measure of moral sentiment in the text. It then moves onto wordlists pertaining to each of the five foundations, returning to the concordance tool and a bottom-up reading of texts.

Corpus design

As aforementioned, the academic literature around character education is polarised, with many documented criticisms. I sought to test these criticisms against a substantial corpus of policies and therefore my first task was to assemble said corpus. In this section I describe this process, before outlining my two-step method of analysis. Corpus design refers to 'the application of selection and sampling criteria according to the purpose of the analysis, as well as issues of size, balance, and representativeness' (Bianchi, 2012, p. 31). As I began building my corpus, I

experienced a fundamental tension. Namely, I required a corpus that was broad and representative of character education policies, but I also sought relatively strict inclusion/exclusion criteria to maintain the integrity of the sample. Fifty years ago, this would have been relatively straightforward. I would have simply collected all government literature pertaining to character education over a certain period. As discussed in Chapter two, however, the policy landscape has shifted dramatically in recent decades, with policymaking becoming increasingly diffuse and decentralised. As well as the UK government, for example, the Jubilee Centre has been one of the main driving forces over the past decade, not only of character education theory, but also of policy and practice. There have also been influential reports published by cross-party parliamentary groups (Paterson et al., 2014) and think tanks (Lexmond & Grist, 2011). It is only the Conservative government and Jubilee Centre, however, that have published consistently and voluminously across the ten-year period (2011-2021), making them ideal candidates for analysis. Interestingly, in the academic literature the government and Jubilee Centre are often treated somewhat homogenously; that is, people tend to criticise 'character education' *per se*, rather than distinguishing between different interpretations. Kristjánsson, a member of the Jubilee Centre, argues that 'critiques of current UK character education betray an inadequate grasp of significant factions within its group of advocates, and that there is reason to question the suggested idea of a single policy network' (2021, p. 1). By contrast, my research provides a comparative element, by way of highlighting similarities and differences between official government policy and the Jubilee Centre literature upon which such policies are largely (but not exclusively) based.

In terms of corpus size, specialised corpora (i.e. those compiled by a researcher) can be much smaller than general or reference corpora, whose wordcounts often run into the millions. Bowker & Pearson (2002, p. 48) argue that 'well-designed corpora that are anywhere from about ten thousand to several hundred of thousands of words in size have proved to be exceptionally useful'. My aim was to build a corpus that accounted for all mentions of character education in government policy over a ten-year period, before building an equivalently sized corpus of Jubilee Centre policies, which are more abundant. Regarding the latter, the aim was to ensure the sample was representative of the Jubilee Centre's philosophy and ideology. According to Bianchi (2012, p. 34), 'a corpus can be said to reach closure as regards a particular type of linguistic feature when an increase in the size of the corpus does not bring in new instances of the given feature'. Based on my initial investigations, I predicted a total corpus size of around 100,000 words.

Beginning with the government corpus, I aimed for relatively strict search criteria. I started by searching the UK government website for documents containing the words 'character' and 'education'. Unfortunately, the search function on the government website is awkward and any specific word searches yielded an unworkable number of results, many of which were irrelevant to the search terms. Therefore, my next strategy was to manually search the relevant folders within the education section of the website. At this point, a further question was how strictly to demarcate 'character' from the other non-academic aspects of children's education. For example, the rhetoric around character overlaps with behaviour management, school exclusions, sex and relationships education, mental health, and more. To ensure parsimony, I chose to focus exclusively on character education, only

considering other aspects of children's development when they were directly mentioned alongside character. Operationally, this meant including any document which referred to character education and excluding any that did not, even if there were overlapping themes. In the final corpus, for example, there are a couple of policies that mention British values, but there were many others on the website that also mentioned British values but did not mention character. They were therefore excluded from the corpus. The strategy henceforth was to manually search the relevant folders contained within the education section of the government website. The most relevant of these was 'Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development', followed by 'Personal, social, health and economic education'. This strategy was more productive than the earlier searches for individual words, although again the categorisations were sometimes haphazard, and I often needed to search the superordinate categories to identify all relevant policy documents. By the end of multiple searches and replications, I felt comfortable that I had captured all references to character education over a ten-year period, resulting in a final corpus of 33,434 words.

Sampling the Jubilee Centre literature proved more straightforward than the government policies. Although the Jubilee Centre website contains over 5,000 documents, thus precluding a comprehensive analysis, the documents are well categorised. Given I was interested in the ideological content of these documents, I was able to focus exclusively on the Jubilee Centre 'frameworks', 'statements' and 'policy briefings' - which profess the Centre's values – in contrast to more procedural or technical documents such as research reports. This resulted in a corpus of 25,190 words. Finally, to understand how these policies translated into practice, I also

downloaded a teaching pack (created by the Jubilee Centre), totalling 32,426 words. The teaching pack, entitled Knightly Virtues, comprised seven stories which aim to explicitly teach moral virtues. The overall corpus therefore comprised three sub-corpora, totalling 91,050 words, with each of the sub-corpora being roughly equivalent in size, lending itself to a robust statistical analysis.

Once I had assembled the corpus, I downloaded the files onto my computer, before 'cleaning' them by converting to plain text and removing any superfluous information, i.e. bullet points and hyperlinks. Uploading the documents to the corpus linguistic software also involves the process of tagging (according to grammatical categories) as well as lemmatisation, i.e. 'the reduction of the words in a corpus to their respective lexemes' (Baker et al., 2006, p. 104). My final corpus, divided into three sub-corpora, is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Overview of the three sub-corpora

Government policies	Words: 33,434
(2014) England to become a global leader of teaching character	
(2014) Measures to help schools instil character in pupils announced	
(2014) British values consultation	
(2014) Chapter six of government white paper	
(2015) Character education; apply for grant funding	
(2015) Rugby coaches to be drafted in to help build grit in pupils	
(2015) DfE Character Awards application window now open	
(2015) Education, sport and business leaders to judge Character Awards	
(2015) Winners of the Character Awards announced	
(2015) Top award for character-based free school with fencing for all	
(2015) Arts underpin Britishness	
(2016) Cameron Life Chances speech	
(2016) Oral statement by Nicky Morgan on the Trojan Horse letter	
(2016) Award launches for schools best at instilling character	
(2016) Funding boost for schools helping pupils develop character	
(2016) Schools and organisations recognised for instilling character	
(2016) Nicky Morgan opens character symposium at Floreat School	
(2016) Nicky Morgan - Naz Legacy Foundation	
(2019) Education Secretary sets out five foundations to build character	
(2019) Character Education Framework	
(2019) Activity passport foreword	
Jubilee Centre policies	Words: 25,190
(2013) Framework for character education	
(2014) Statement on social action	
(2015) Statement on teacher education and character education	
(2016) Statement on character, virtue and practical wisdom in professions	
(2016) Policy briefing: Longer school day	
(2016) Policy briefing: Social mobility	
(2016) Policy briefing: National Citizen Service	
(2019) Statement on civic virtue	
(2020) Statement on character education in universities	
(2020) Statement on character and sport	
(2021) Statement on character and the pandemic	
(2021) Framework for character education in universities	
Jubilee Centre teaching materials	Words: 32,426
(2012) Anne Frank	
(2012) Beowulf	
(2012) Don Quixote	
(2012) El Cid	
(2012) Gareth and Lynette	
(2012) Joan of Arc	
(2012) Merchant of Venice	
(2012) Robin Hood	
(2012) Rosa Parks	
Total:	Words: 91,050

Lexicogrammatical analysis

This section describes my two-step method of analysis. The aim was to understand how character education was defined and framed in the corpus, with an emphasis on similarities/differences between sub-corpora. There are many software packages which facilitate such an analysis. I chose to use LancsBox, developed at Lancaster University, for several reasons. First, Lancaster University are one of the world leaders in corpus approaches to discourse and I was familiar with the software having attended an eight-week training programme over the summer of 2021. Second, it offered useful tools that other software did not, notably the ability to visualise collocations (or the statistical relationships between words) as networks and graphs. Third was personal preference: I knew I would be spending considerable time using the software, and I found the layout and data management intuitive versus other applications. Although LancsBox acted as my primary software, and the means by which I organised and managed my corpus, I also used two additional pieces of software. Towards the latter stages of my research, I discovered that Rayson (2008) had applied the keyword method to semantic domains (which I explain later), and I deemed this highly relevant to my project. The software he developed, WMatrix, was therefore used to analyse key concepts – or semantic domains – in each of the sub-corpora, since there are no other packages which include this tool. Finally, I used Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) for the sentiment analysis, which again I explain in greater detail in the following section. Between them, these three software packages contain a range of conceptual tools that are useful for analysing corpora, offering researchers a bird's eye view of large linguistic datasets that would be difficult to comprehend purely from close reading or a bottom-up approach. In the remainder of this section, I explain each of these

tools, such that the results in Chapter four become more intelligible. In order, the tools are frequencies, collocations, keywords and key concepts.

Firstly, LancsBox can be used to create lists of the most common words (frequencies) or groups of words (clusters) in a corpus. It also provides measures of dispersion: the distribution of a given word throughout the corpus, which allows one to 'distinguish readily e.g. between words which are used frequently and those which are used infrequently but which, when mentioned, are likely to be repeated reasonably often within a short space of text' (Mcenery & Hardie, 2013, p. 20). It is important when performing more quantitative analyses that words do not become entirely abstracted from their context. As such, the concordance tool acts as the interface between the more quantitative and qualitative aspects of the analysis. As Baker et al. (2008) write, 'a concordance presents the analyst with instances of a word or cluster in its immediate co-text across an entire corpus of texts'. This has changed how analysts can read texts, moving from a 'linear reading of one text after the other, to non-linear and focused access to several texts at once' (Bianchi, 2012, p. 49). In my research, this allowed me to focus on the word *character* and its collocates across the corpus as a whole. Concordances are a common starting point for analysis.

Natural language is not random: words appear in 'characteristic collocations, which show the associations and connotations they have, and therefore the assumptions which they embody' (Stubbs, 1996, p. 172). In this sense, words can be understood as having a kind of gravitational pull, drawing other words into their orbit in a predictable manner. These relationships can be described statistically by looking at

the strongest collocates of certain words, for example *character* or *resilience*. There are several different measures of collocational strength, but I chose to use the Mutual Information statistic (Church & Hanks, 1990) because it detects collocations that occur relatively infrequently but significantly, versus more common words such as *the* or *and*. The MI statistic 'compares the observed number of occurrences of a word pair with its expected number of occurrences' (Durrant & Doherty, 2010, p. 131), thus providing a 'measure of how much one word tells us about the other' (Manning & Schütze, 1999, p. 178). For the purpose of analysis, a collocation is operationally defined as 'the above-chance frequent co-occurrence of two words within a pre-determined span … five words on either side of the word under investigation' (Baker et al., 2008, p. 278).

Keywords are those words that occur statistically more often in one corpus versus another, either a reference corpus or another specialised corpus (Baker, 2023). In my research I used the keyword function to compare the three sub-corpora, i.e. the government and Jubilee Centre policies, and the Jubilee teaching materials. Rayson (2008) cautions that when comparing corpora, 'issues relevant to comparison of corpora such as representativeness, homogeneity and comparability' are paramount. Assuming these conditions are met, we can use the log likelihood statistic to determine which words are overused or underused (relative to the other corpora) at the $p<0.01$ level (LL=6.63) and $p<0.0001$ level (LL=15.13). He also applied the keyword methods to semantic domains, or key concepts. As he writes, 'collecting together words into their semantic fields' allows one to identify trends that may have been 'invisible at the word level' (Rayson, 2008, p. 542). Using the semantic (USAS) tagger, the software tags not only words, but groups of words, into

twenty-one semantic fields, including: emotion, food and farming, money and commerce, education, language and communication, and time. Much like L'Hôte (2010, p. 359), I used the semantic tagger for 'confirming or broadening elements of analysis which were primarily identified thanks to qualitative and key-word analyses'. The key concept analysis was perhaps the most illuminating aspect of the lexicogrammatical analysis, providing a conceptual overview of the government and Jubilee Centre policies, which was useful for comparative purposes, and directly informed the subsequent experiments.

Sentiment analysis

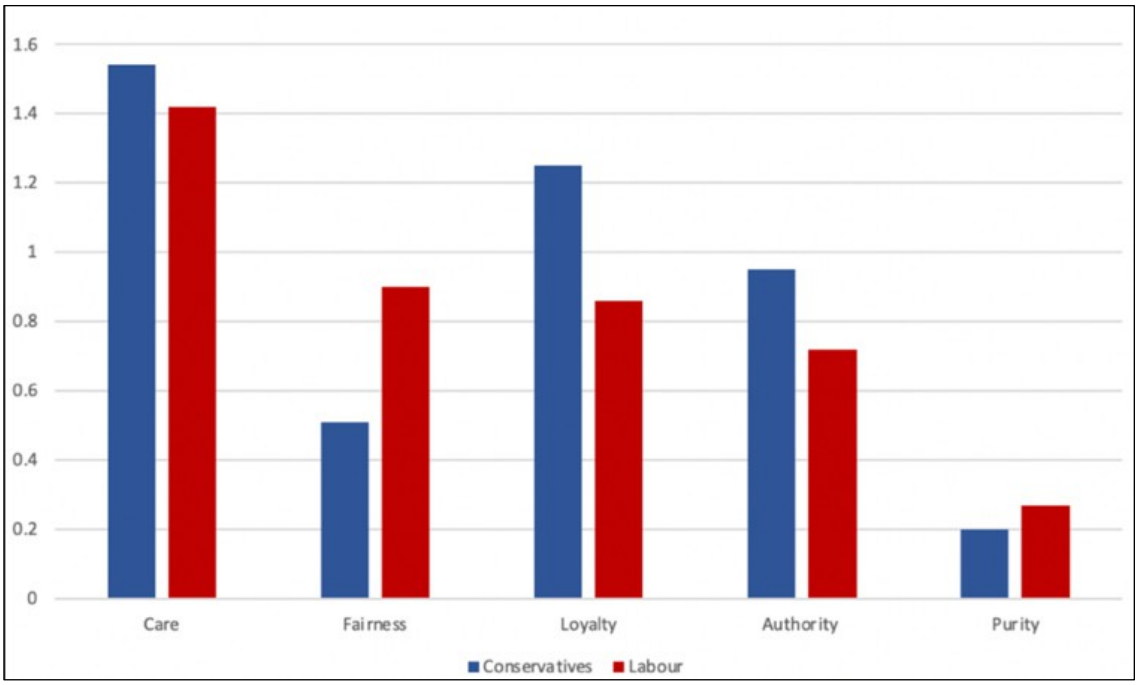
Morally-laden words are uniquely influential in terms of cognitive processing because humans are more perceptually aware of them than non-moral words (Brady et al., 2020). In one study, tweets containing moral or emotional sentiment increased retweets by twenty percent per moral-emotional word (Brady et al., 2017). It is reasonable to assume that the moral language contained within character education policies might reflect the views (conscious or otherwise) of the authors, as well as potentially influencing those reading or implementing the policies. The lexicogrammatical analysis (outlined in the previous section) was used to provide a broad overview of the character education corpus. It was essentially descriptive and atheoretical, besides the basic linguistic and statistical theory underpinning the software. The sentiment analysis is more intimately linked with my initial motivation for the research, attempting to understand the moral and political content of character education policies. This moves beyond description into interpretation and therefore necessitates the use of theory. Moral Foundations Theory (Joseph & Haidt, 2006) predicts that people make moral and political

decisions based on evolved moral foundations, five of which (care, fairness, loyalty, authority and purity) are posited based on an examination of cross-cultural ethnographic data. Crucially, many studies have found that liberals and conservatives place different weight on the five foundations when making moral and political decisions (Graham et al., 2009; Harper & Hogue, 2019; Silver & Silver, 2017). To test the hypothesis that people's moral foundations are also reflected through their language use, Haidt and others developed the Moral Foundations Dictionary (Graham et al., 2009), consisting of 295 words and word stems distributed across the five foundations.

The authors initially used the dictionary to compare liberal and Baptist church sermons, and many of their hypotheses were validated: liberals used more care and fairness words, whilst Baptists used more authority and purity words, relative to one another (Graham et al., 2009). Further research indicates that liberals use more care words than conservatives when debating stem-cell research (Clifford & Jerit, 2013) and more fairness words when debating same-sex marriage (Frimer et al., 2017) or abortion (Sagi & Dehghani, 2014). More recent research from Frimer (2020) sounds a note of methodological caution: his multiple replications of the original study yielded a success rate of only 30%, and effect sizes were 38 times smaller than the original. These findings might be explained by problems with the original MFD, which Lewis (2019, p. 20) describes as a 'potentially a very useful tool … [which] … ought to be viewed as a starting point, not as a definitive scorecard'. For this reason I use an updated, third-party dictionary, the extended Moral Foundations Dictionary (Hopp et al., 2020), which contains a greater number of words (n=3270), and was compiled by a larger (n=557) sample of the population,

rather than by a small group of experts. I discuss the validity and reliability of the eMFD later in the chapter, but to summarise, it provided me with a means to test the various normative criticisms of character education (i.e. that it is neoliberal, conservative, individualistic and religious) against an actual corpus of policies. By way of example, an application of the eMFD is demonstrated in Figure 5, where I have used it to compare the moral sentiment in two UK political party manifestos from 2017.

Figure 5: Moral sentiment in Conservative and Labour manifestos



The graph is purely descriptive, but the log likelihood statistic can be used to test whether differences between the two sub-corpora are significant at the $p<0.001$ level. In the above example, the Labour Manifesto (2017) uses significantly more 'fairness' words than the Conservative Manifesto (2017), which uses significantly more 'loyalty' words. This is unsurprising given the titles of the respective manifestos: *For the many, not the few* (Labour), and *Forward together: Our plan for*

a stronger Britain and a prosperous future (Conservative). In this sense, the eMFD can be used to provide a quantitative measure of moral sentiment in a corpus, which can then be used as a basis for qualitative exploration at the level of wordlists and individual texts.

Survey experiments

The corpus analysis demonstrated that the UK Conservative government and Jubilee Centre use different language to frame character education. Many discourse analyses are content to conclude that differences in language must necessarily result in differences in beliefs, attitudes, or behaviours. For example, a discourse analysis might find that right-wing newspapers tend to frame immigration in terms of water metaphors (e.g. floods/tides of migrants), before concluding that such language is dehumanising and therefore leads to discrimination. Although this may well be the case, it is not evidenced through the discourse analysis alone. Just because a particular frame might be present in communication, this does not necessarily mean that people will be influenced by it (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010). To which end, the purpose of the experiments was to test the framing effects of the respective metaphors for moral education (garden versus business, as established through the corpus analysis) on people's policy choices. Aside from shedding light on the specific problem of character education in England, the experiments also speak more broadly to the perpetual tension between progressive and conservative tendencies in education, as reflected historically through different language and metaphors. Given the ubiquity of metaphor in social policy, it is important to understand if and how these metaphors shape people's reasoning about complex social issues (Reuchamps et al., 2019; P. H. Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2015). In this section, I

provide a brief history of framing experiments, focusing on a narrower, psychological definition of 'framing' than used in the discourse analysis. I then explain the process of sampling and recruitment, before introducing my experimental design, norming study, and demographic questionnaire. I end by discussing statistical analyses.

Some of the earliest experimental evidence for framing effects came from (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981), who demonstrated that framing solutions to a hypothetical disease problem positively versus negatively (i.e. save 200/600 people versus let 400 die) could bias people's responses. Since these seminal experiments, many different types of framing effect have been demonstrated, but here I focus specifically on metaphorical framing effects since these are most relevant to my research. The corpus analysis (Chapter five) established that the government and Jubilee Centre used different metaphors to frame the issue of character education. In the past decade, cognitive scientists have sought to empirically investigate whether such metaphorical frames have a causal influence on people's reasoning about social policy. Confirming and replicating their hypotheses, Thibodeau & Boroditsky (2011, 2013) demonstrated that framing a hypothetical crime problem as either a *virus infecting* a city or a *beast preying on* a city could predict participants' policy responses, encouraging more reform- or enforcement-oriented measures, respectively. Since these influential studies, the experimental evidence for metaphorical framing effects has grown exponentially. To list a few examples, framing climate change as a *war* versus a *race* prompts more urgency, risk perception and willingness to change behaviour (Flusberg et al., 2017); framing cancer as a *journey* versus a *battle* results in greater acceptance of difficult outcomes

later down the line (Semino et al., 2018); whilst framing the flu metaphorically as a *beast, riot, army or weed* (versus a non-metaphorical *virus*) leads to greater intention to get vaccinated (Scherer et al., 2015). All these examples have real-world consequences and I argue the same stands for moral education. The aim of the two survey experiments is therefore two-fold: first, they test whether the language used by the Jubilee Centre and UK government has any bearing on how people reason about character education. As (Clifford & Jerit, 2013, p. 2) argue: 'there has been little examination of the role contemporary political elites play in facilitating moral reasoning'. And secondly, they test whether the policies advocated by the UK government are in keeping with public opinion.

Sampling and recruitment

Previous metaphorical framing experiments have elicited consistent but modest framing effects. Various systematic reviews have noted aggregated effect sizes to be around r=0.07 (Sopory & Dillard, 2002), r=0.09 (Van Stee, 2018), and d=0.11 (Brugman et al., 2019). Given these modest effect sizes, relatively large samples are required to test for these effects. Thibodeau & Boroditsky (2015) recommend that each condition needs to contain a minimum of 150-200 participants. Given the onset of a global pandemic, I looked to online platforms for recruitment. There are now several online platforms that facilitate such an endeavour, the most common of which being Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is a crowdsourcing marketplace where individuals and businesses can outsource online tasks to workers, and is commonly used by academic researchers. I recruited my sample via the online Prolific.ac platform, which is specifically tailored to academic research, and was especially convenient due to the large pool of British respondents. Having

conducted a pilot using MTurk, I found the platform was heavily skewed towards the US population, and therefore recruitment of UK participants was not only time-consuming but prohibitive. Had I used MTurk for my final experiment, I would have exhausted the pool of British workers long before hitting my target sample of 800. By contrast, on Prolific.ac I managed to collect 861 responses within an hour. In each of the two experiments, participants were provided with a link to the study, and I was notified whenever one was completed. I was then able to review the response and approve where appropriate, which was the case for >99% of responses. Participants were paid to complete the tasks and questionnaires, resulting in an equivalent hourly wage of £8.34, which compares favourably to other research using similar methods.

Experimental design

I designed the framing experiments using Qualtrics. In the experiments, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In each, they read a brief vignette about moral education in the fictional city of Greenville, which included genuine statistics (from England) about declining mental health and rising exclusions. The first condition was framed in organic, gardening language (cultivate, flourish) and the second was framed in inorganic, business language (build, compete). The vignettes were identical except slight manipulations between words (organic/inorganic) and crucially all statistics were also identical. The conditions are shown below.

> Education is a **garden** involving many **gardeners**: parents, teachers and others. As well as developing knowledge, education also aims to **cultivate** children's character and resilience, so they can **flourish** in a rapidly changing world. In Greenville, however, there is cause for concern. In 2010 the city was

> thriving, but after a decade of cuts its schools are **wilting** and its youth have become **disenchanted**. The number of pupils being excluded from school has increased by 71% in the past seven years, whilst 1 in 5 struggle with their mental health. Greenville's policymakers are concerned that unless they act soon, it may be too late to recover children's moral and emotional development.
>
> Education is a **business** involving many **stakeholders**: parents, teachers and others. As well as developing knowledge, education also aims to **build** children's character and resilience, so they can **compete** in a rapidly changing world. In Greenville, however, there is cause for concern. In 2010 the city was thriving, but after a decade of cuts its schools are **failing** and its youth have become **disengaged**. The number of pupils being excluded from school has increased by 71% in the past seven years, whilst 1 in 5 struggle with their mental health. Greenville's policymakers are concerned that unless they act soon, it may be too late to recover children's moral and emotional development.

In both experiments, the two conditions were constructed to be as ecologically valid as possible, reflecting both the reality of schooling in England, as well as the language in which policies are framed. The exclusion numbers were taken directly from government statistics (DfE, 2020.) and the mental health statistics were taken from the international Good Childhood Report (The Children's Society, 2020). The words in bold reflect fundamental linguistic differences between the UK government and Jubilee Centre framings of character, as evidenced through the corpus analysis. For example, the words *flourish* and *cultivate* appeared significantly more in the Jubilee corpus, whereas *business* and *build* appeared significantly more in the government corpus. The metaphors – garden and business – were extended using words from related semantic domains, whilst retaining the overall meaning of the passage. The metaphors were introduced explicitly at the beginning of the passage such that participants could interpret subsequent information through the respective frames. To this end, it was important that subsequent information entailed some ambiguity, where certain words (those underlined) could be

interpreted through either metaphor. Having read one of two conditions, participants in experiment 1 (n=861) were then presented with the following, closed question:

> Policymakers know they must respond to the problem in the city's schools, but they don't know which policies to change or how much to change them. Please rank in order which policies you think would be most helpful to address the problem, as described on the previous page. Drag and drop the policies into your desired order, so that number 1 (at the top) is the most helpful policy and number 4 (at the bottom) is the least helpful policy.

1. Include mindfulness and yoga in school timetables
2. Reduce examinations before GCSEs
3. Implement zero-tolerance attendance and school uniform policies
4. Use computer software to record and monitor children's behaviour

Regarding this task, my hypothesis was that participants exposed to the gardening frame would be more likely to choose nurturant policies (one and two), whereas those exposed to the business frame would be more likely to choose disciplinary policies (three and four), once socio-demographic factors had been controlled for. I explain the rationale for including these particular policies in Chapter six. In experiment 2 (n=400), participants were instead presented with the following, open-ended question:

> Policymakers know they must respond to the problem in the city's schools, but they don't know which policies to change or how much to change them. In your opinion, what would be most helpful to address the problem, as described on the previous page?

The aim here was more exploratory. I wanted to understand which policies people would generate without the constraints of multiple-choice. I also wanted to see whether participants would extend the metaphors through their own writing and

policy formulations, or indeed be swayed in their responses. In both experiments, participants were then asked the same follow-up question:

> The report about children's education, which you read before ranking the policies/offering your opinion, began: 'Education is a …… '. From memory, please fill in the missing word.

This question tested for metaphor covertness (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2013), i.e. whether participants were aware of the metaphors being used, and whether this had any impact on their reasoning. For example, it might be the case that only those who remember metaphors used them as scaffolds for reasoning. After completing the main task, participants were asked to complete a short socio-demographic questionnaire pertaining to age, gender, ethnicity, education level, and political affiliation. This allowed me to analyse the experimental data by group, comparing for example left-wing and right-wing responses. These five questions were taken from commonplace large-scale surveys in the UK, therefore ensuring replicability.

Norming study

The main hypothesis of my experiments was that the gardening frame would predict more nurturant policies, whereas the business frame would predict more disciplinary policies. The norming study, utilising a separate group of participants (n=100), comprised two tasks designed to validate the measures used in the experiment. Before performing the tasks, participants all read the same passage, which was a neutral or literal (as far as possible) framing of the experimental passage. It read as follows:

> Education is a **system** involving many **people**: parents, teachers and others. As well as <u>developing</u> knowledge, education also aims to **develop** children's

character and resilience, so they can **effectively participate** in a rapidly changing world. In Greenville, however, there is cause for concern. In 2010 the city was thriving, but after a decade of cuts its schools are **underperforming** and its youth have become **disillusioned**. The number of pupils being excluded from school has increased by 71% in the past seven years, whilst 1 in 5 struggle with their mental health. Greenville's policymakers are concerned that unless they act soon, it may be too late to recover children's moral and emotional development.

Policymakers know they must respond to the problem, but they don't know which policies to change or how much to change them. Two politicians are leading the debate.

One argues that 'Education is a **garden** where children can **cultivate** their character'.

The other argues that 'Education is a **business** where children can **build** their character'.

If you had to guess, which of the following policies are supported by each of the politicians? Pick the 2 policies you think are most consistent with the garden expression, then drag and drop those items into the 'Garden' box. Do the same with the 2 policies that are most consistent with the business expression by dragging those items into the 'Business' box (2 policies in each box).

The hypothesis was that participants would match nurturant policies with the garden frame, and disciplinary policies with the business frame. If the hypothesis was validated, it would demonstrate that participants understood the entailments of the different metaphors for education. If participants did not understand the different entailments when presented with the two metaphors explicitly, then the main experiment would be rendered redundant. After the first task, participants in the norming study were asked a second question.

The following four education policies vary in the degree to which they emphasise nurture versus discipline. For each of the policy options below, please rate the extent to which, in your view, each option emphasises nurture versus discipline. Use the slidebar to indicate your rating for each of the six policies. Lower values (0-49) indicate a view that the policy approach is relatively nurture-oriented; higher values (51-100) indicate a view that the policy approach is relatively discipline-oriented.

- Include mindfulness and yoga in school timetables
- Reduce examinations before GCSEs
- Implement zero-tolerance attendance and school uniform policies
- Use computer software to record and monitor children's behaviour

The hypothesis was that participants would score the first two policies between 0-49, and the second two policies between 51-100, with 50 being the cut-off. If I am claiming that the garden versus business frame predicts nurturant versus disciplinary policies, then I need to demonstrate that there is some empirical basis for these categorisations, as defined by a random sample and not just my own intuitions. Results of the norming study are presented in Chapter seven as part of the first experimental paper.

Statistical analysis

The experimental data from experiment one (closed response) were analysed using a logistic regression model, which aimed to predict whether exposure to either the gardening or business frame would result in participants selecting a nurturant or disciplinary policy as their top choice, controlling for covariates. Alongside metaphorical frame, several other demographic variables were also analysed. In experiment two (open response) the responses were manually coded, bottom-up, to elicit dominant themes. I first used *in vivo c*odes, which resulted in 101 codes spanning the 400 responses. I then explored the codes for duplicates and overlaps, before merging the relevant items, resulting in an overall code list numbering 30. Finally, I grouped the codes according to common themes, which ultimately yielded 10 categories, each containing between 2 and 5 codes.

Validity and reliability

Scheufele & Iyengar (2014) distinguish between two different types of framing research: emphasis framing and equivalence framing. Whilst the first is strong in external validity, the second is stronger in internal validity; therefore 'based on these tensions between internal and external validity, researchers will continue to be torn between two goals' (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 18). In my research, I have attempted to mitigate this problem by analysing framing from both perspectives. The first study demonstrates how character education is framed in policies by repeatedly emphasising certain collocations, concepts or moral foundations. The second study takes these findings, before framing them equivalently in an experimental context to test whether they have any bearing on people's reasoning. The final paper cross-references these findings, and aims to establish whether policies are congruent with UK public opinion. This triangulation of datasets, theories and methods adds coherence to the overall research design. When conducting mixed-methods research, however, it is not sufficient to demonstrate robustness across the research design as a whole; one must also demonstrate the validity and reliability of the component parts. I end this section by doing so, beginning with the discourse analysis.

As previously mentioned, I chose to use a corpus approach to discourse because I wanted to maximise the reliability of my findings. Extant analyses of character education policies are entirely qualitative, and this leaves open the possibility of cherry-picking data to fit pre-conceived intuitions (conscious or otherwise). Wodak (2014, p. 312) argues that analyses of discourse 'must be transparent, selections and interpretations justified, and value positions made explicit'. I have adhered to these

principles (see the next section re: the latter), and additionally, I have supported my findings with statistical measures of linguistic features across the policy corpus. Regarding the experiments, I have ensured reliability by modelling my methodology as closely as possible on influential works in the field. Where I have deviated from these experiments, I have explained how and justified why. As part of this, I also emailed my experimental design to one of the original authors, who commented that my 'paragraphs look great' and represented a 'very clean manipulation' (Thibodeau, 2022, personal communication, 31 March). In terms of ensuring validity, the main focus was my outcome variable, i.e. participants' top policy choice as a reflection of nurture versus discipline. To establish an empirical basis for this measure, I conducted a norming study using an independent group of participants (n=100), and the results of this study, as relayed in the final chapter of this document, demonstrate that indeed this was a valid measure of policy preference.

Ethics

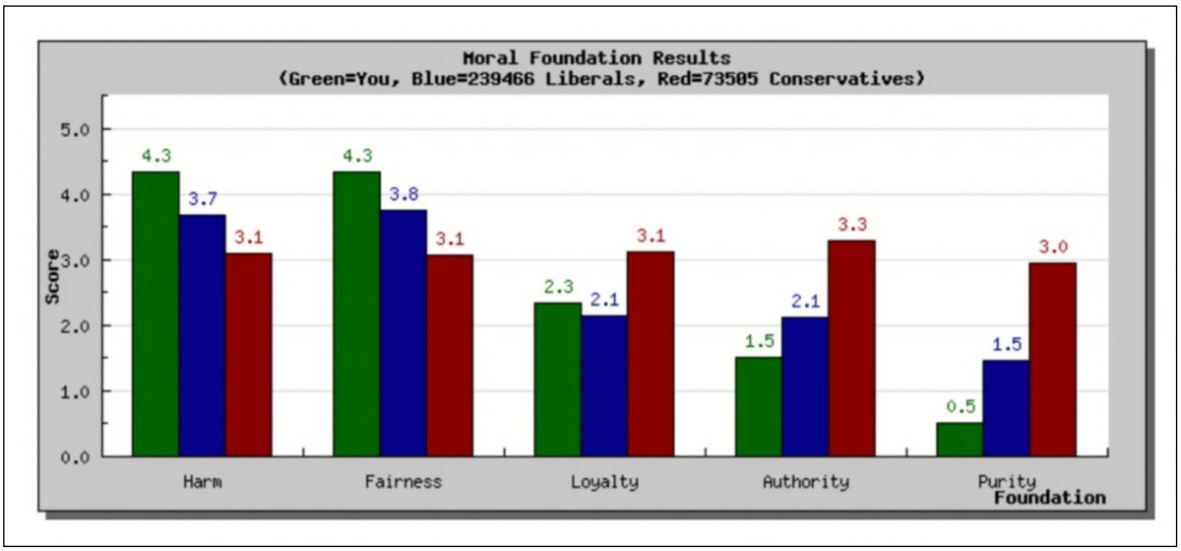
On one level, the ethics of this research were reasonably straightforward. The discourse analysis involved collecting forty-two documents, spanning the UK government and Jubilee Centre. Given these materials had been deliberately published for dissemination in the public domain, this did not entail any ethical issues. The framing experiment involved human participants, and therefore required a greater attention to ethical concerns, but all participants were non-vulnerable adults, and the tasks themselves were relatively anodyne and unlikely to cause emotional distress. Perhaps the main ethical concern here would be the use of incentives for participation, which BERA (2018, p. 19) argue 'should be commensurate with good sense, such that the level of incentive does not impinge on

the free decision to participate'. It is worth distinguishing between two types of incentives, coercive and non-coercive, with mine falling into the latter category. The incentives I offered for participation were non-coercive because I offered a reasonable sum of money (£9.12 per hour equivalent), which exceeds the average for similar research, without being unnecessarily high, which might lead to people participating purely for financial gain. Indeed, I argue it would be less ethical to not offer any compensation for participation, since this could amount to exploiting individuals for their labour. Combined with the fact that participants were non-vulnerable adults, this mitigates (to the greatest extent possible) any ethical issues surrounding incentives.

On another level, the ethics of this research were rather more complicated, since my theoretical framework is predicated on the idea that people are biased by their own moral or political beliefs. As Joseph & Haidt (2006, p. 1) argue, 'students of morality are biased by their own moral commitments'. This stands as much for tenured philosophers or ethicists as it does PhD students, even if sophisticated argumentation adds a veneer of objectivity. In fact, research has shown that Professors of Ethics are no more ethical than the average person (Schönegger & Wagner, 2019; Schwitzgebel & Rust, 2014), merely better at providing post-hoc rationalisations for their pre-existing beliefs. It would be naïve to assume, given the thrust of my theoretical framework, that I might be exempt from these biases. Perhaps, therefore, my results are simply reflections of my own opinions, disguised as facts, using cherry-picked data to support my intuitions. I offer two points in response: 1) I will be candid about my own moral/political beliefs and biases, and 2) I will demonstrate that I have taken steps to mitigate these in terms of my

analysis. Rather than describe my positionality, I have chosen to use the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2011), an extension of which I use in this research, to provide a numerical measure. Figure 6 shows my scores (in green) for each of the five foundations, compared with the average for conservatives (in red) and liberals (in blue).

Figure 6: My moral foundations



As Moral Foundations Theory predicts, conservatives score equally across all five moral foundations, whereas liberals tend to emphasise *care/harm* and *fairness/cheating* to the detriment of the three 'binding' foundations: *loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion,* and *purity/degradation*. My results place me in the strongly liberal category, according to Haidt's analysis, and intuitively I share many of the (broadly, but not exclusively) left-wing criticisms of character education. It is therefore important that I do not let my own beliefs bleed into the analysis. Two emails I received following the survey experiment illustrate the extent to which people are emotionally invested in [moral] education. The first quotation

reflects, anecdotally, that people think moral education is important and emotionally salient; the second demonstrates that people are particularly steadfast in their opinions on this issue.

> An interesting and engaging short study. I would like to learn more about the background to your work. Educational engagement is so vital and your work is important so please accept my best wishes for obtaining valuable results for your fascinating research (email communication, 10/04/2022).

> Hello there, I recently completed your study regarding children's mental health and schooling. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to participate in your study. During the task, I was asked to rank 4 ideas into what would be most beneficial for students. However, two of the ideas I found very concerning, namely monitoring children with computer software and enforcing a strict uniform & attendence [sic] policy. If this study is going to inform education in any way I would like to categorically state that these ideas would be detrimental to the goal of improving a student's wellbeing and I do not support them in any way. Thank you (email communication, 9/04/2022).

Chapter four:
Policy analysis

The moral foundations of character education: a corpus-linguistic analysis

This paper investigates the claim that English character education policies are neoliberal, conservative, individualist and religiously-tethered, as argued by critics. Using computer software and techniques from corpus linguistics, I conducted a comparative analysis of 19 policies (33,434 words) published by the Conservative government, as well as 11 policies (25,190 words) and 9 stories (32,426 words) published by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues between 2011 and 2021. Quantitative analysis suggests that government policies can be reasonably classified as neoliberal, conservative and individualist, whereas the Jubilee Centre's teaching materials, if not their policies, include significant religious language. The analysis also points towards different metaphorical framings of character education, with the government employing the language of business, the Jubilee Centre adopting the language of cultivation. These different framings reflect divergent definitions of, and ambitions for, the national project of character education.

Keywords: Character education, Jubilee Centre, corpus linguistics, moral, psychology, Moral Foundations

Introduction

If 'words do the work of politics' (Graham et al., 2009, p. 1040) then 'character' and 'resilience' have laboured tirelessly over the past decade, working their way from relative obscurity into government policies (DfE, 2019) and inspection frameworks (OFSTED, 2023). The character education movement gained global momentum at the turn of the millennium, and its resurgence in the UK can be directly linked to the London Riots in 2011. Ever since, a tightly-knit policy network has emerged, spearheaded by the Jubilee Centre, funded by the John Templeton Foundation (Allen & Bull, 2018), and supported by key actors in the Conservative government (i.e., Nicky Morgan and Damian Hinds). According to the Jubilee Centre, character education can provide the 'basis for human and societal flourishing' (2022, p. 11).

According to its supporters in government and business, character is key to academic attainment (Morgan, 2017), social mobility (Hinds, 2019), mental health (Hinds, 2019) and work-readiness (CBI, 2019). However not everyone is convinced, with some strongly rejecting the notion of character as a 'panacea for various social ills' (Jerome & Kisby, 2019, p. 3).

Jerome & Kisby (2019, 2020) have been among the most vociferous critics of character education in a UK context, arguing the project is 'deeply flawed in theory and practice' (2019, p. 3). Their book-length analysis summarises and extends numerous critiques from within academia. For example, Suissa argues that 'character' represents a depoliticised form of moral education, which pays little attention to citizenship (2015) and conflates morality with 'tough love' parenting (2017). Others argue that character education recasts structural inequalities as individual deficits (Bates, 2019; Spohrer & Bailey, 2020), whilst Taylor (2018) draws parallels with late Victorian discourses around social mobility. There are also criticisms from the political right, who argue that character is 'soft' and represents a 'watering-down' of traditional, academic education (i.e. Ecclestone, 2012; Young, 2014). Walsh (2018) and Sayer (2020) adopt nuanced positions in a polarised debate, advocating that character be re-examined and perhaps rescued, rather than rejected out of hand. In summary, critics argue that character education is 'unclear, redundant, old-fashioned, religious, paternalistic, anti-democratic, conservative, individualistic, relative and situation-specific' (Kristjánsson, 2013, p. 1).

Whilst some criticisms of character education are objectively negative (i.e. unclear, redundant), others are normative (i.e. religious, conservative). This points to an

intractable problem with moral education and its analysis: it is inherently value-laden and political. Schön & Rein (1994, p. 3) distinguish between *policy disagreements*, 'disputes in which the parties to contention are able to resolve the questions at the heart of their disputes by examining the facts of the situation' and *policy controversies*, 'disputes in which the contending parties hold conflicting frames' (p. 4). The main argument of this paper is that different parties – such as the Conservative government, the Jubilee Centre, and other academics (author included) – approach the issue of character education through different frames, coloured by religious affiliations, political beliefs, and myriad other personal peculiarities. For this reason, as an academic discipline, moral or character education seems more susceptible than most to motivated reasoning, i.e. that people 'are more likely to arrive at conclusions that they want to arrive at, but their ability to do so is constrained by their ability to construct seemingly reasonable justifications for these conclusions' (Kunda, 1990, p. 480).

This paper takes as its starting point Kristjánsson's recent rebuttal of criticisms of character education, which acts as a case in point. Kristjánsson (2021) deals with two sets of criticisms, and begins by accusing Allen & Bull of motivated reasoning in all but name, deeming their tone bullish and their reasoning fallacious, verging into *ad hominem*. Kristjánsson argues their insinuation that the centre is complicit in a 'wilful neoliberal, religiously motivated conspiracy' is but one example of 'extreme generalisations … elicited on the grounds of the thinnest evidence' (2021, p. 7). Dealing with a second set of criticisms, Kristjánsson dismisses them one by one, suggesting the conclusions are not supported by the evidence, concluding: '[a]ll in all, the examples provided by Jerome & Kisby (2020) do not expose the

arguments in question … as the subterfuges that the critics make them out to be'. He goes on to show how opposite conclusions can be reached from the same evidence, given alternative interpretations. Thus, there appears to be somewhat of an impasse. Jerome & Kisby stand by all ten criticisms of character education, whilst Kristjánsson rejects them. This seems to reflect a difference in frames, since it is unlikely that all ten criticisms are either valid or invalid. What emerges from this debate is less a disagreement over facts than a clash of interpretive frames. Critics and defenders often analyse the same texts and reach opposite conclusions Kristjánsson suggests that the Jubilee Centre 'relishes well motivated, theoretically grounded, critiques of its agenda' and this paper is intended in such a vein. This paper aims to move beyond interpretive impasse by applying corpus linguistics and Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) to policy texts. This allows for a more objective, transparent, and replicable assessment of the ideological content of character education policies.

Theory

This study is grounded in Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), a model developed by Haidt & Joseph (2004) and expanded by (Graham et al., 2013), which proposes that human moral reasoning is driven more by intuitive, affective reactions than deliberate reasoning. MFT identifies five core domains that underlie cross-cultural variations in moral behaviour: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and purity/degradation. These domains (in Figure 7) are hypothesised to have evolved as adaptive responses to recurring challenges in human evolutionary history (Haidt, 2013).

Figure 7: Original moral foundations

Foundation	Care/harm	Fairness/cheating	Loyalty/betrayal	Authority/subversion	Sanctity/degradation
Adaptive challenge	Protect and care for children	Reap benefits of two-way partnerships	Form cohesive coalitions	Forge beneficial relationships within hierarchies	Avoid communicable diseases
Original triggers	Suffering, distress, or neediness expressed by one's child	Cheating, cooperation, deception	Threat or challenge to group	Signs of high and low rank	Waste products, diseased people
Current triggers	Baby seals, cute cartoon characters	Marital fidelity, broken vending machines	Sports teams, nations	Bosses, respected professionals	Immigration, deviant sexuality
Characteristic emotions	Compassion for victim; anger at perpetrator	Anger, gratitude, guilt	Group pride, rage at traitors	Respect, fear	Disgust
Relevant virtues	Caring, kindness	Fairness, justice, trustworthiness	Loyalty, patriotism, self-sacrifice	Obedience, deference	Temperance, chastity, piety, cleanliness

The theory's central insight is that individuals differ in the extent to which they prioritise these foundations. Generally speaking, liberals tend to value care and fairness more heavily, while conservatives draw more evenly across all five, including loyalty, authority, and purity (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt, 2013). This has led some to describe MFT as offering a kind of moral 'pluralism' that captures ideological diversity (Vaisey, 2012), and has been widely applied to studies of political rhetoric, media discourse, and public policy (Clifford & Jerit, 2013; Day et al., 2014; Lewis, 2019; Silver & Silver, 2017; Smith, 2019). In the context of education policy, MFT is a particularly useful tool because it enables one to assess not just the explicit content of a text, but its underlying moral sentiment. This is crucial when studying discourses such as character education, which often operate through moral appeals that may or may not be made explicit. Previous critiques of character education have highlighted its normative assumptions, namely that it promotes a conservative or religious worldview under the guise of neutrality. By applying MFT,

it becomes possible to systematically evaluate whether these claims hold up across a wider range of texts.

Methods

This paper applies corpus linguistic techniques to a body of naturally-occurring discourse, namely a corpus of character education policies published in the UK between 2011 and 2021. The analysis is focused on the language and ideological content of character education, comprising two stages. The first is descriptive, aiming to provide an ostensive definition of 'character', as well as how it is framed in both the government and Jubilee Centre policies. The second draws on MFT to analyse the moral sentiment of the policies, in addition to the Jubilee Centre's teaching materials (the Knightly Virtues). The overarching question this paper aims to address – is character education neoliberal, conservative, individualist and religiously-tethered? – is operationally unworkable, demanding binary answers to definitionally messy questions. As such, I have chosen to operationalise my overarching research question as follows:

> RQ1: How is 'character' defined and framed in the UK government and Jubilee Centre policies?
>
> RQ2: Which moral sentiments underpin the UK government and Jubilee Centre conceptions of character education?

By employing the concept of framing and asking a 'how?' rather than an 'is?' question, I was able to ensure that RQ1 was theoretically grounded and methodologically appropriate. Here, framing is interpreted at the macro level, following Entmans's (1993) definition: 'to frame is to select some aspects of a

perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (p. 52). Which is to say, which aspects of 'character' do the two sets of policies emphasise? RQ2 is based on MFT to analyse the ideological context of the policies, and also include the Jubilee Centre's teaching materials, to investigate whether and how moral sentiment may vary between theory and practice.

Corpus building

The corpus was constructed to reflect two distinct policy actors: (1) the UK Conservative government and (2) the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. The aim was to assemble a representative and thematically coherent collection of documents from each. For the government corpus, I began with keyword searches for 'character', 'resilience', and 'education' on Gov.uk, then manually navigated the Department for Education's document archives, focusing particularly on the 'Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development' and 'Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education' folders. I included 19 documents, totalling 33,434 words. For the Jubilee Centre, the search was more straightforward. The Centre categorises its documents clearly, and I included 11 policy- and framework-style documents, totalling 25,190 words. Additionally, I analysed 9 teaching stories from the Knightly Virtues pack (32,426 words), representing the Centre's applied pedagogical materials. This resulted in a total corpus of 91,050 words across the three sub-corpora. Documents were cleaned of metadata, extraneous formatting, and hyperlinks, and converted to plain text.

Analysis

Corpus linguistic analysis can either 'focus on the use of a particular linguistic feature, possibly a word, lemma, multiword expression or a grammatical construction … [or] one can examine the characteristics of whole texts' (Rayson, 2008, p. 520). I follow Rayson (2008) and L'Hôte (2010), in combining both. The first phase of analysis focused on the lexicogrammatical content of the texts. I began by examining the most frequently occurring words in each sub-corpus to establish the lexical field of character education within each institutional voice. This included noting both high-frequency standalone terms and those appearing in frequent lexical bundles (e.g. 'character and resilience'). Next, I analysed collocates of key terms such as 'character', 'resilience', and 'virtue', using mutual information scores to identify statistically strong word pairings. I then turned to keyword analysis, identifying words that were statistically overrepresented in one sub-corpus compared to another using log-likelihood scores. These keywords allowed for comparative insights into the thematic focus of each actor's discourse. Lastly, I used a semantic domain tagging system to categorise these keywords into broader conceptual fields - such as economics, education, military, ethics, or cultivation - thus identifying dominant metaphors and ideological preoccupations in each corpus.

In the second phase, I used the extended Moral Foundations Dictionary (eMFD) to assess the prevalence and distribution of moral language across each of the five foundations. The dictionary was developed by Hopp et al. (2020), building on the original MFD whilst overcoming some of its limitations. While the original MFD was derived from a small and culturally homogeneous sample, the eMFD is based on responses from a broader, more diverse population and contains 3,270 words

distributed across the five foundations. The eMFD therefore allows researchers to conduct large-scale content analyses of moral discourse in a more empirically grounded way. Importantly, MFT is used here not as a framework for judging the moral validity of particular policies, but as an analytical lens to map the moral topography of character education in England. In doing so, it complements the corpus linguistic approach, which provides a fine-grained picture of how character is linguistically constructed. Together, these methods allow for an integrated understanding of the moral and ideological assumptions embedded in policy discourse. Word frequencies were compiled per sub-corpus and statistically compared using log-likelihood testing. This process allowed me to assess which moral sentiments were foregrounded in each policy corpus, while also comparing Jubilee policies with their teaching materials. I cross-checked the contextual usage of high-frequency moral terms using concordance lines to ensure validity of classification. Together, these analyses provided a robust empirical foundation for interpreting the ideological underpinnings of English character education policy.

Results

Lexicogrammatical analysis

This section describes the results of the lexicogrammatical analysis, intended to provide an ostensive definition of 'character' in each of the two policy sub-corpora, as well as exploring how it is framed (i.e. the semantic environment in which the word typically occurs). Before focusing specifically on the word 'character' and its collocates, I began by computing the most common words overall in each of the sub-corpora (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Most frequent words in government (left) and Jubilee (right) policies

The preliminary frequency analysis indicated that *character* was the most common content word across both policy sub-corpora, confirming the analysis had captured the intended policy discourse. To explore how character was framed, collocational patterns were examined. In the government corpus, the most significant verb collocates of *character* were *instilling* (MI=6.09) and *building* (MI=4.83), followed by *instil* (MI=4.69), and *build* (MI=3.94), suggesting a framing of character as a quality to be actively implanted or constructed. By contrast, in the Jubilee Centre corpus, the most salient verb collocates were *formation* (MI=5.08), *development* (MI=4.83), and *cultivation* (MI=4.69), implying a more organic, developmental view of character. A particularly strong association between *character* and *resilience* was observed in government discourse, where the lexical bundle *character and resilience* occurred frequently (n=26) in all but three documents, a pattern not observed for other collocates such as *confidence* or *honesty*. This repeated conjunction suggests that *resilience* may serve as a conceptual proxy for character within government framing. Across the entire corpus, the repeatedly stated aim is 'building character and resilience in every child' (Gov, 2014).

I next computed the most common words in each sub-corpus but this time *relative to the other sub-corpora.* This data allows one to claim that word *x* appears *n* times more in corpus *a* versus corpus *b*, thus introducing a comparative element, the importance of which has been highlighted by Kristjánsson (2021). Words overrepresented in the government corpus included *I*, *we*, and *programme*, reflecting the inclusion of spoken material. In contrast, the Jubilee Centre corpus featured greater frequencies of *virtues*, *moral*, and *flourishing*, indicative of a more normative framing. The key concept analysis, an extension of the keyword method, was the most informative aspect of the lexicogrammatical analysis. It applies the same logic to concepts, or semantic domains, rather than individual words (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Key semantic domains in Government versus Jubilee policy corpora

UK government	**LL Stat.**	**Jubilee Centre**	**LL Stat.**
Money and pay	76.17	Ethical	691.30
Success	34.67	Concrete/abstract	52.38
Confident	34.27	Sports	43.49
Evaluation: bad	32.74	The media	40.00
Money: lack	28.07	Farming and horticulture	38.76
Putting, pulling, pushing	22.23	Thought/belief	24.23
Warfare, defence, army	20.73	Drama, theatre	22.23
Substances and materials	19.94	Mental actions/processes	20.73
Evaluation: good	19.10	General ethics	19.94
Deserving	14.71	Understanding	19.10
Architecture/houses/buildings	10.76	Plants	14.71

Analysis of key semantic domains revealed systematic differences in emphasis between the corpora. In the government corpus, the most statistically significant domains were *money and pay* (LL=76.17), *success* (LL=34.67), *confident* (LL=34.27). These findings suggest a pragmatic, performance-oriented conceptualisation of

character, with particular emphasis on achievement, effort, and resilience. This orientation is illustrated in policies linking character development to employability and social mobility, often through 'tough' initiatives such as the use of rugby coaches and Combined Cadet Forces, the latter of which is reflected in the prominence of the semantic domain *warfare, defence and the army* (LL=20.73).

> Rugby coaches from premiership clubs will be drafted into schools to instil character and resilience in disaffected children as part of the government's "core mission to deliver real social justice" (Morgan, 2015).
>
> CCF [Combined Cadet Force] units in schools give young people the life skills and self-confidence to take charge of their lives so they can reach their full potential at school and beyond, including in employment. The aim is to enable the development of personal responsibility, leadership and self- discipline (Gov, 2019).

In contrast to government policies, the Jubilee Centre corpus was characterised by semantic domains such as *ethics* (LL=691.3), *thought/belief* (LL=24.23), *general ethics* (LL=19.94), and *farming and horticulture* (LL=38.76). These themes chime with the collocates of *character* - *formation*, *development*, and *cultivation* - further suggesting a framing of character as a process of organic growth, rather than one of construction or imposition. It should be noted that the unusually high score for *ethics* (LL=691.3) reflects the fact there were no mentions of this domain in the government policies, thus skewing the comparison.

Before moving onto an analysis of moral sentiment in the corpora, this section concludes with a brief examination of how character is explicitly defined in the two sets of policies, beginning with the government. In one speech, Hinds offers a precise and comprehensive definition of character, which mirrors the quantitative findings and the emphasis on performance virtues. He argues it comprises four traits:

> First you have to believe you can achieve. You have to be able to stick with the task in hand, and see a link between effort today and payback some time in the future, even if it's uncertain or rather a long way off. Finally, you need to develop the ability to bounce back from the knocks that life inevitably brings to all of us (Hinds, 2019).

In order, the traits he describes are confidence, grit, delayed gratification, and resilience. He then goes on to say:

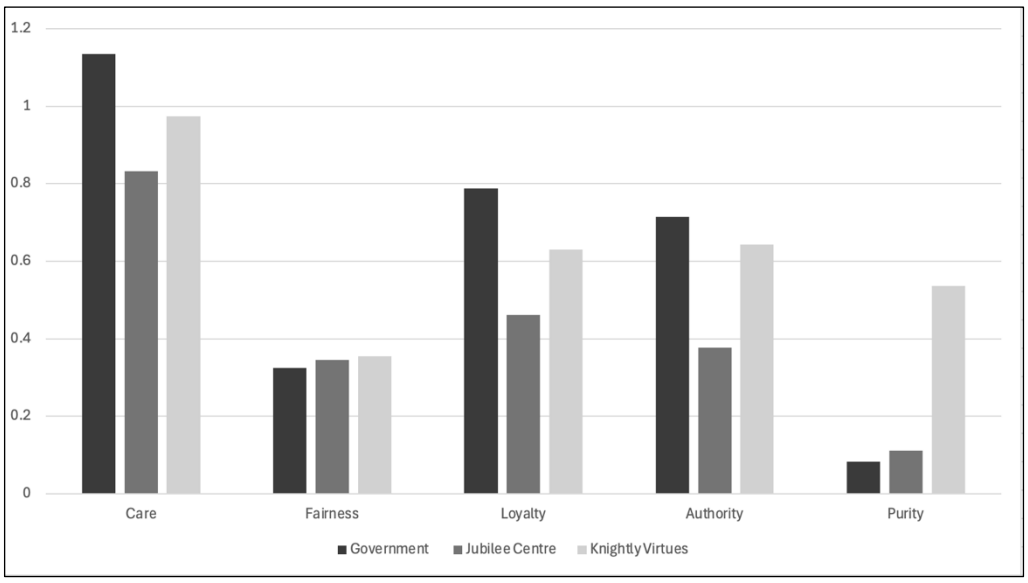
> Those four things would also set you up to be a pretty good fraudster or bank robber. We want you to use strength of character to be good in the world and that is where virtues and values come in … kindness, generosity, humility, tolerance and integrity (Hinds, 2019).

Despite this caveat, the character education policies are skewed heavily towards the behavioural and personality traits rather than values or morals. For example, *confiden** and *resilien** are mentioned 95 and 74 times respectively in the government corpus, whilst *grit** receives 18 mentions. *Kindness* is mentioned 6 times, *generosity* and *humility* just 3. By contrast, the Jubilee Centre divides character traits into four categories, reflecting a broader vision than that offered by the government. The four traits mentioned by Hinds would all fall into the 'performance' category, whereas in the Jubilee Centre policies, performance virtues receive the least mentions, with moral (171) and civic (117) virtues being mentioned more than twice as often as performance (45) and intellectual (51) virtues. The Jubilee Centre policies are empirically more 'holistic' than the government's, yet this says little about their ideological content, which was addressed through the sentiment analysis.

Moral sentiment analysis

Using the Moral Foundations Dictionary (Graham et al., 2009), the distribution of moral language was examined across the three sub-corpora. The results are presented below, with attention to overall trends and differences Figure 10 shows the distribution of moral words in each of the three sub-corpora, and Table 3 shows the most common moral words overall.

Figure 10: Distribution of moral words across five foundations



Across the three corpora, moral terms associated with the care foundation appeared most frequently, followed by those linked to loyalty, authority, fairness, and purity. The government and Jubilee Centre policy documents exhibited broadly similar frequencies of care-related (LL=4.54), fairness-related (LL=2.86), and purity-related (LL=2.2) terms. However, government policies demonstrated significantly greater emphasis on loyalty (LL=32.25) and authority (LL=61.27) foundations. Jubilee teaching materials showed a markedly different pattern, with substantially higher frequencies of purity-related language compared to either set of policies.

Table 3: Ten most common moral words in the sub-corpora

Government policies	Freq.	Jubilee policies	Freq.	Knightly Virtues	Freq.
Help	79	Help	43	Help	27
Community	61	Communities	30	Father	26
Behaviour	38	Community	29	Food	26
Respect	37	Trust	20	Mother	21
Trust	34	Benefits	18	Noble	17
Child	33	Health	15	Priest	16
Country	31	Honesty	14	Church	14
Leadership	28	Institutions	14	Married	13
Helping	23	Compassion	13	Servant	13
Charity	23	Together	13	God	12

Table 3 presents the ten most common moral words (across all five foundations) used in three different sub-corpora: government policies, Jubilee Centre policies, and the Knightly Virtues project. All three datasets prominently feature the word *help*, suggesting a shared rhetorical emphasis on prosocial behaviour. However, the surrounding moral vocabulary diverges markedly across the corpora, revealing differing moral emphases and ideological orientations. In government policy documents, terms like *community, behaviour, respect, trust,* and *leadership* dominate, reflecting a civic and regulatory framing concerned with social order and national identity (*country*). Jubilee policies, by contrast, share this focus on *community* and *trust* but introduce more relational and emotive terms such as *compassion* and *together*, implying a slightly more communitarian or care-oriented ethos. In the Knightly Virtues corpus, the vocabulary shifts decisively toward religious and familial language - *father, mother, church, God,* and *priest* - alongside more traditional moral archetypes like *noble* and *servant***.** This suggests a moral worldview rooted in hierarchy, tradition, and religious authority, in contrast to the Centre's policy corpora's more civic register. In the remainder of this section, I

unpack these results by focusing on each of the five foundations, focusing on the most common words pertaining to each. Alongside examining their frequencies, I also analyse their distribution across the corpora. A word appearing once in all 19 government policies is arguably more analytically salient than a word appealing 19 times in one policy.

Among government documents, the most frequent care-related terms included *help* (n=79), *charity* (n=23), and *health* (n=21). In the Jubilee Centre policy corpus, *help* (n=33), *benefit* (n=11), and *compassion* (n=13) were similarly prominent. Teaching materials placed particular emphasis on *help* (n=27), *mother* (n=21), and *love* (n=12). Analysis of term dispersion indicated that *help* was widely distributed, appearing in 18 of 19 government texts, 9 of 11 Jubilee policy documents, and 7 of 9 teaching resources. Overall, little difference was observed between government and Jubilee Centre policies in their invocation of the care foundation.

Fairness-related sentiments were less salient than care sentiments across all corpora. In government policies, the most common fairness-related terms were *trust* (n=34), *honesty* (n=11), and *integrity* (n=13), a pattern mirrored in Jubilee Centre policies with *trust* (n=20), *honesty* (n=14), and *integrity* (n=13). Teaching materials displayed relatively fewer fairness-related terms, although *law* (n=11) and *civil rights* (n=2) were noted. In both policy corpora, fairness discourse appeared to prioritise personal virtues such as honesty and integrity over structural concerns such as justice or equity. For example, *justice* featured in only four government texts and six Jubilee texts, while *equity* was almost absent. These findings may suggest a narrower interpretation of fairness within character

education policy discourse. This is notable and perhaps speaks to some of the more 'left-wing' criticisms of character education, namely that it individualises responsibility for social problems, whilst ignoring more systemic factors.

Loyalty-related language appeared notably more prominent in government policies than in the other corpora. The government corpus frequently employed terms such as *community* (n=61), *country* (n=31), and *British* (n=18), with *community* appearing in 18 of 19 texts, British in 16. Jubilee Centre policies also emphasised *community* (n=29) and *family* (n=8), although to a lesser degree, and again, the former was mentioned in all but one text. Teaching materials shifted focus towards familial and wartime themes, with *family* (n=33), *war* (n=25), and *country* (n=19) among the most common loyalty-related terms. *Family* was mentioned in all but one text, whereas *war* and *country* were mentioned in roughly half. These patterns suggest that loyalty discourse in government policies may lean more heavily towards national identity, whereas the Jubilee Centre and its teaching materials present a more relational framing of loyalty.

Authority-related language appeared significantly more frequently in government policies than in Jubilee Centre policies or its teaching materials. The government corpus was characterised by frequent references to *respect* (n=37), *leadership* (n=28), and *order* (n=8), with *respect* mentioned in 13 of 19 texts and *leadership* present in 14. In the *Character Education Benchmarks* (DfE, 2019), one of the six questions against which schools must rate themselves is: 'Are we clear on the importance of discipline and good behaviour in school life?' (Gov, 2019). In the Jubilee Centre policy corpus, authority-related terms such as *institutions* (n=14),

respect (n=12), and *leadership* (n=10) appeared somewhat less frequently. Teaching materials adopted a different framing, with authority emerging primarily through narrative figures such as *father* (n=26), *servant* (n=13), and *master* (n=6), which are widely distributed across the corpus.

Purity-related terms were notably absent from government and Jubilee Centre policy documents but ubiquitous in the teaching materials. In the government corpus, references to purity were almost entirely absent, with only isolated mentions such as *Bible* (n=1) and *blessed* (n=1). The Jubilee Centre corpus included slightly more purity-related language, such as *body* (n=6) and *faith* (n=3), though overall frequencies remained low. By contrast, teaching materials were characterised by rich usage of sanctity-related terms, including *food* (n=26), *priest* (n=16), *noble* (n=17), *church* (n=14), and *God* (n=12). Notably, religious language appeared not only in explicitly religious narratives (e.g., the story of Joan of Arc) but also in texts without overt religious themes, suggesting a broader diffusion of sanctity discourse within the educational materials. For example, church and God are each mentioned in roughly half the texts.

Discussion

The corpus analysis presented in this paper offers compelling evidence that the discourse of character education in England is shaped by divergent ideological and moral frameworks, closely tied to the institutional origins of the texts. By triangulating lexicogrammatical analysis with moral foundations data, and by attending to framing and collocational patterns, the findings reveal the implicit values embedded in government and Jubilee Centre character education discourses.

In what follows, I first revisit how each corpus defines and frames character, then explore broader political implications, drawing on relevant research. I end by reflecting on the problems posed by ideologically partial visions of moral education. The government corpus constructs character in overtly behavioural and performance-oriented terms. High-frequency collocates of character include *resilience*, *confidence*, and *independence*, traits that also appear in the OFSTED inspection framework. Across 33,434 words of government policy, *resilience* appears 64 times, often in conjunction with metaphors of *building*, *instilling*, or *training*. The child is presented as a resilient subject-in-progress, shaped to meet the needs of the labour market. As Morgan (2015) notes, 'the character traits we instil in young people should reflect the type of workforce our modern economy wants and needs.' Damian Hinds echoes this sentiment, claiming 'character and a positive outlook are all intrinsically linked to employability', valorising 'public school confidence' as an aspirational benchmark (Hinds, 2019). At no point do terms like compassion, solidarity, or justice feature as virtues to be cultivated, suggesting a narrow moral horizon dominated by traits of self-regulation and personal fortitude. Such findings are supported by the sentiment analysis, which indicates a significant emphasis on loyalty and authority (through the discourse of British values, discipline, and responsibility), whilst neglecting fairness-related themes. The moral message is that citizens are obedient, industrious, and emotionally robust.

The Jubilee Centre corpus offers a more holistic and relational view of character. As they argue, 'social mobility should not only focus on individualism and performance virtues, but should be a mechanism for citizens and society to flourish together' (2016, p. 1). Frequent collocates of character include *virtue*, *flourishing*, and

citizenship, and metaphors of cultivation and growth dominate, aligning with a neo-Aristotelian approach grounded in eudaimonia. Moral foundations data confirm a more balanced distribution in the Jubilee Centre policy texts. However, the Knightly Virtues teaching materials - still promoted and widely used - are an outlier. Of all corpora analysed, they contain the highest frequency of purity-related terms, positioning moral development within a Christian worldview, using stories of saints and biblical figures to exemplify character.

The analysis points to a central overarching problem: each institutional actor appears to construct character in its own ideological image. The government favours a muscular liberalism in which self-sufficiency and employability are the highest goods. Hinds (2019) explicitly links character education to benchmarks drawn from elite private schools, praising their capacity to produce 'have-a-go assertiveness'. The implicit message is that moral development is a function of elite socialisation: something to be engineered into the working-class child by means of rugby coaches and cadet forces. It would not be controversial to suggest that this represents a more 'conservative' definition of character than might be held by teachers or academics. In one sense, that Conservative policies are conservative is uncontroversial: it is surely the prerogative of incumbent governments to make policy in keeping with their values, given the democratic mandate. However, the government has been vocal recently on issues of impartiality in the classroom, and recently updated their guidance on '[p]olitical impartiality in schools' (DfE, 2022). Whilst I agree that children should be shielded from the political proclivities of teachers, surely this should apply equally to the state? A related issue is that if we take the ostensive definition of character education offered by government policies, Boris Johnson

would pass with flying colours. This is not intended as a flippant observation. Shortly after the introduction of the character education (DfE, 2019) and inspection frameworks (OFSTED, 2023), Johnson was forced to resign as Prime Minister, the main criticism being of his moral character or lack thereof. This points to a fundamental contradiction in the policies. Hinds is correct to point out that confidence, grit and resilience (the three traits which feature in the final OFSTED framework) would be the makings of a good fraudster. The problem is that the policies offer little guidance beyond this narrow definition of character, and instead represent a somewhat incoherent amalgam of positive psychology, neoliberalism, and One-nation conservatism.

Although the Jubilee Centre's conceptualisation of character is broader and more holistic, a related problem remains. The Centre tends to present itself as politically neutral, stating in multiple publications that 'the Centre has a robust and rigorous research and evidence-based approach that is objective and non-political' (Jubilee Centre, 2022, p. 2). The research may well be 'objective' in methodological terms, but this does not entail any kind of moral or political objectivity. The discrepancy between policy and pedagogy further complicates the Centre's claim to political and religious neutrality. Kristjánsson (2021, p. 7) has stated that the Centre 'takes no stand on religious issues', yet the Knightly Virtues programme, distributed to over 20,000 children, suggests otherwise. A cynical reading might suggest the Centre is smuggling religious content into ostensibly secular spaces; a more charitable interpretation holds that this reflects unconscious bias in the construction of moral exemplars. As the literature on narrative pedagogy suggests, stories inevitably encode the values of their authors (Bruner, 1991). In this case, the Centre's moral

vision skews towards the culturally conservative and theologically inflected. While the Centre claims the Knightly Virtues predate its founding, their continued promotion and widespread use suggest ongoing alignment. Arthur's own writings assert that the UK has drifted dangerously far from its Judeo-Christian foundations, lamenting the erosion of shared moral criteria. This ideological orientation, though more subtly framed, still shapes the Centre's moral universe. Perhaps the most concerning finding is that all three corpora exhibit a relative absence of fairness-related language. Despite the prominence of social justice, inclusion, and equity in broader educational discourse, these values are largely absent from the moral frameworks analysed. This suggests that contemporary character education, whether grounded in neoliberalism or virtue ethics, may be insufficiently responsive to the ethical demands of a pluralistic, unequal society.

Conclusion

Character education is not a neutral enterprise. This analysis confirms that both government and Jubilee Centre policy discourses embed normative visions of the good citizen, shaped by ideological commitments and institutional histories. The government offers a technocratic, economically-aligned model of personal virtue. The corpus analysis provides significant evidence that UK government policies around character education *are* neoliberal, conservative, and individualist, as argued by critics. The data supports Kristjánsson's (2021) categorisation of government policy as a mixture of Duckworth (2016), focusing on individual grit and resilience, and Tough (2013), whose work is described as 'amoral, instrumentalist, performance-driven, behaviouristic and almost Gradgrindian' (Kristjánsson, 2021, p. 5). By contrast, the Jubilee Centre provides a philosophically

coherent, but culturally inflected, framework rooted in tradition and religion. Each constructs character in its own image. This raises fundamental questions about the future of moral education in England. Can a pluralistic society sustain shared moral frameworks without suppressing diversity? Can we teach virtue without ideology? And should we try? What is clear is that character education, as currently conceived, reflects competing ideals about what kind of citizens we should produce, and what kind of society we wish to inhabit.

Chapter five:
Framing experiment

Two metaphors for character education: a psychological framing experiment

Historically, teachers and policymakers have drawn upon different language and metaphors to describe the process of education. Some philosophers and linguists argue these metaphors can shape the way people think about education, reflecting different political and pedagogical positions. This paper aims to test this claim in the context of moral education policy in England. In an online survey experiment, participants (n=861) were asked to read a scenario about moral education, framed in either gardening (group 1) or business (group 2) language, before being asked to rank policies in response. The hypothesis was that those reading the garden frame would be more likely to emphasise nurture in their policy preferences, whereas those reading the business frame would be more likely to emphasise discipline. A logistic regression found no significant framing effects, except among Asians/British Asians, a curious anomaly. The analysis also found strong effects for demographic variables, notably age, gender, and especially political affiliation.

Keywords: Moral education, character, policy analysis, framing, metaphor

Introduction

Since the 1980s, there has been a move to restructure the UK education system according to the principles of New Public Management: privatisation, marketisation, and accountability (Tolofari, 2005). In subsequent decades, academics from both sides of the political spectrum have become increasingly concerned by the encroachment of the logic and language of business into the educational sphere. The position is best summarised by the philosopher, Richard Pring:

> The language of education through which we are asked to "think in business terms" … constitutes a new way of thinking about the relation of teacher and learner. It employs different metaphors, different ways of describing and evaluating educational activities; but, in doing so, it changes those activities into something else. It transforms the moral context in which education takes place and is judged successful or otherwise (2001, p. 108).

Pring (2019, p. 40) is especially troubled by the 'insidious growth of "the impersonal"' in education; he argues that by co-opting the language of business, educators begin to think through the same logic of standards, targets and delivery. This transforms the educational process into a transactional, results-driven enterprise, rather than a human endeavour, focused on the growth of individual students. This sounds like a compelling argument, but does it hold up empirically? This paper attempts to shed some light on this question, beginning with a general discussion around the use of metaphor in education, before focusing more specifically on recent developments in character education in England.

Metaphor in education

Of all the metaphors that abound in education, two have featured especially prominently over the past decades. The first frames education as a factory, where teachers are managers, their job to mould children into finished products according to predetermined criteria or standards. The second frames education as a garden, where teachers are gardeners who cultivate children's development in accordance with their natural proclivities. The factory metaphor is exemplified in the following quotation from Ellwood Cubberley, former Dean of the Stanford University School of Education:

> Our schools are, in a sense, factories, in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands of twentieth-century civilization, and it is the business of the school to build its pupils according to the specifications laid down (1916, p. 338).

The factory model of education has persisted for decades. Arising from the industrial revolution, the concept took hold in the early 20th century, when Scientific

Management (or Taylorism) became the dominant approach to managing public services. The model is effective insofar as it stipulates clear outcomes, with an emphasis on efficiency in achieving these results. However, critics argue the model promotes obedience and docility at the expense of creativity and individuality, thus privileging a 'one size fits all' approach to education that is reminiscent of current attempts to standardise curricula and outcomes (Bradbury, 2019; Hutchings, 2015). I argue the business metaphor, now hegemonic in education policy, represents an updated version of the factory metaphor, following the same logic but more commensurate with the economic landscape of the 21st century. Although the backdrop is different, it operates according to the same logic, where teaching is understood 'within a broader discourse of "performance indicators" and "audits", "inputs" related to "outputs", "target-setting" and "efficiency gains"' (Pring, 2018, p. 40). Contrast the factory or business model with the following gardening metaphor, which Gopnik uses to explain child development and parenting:

> The good gardener works to create fertile soil that can sustain a whole ecosystem of different plants with different strengths and beauties—and with different weaknesses and difficulties, too. Unlike a good chair, a good garden is constantly changing, as it adapts to the changing circumstances of the weather and the seasons (Gopnik, 2016, p. 19).

The gardening metaphor can be traced back to antiquity, with Antiphon and Plato adopting agricultural analogies to describe the process of human development (Mintz, 2018). Centuries later, horticultural metaphors came to reflect liberal or progressive approaches to education, notably through Rousseau and Dewey, the latter of whom famously argued that '[t]he aim of education is growth; the aim of growth is more growth' (1938, p. 96). The emphasis here is less on results and more on process: education is not a means to an end, but an end in itself. We also see relics

of the gardening metaphor in everyday language, for example in the word 'kindergarten', coined by Fredrich Froebel to represent his child-centred philosophy. As Oxford et al. (1998) claim, 'like a gardener, the teacher's job [is] to construct the optimal environment in which the inner nature of the mind could grow and flourish' (p. 9)

Character education in England

The language in which education policies are framed is relevant to current debates around character education in England, where schools have a statutory duty to promote children's 'spiritual, moral, social, and cultural' (SMSC) development. Over previous decades, initiatives have taken multiple forms, including moral education, citizenship education, values clarification, and social and emotional learning. These programs all focus on different aspects of children's non-academic development, often packaged in different language, embodying different aims. Since the London Riots in 2011, 'character education' has become the dominant approach, spearheaded by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, and supported by the then incumbent Conservative government. This culminated in new Character Education (DfE, 2019) and OFSTED inspection (2023) frameworks. However, despite its policy success, many have criticised character education as a political project, arguing it is neoliberal, conservative, individualist and religiously-tethered (Kristjánsson, 2021). In a separate paper, I conducted a comparative analysis of UK Government and Jubilee Centre policies to test whether these criticisms were warranted. Whilst the focus of that paper was the ideological content of the policies, an additional finding emerged vis-à-vis language use.

The corpus analysis found that the government and Jubilee Centre used different metaphors to frame the issue of character education, with the former relying on business and management language, the latter using more organic, growth metaphors. The language of the government policies is very much in keeping with trends identified by the Nuffield Review (Pring et al., 2009, p. 17), a comprehensive appraisal of 14-19 education and training in England. Based on an analysis of aims, curriculum and assessment, the review cautions that in seeking education reform based on the logic of business, there is a danger 'we shall depend upon a particular language and a particular set of metaphors - a language which lends itself to more effective control and management, rather than to an engagement between minds' (Pring et al., 2009, p. 17). It is therefore worthwhile to investigate whether current character education policy – focused on individual resilience, discipline, and employability - is shaped and legitimised by the instrumental, business language in which it is framed. Speaking in parliament, Sir Iain Duncan Smith defined character as 'understanding what it is to go to work and to get up in the morning' (2015). To what extent are such impoverished definitions caused by the 'impoverished metaphors' (Pring, 2007, p. 328) we sometimes use to talk about [moral] education?

Theory

The idea that metaphor can shape people's understanding of social issues is rooted in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which proposes that metaphor is 'a central cognitive process for abstract conceptualization and reasoning' (Johnson, 2010, p. 412). In recent decades, cognitive scientists have experimentally tested whether metaphor has a causal influence on people's reasoning about social policy. Confirming and replicating their hypotheses,

Thibodeau & Boroditsky (2011, 2013) found that framing a hypothetical crime problem as either a 'virus infecting' a city or a 'beast preying on' a city could predict participants' policy responses, encouraging more reform- or enforcement-oriented measures, respectively. Since these influential studies, the experimental evidence for metaphorical framing effects has grown exponentially: framing climate change as a 'war' versus a 'race' prompts more urgency, risk perception and willingness to change behaviour (Flusberg et al., 2017); framing cancer as a 'journey' versus a 'battle' results in greater acceptance of difficult outcomes later down the line (Semino et al., 2018); framing the flu metaphorically as a 'beast', 'riot', 'army' or 'weed' versus a literal 'virus' leads to greater intention to get vaccinated (Scherer et al., 2015). The framing of these issues has demonstrable, real-world consequences, and the same stands for moral education. When we debate moral education, how much work (if any) are the different metaphors doing? My methodology is designed to answer this question.

Methods

The aim of this experiment is two-fold: first, it tests whether framing education as a garden or business predicts different policy responses; second, independent of framing effects, it aims to provide a picture of public opinion on character education, such that it can be calibrated against current policies. An online framing experiment provides an efficient and controlled means of testing how alternative framings influence policy preferences in a large and diverse sample. By randomly assigning participants to conditions, it is possible to isolate the causal effect of framing on responses while simultaneously collecting attitudinal data that can be compared

with current policy priorities. To ensure robustness and replicability, I followed Thibodeau & Boroditsky's (2013) methodology unless otherwise stated.

Sampling and recruitment

Participants (n=861) were recruited via *Prolific.ac* and asked to participate in a study about children's moral education. Given the relatively small effect sizes demonstrated in the extant literature, large samples were required to test for framing effects. Thibodeau & Boroditsky (2015) recommend that each condition needs to contain a minimum of 150-200 participants, a benchmark that was well exceeded in this study. Importantly, all participants were recruited from the UK in the hope of providing an ecologically valid analysis of a) framing effects and b) public opinion. (Prolific.ac does not allow one to sample exclusively from England, though this could have been included as a question in the demographic questionnaire). The main limitation of this study is the self-selecting nature of my sample, which I discuss in more detail in later sections.

Experimental design

In the experiment, participants were presented with one of two conditions. In each, they read a brief scenario about character education in the fictional city of Greenville, which included some genuine statistics (from England) about declining mental health and rising exclusions. The first condition was framed in organic, gardening language and the second was framed in inorganic, business language. The scenarios were identical except for slight manipulations between words (in bold) and crucially all statistics were identical. The conditions are shown below.

> Education is a **garden/business** involving many **gardeners/stakeholders**: parents, teachers and others. As well as developing knowledge, education also aims to **cultivate/build** children's character and resilience, so they can **flourish/compete** in a rapidly changing world. In Greenville, however, there is cause for concern. In 2010 the city was thriving, but after a decade of cuts its schools are **wilting/failing** and its youth have become **disenchanted/disengaged**. The number of pupils being excluded from school has increased by 71% in the past seven years, whilst 1 in 5 struggle with their mental health. Greenville's policymakers are concerned that unless they act soon, it may be too late to recover children's moral and emotional development.

The two conditions were constructed to be as ecologically valid as possible, reflecting both the reality of schooling in England, as well as the language in which policies are framed. The exclusion numbers were taken directly from government statistics (DfE, 2020), and the mental health statistics were taken from the international *Good Childhood Report* (The Children's Society, 2020). The words in bold reflect fundamental differences between the UK government and Jubilee Centre framings of character, as evidenced through a corpus analysis of the policies. For example, the words 'flourish' and 'cultivate' appeared significantly more in the Jubilee corpus, whereas 'business' and 'build' appeared significantly more in the government corpus. The metaphors – garden and business – were extended using words from related semantic domains, whilst retaining the overall meaning of the passage. The metaphors were introduced explicitly at the beginning of the passage such that participants could interpret subsequent information through the respective frames (Thibodeau et al., 2017). To this end, it was important that subsequent information entailed some ambiguity, where certain words (those underlined) could be interpreted through either metaphor. After reading the scenario, participants were asked to respond to the hypothetical problem by

ranking four policies in order of preference (these policies are described in the next section, along with how they were designed, as part of defining my outcome variable).

After ranking the policies, participants were presented with the following statement: 'The report about children's education, which you read before ranking the policies, began: '"Education is a……". From memory, please fill in the missing word'. This question tested for metaphor covertness (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2013), that is, whether participants were aware of the metaphors being used and whether this had any impact on their reasoning. For example, it might be the case that only those who remembered the metaphors used them as cognitive scaffolds or heuristics. Having completed the main task, participants were asked to complete a short socio-demographic questionnaire pertaining to age, gender, ethnicity, education level, and political affiliation. Of all the demographic variables, political affiliation was the most problematic in terms of coding. US studies tend to differentiate between Democrats and Republicans, whilst others opt for liberal versus conservative. These distinctions were deemed inappropriate for the current study given recent shifts in the UK political landscape. The term 'liberal' has very different connotations when applied to the social and economic spheres and, as such, left- versus right-wing was deemed the most parsimonious and predictive measure of political affiliation.

Outcome variable

The dependent variable in this study, a binary measure of policy preference - nurture or discipline - was established through a norming study. The study used a

different sample (n = 100) to the main experiment and encompassed two tasks. In the first, participants read a maximally neutral/literal version of the experimental passage, before being informed that two politicians were debating the issue using different metaphors (garden and business). They were then presented with the four policies and asked to match two to each politician, based on their use of metaphor. This task allowed me to understand whether participants understood the entailments of the two metaphors when they were presented explicitly. In a second task, participants were informed that the four policies differed in the extent to which they emphasised nurture and discipline. They were then asked to rank each of the four policies on a scale of 0 (totally nurturant) to 100 (totally disciplinary), with the aim the of providing a categorical distinction (using 50 as the cut-off point) between the policies, thus resulting in a binary outcome variable for the experiment proper. The two hypotheses for the norming study were as follows:

> *H1*: Participants will match policies 1 and 2 with the gardening frame, and will match policies 3 and 4 with the business frame
>
> *H2*: Participants will rank policies 1 and 2 as nurturant (0-49), and will rank policies 3 and 4 as disciplinary (51-100)

The four policies that participants were asked to rank (below) were developed according to two criteria. Firstly, they needed to sharply capture the distinction between nurture- and discipline-focused approaches to the perceived problems in English schools. Secondly, they needed to be ecologically valid, i.e. realistic, potentially viable policies that could be (or are being) enacted across the country.

1. Include mindfulness and yoga in school timetables
2. Reduce examinations before GCSEs
3. Implement zero-tolerance attendance and school uniform policies
4. Use computer software to record and monitor children's behaviour

The first two policies are designed to represent more nurturant and holistic approaches: policy one focuses on children's mental and physical wellbeing; policy two is being argued for throughout the profession, notably through organisations such as 'More Than a Score', a coalition of teachers, parents, academics and trade unions. Policies three and four represent more discipline-focused approaches, focusing on children's behaviour, a key theme in government policy. In 2017, the government's school behaviour tsar, Tom Bennet, published a national review of schools in England. Among key recommendations were creating a national database of school behaviour that could be used to inform OFSTED inspections, and funding more 'internal exclusion units', which are currently used in over half of secondary schools (Mills & Thompson, 2018). Bennet's approach generally, and the use of exclusion units specifically, has been heavily criticised by many teachers and parents. References to the importance of discipline and behaviour are made throughout the character education policies. Together, the four policy options are considered reasonable reflections of the status quo, as well as possible alternatives.

The results of the norming study indicate that participants clearly understood the entailments of the garden and business metaphors when explicitly presented with the information. Ninety participants (90%) submitted four congruent responses, correctly matching two policies with the garden frame, and two with the business frame. The remaining participants submitted two congruent responses, correctly matching one policy with each frame. These levels of congruence are high compared with existing studies (i.e. Thibodeau & Gehring, 2015). The analysis also revealed a categorical distinction between those policies ranked as nurturant and disciplinary.

Participants ranked policy 1 (M = 14.72, SD = 20.113) and policy 2 (M = 24.86, SD = 17.599) as nurturant, whereas they ranked policy 3 (M = 86.15, SD = 16.334) and policy 4 (M = 80.69, SD = 18.478) as disciplinary, as predicted. The norming study therefore provides a robust empirical basis for the dependent variable, i.e. participants' top policy choice - nurture or discipline - coded as 1 and 0 respectively.

Statistical analysis

The relationship between metaphorical frame and policy preference was examined through a binary logistic regression model. A number of relevant covariates, identified through a review of literature as potentially influencing or confounding the relationship of interest, were introduced into models to investigate and control for such effects. I adopted a hierarchical approach to model building, entering predictor variables in blocks according to extant literature and my specific research hypotheses. In the first model, I entered 'metaphorical frame' and 'politics' as predictors, corresponding with *H1* and *H2* below. In the second, I entered variables that were likely to directly influence policy preference or covary with other predictors. Finally, I entered interaction effects between metaphor and demographic variables to test whether groups varied in their susceptibility to framing effects. Variables were retained based on statistical significance. The two experimental hypotheses were as follows:

> *H1*: Participants exposed to the gardening frame will be more likely to choose a 'nurture' policy as their top choice, whereas participants exposed to the business frame will be more likely to select a 'discipline' policy as their top choice.
>
> *H2*: Left-wing participants will be more likely to select a 'nurture' policy as their top choice, whereas right-wing participants will be more likely to select a 'discipline' policy as their top choice, independent of metaphorical frame.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Before presenting results of the logistic regression modelling, I first include some descriptive statistics pertaining to demographic variables (see Table 4) as well as participants' responses to the two tasks. Given the aspiration to construct an ecologically valid experiment, the aim was for my sample to be broadly representative of public opinion. As later discussed, however, the self-selected nature of the sample limits generalisability at the national level.

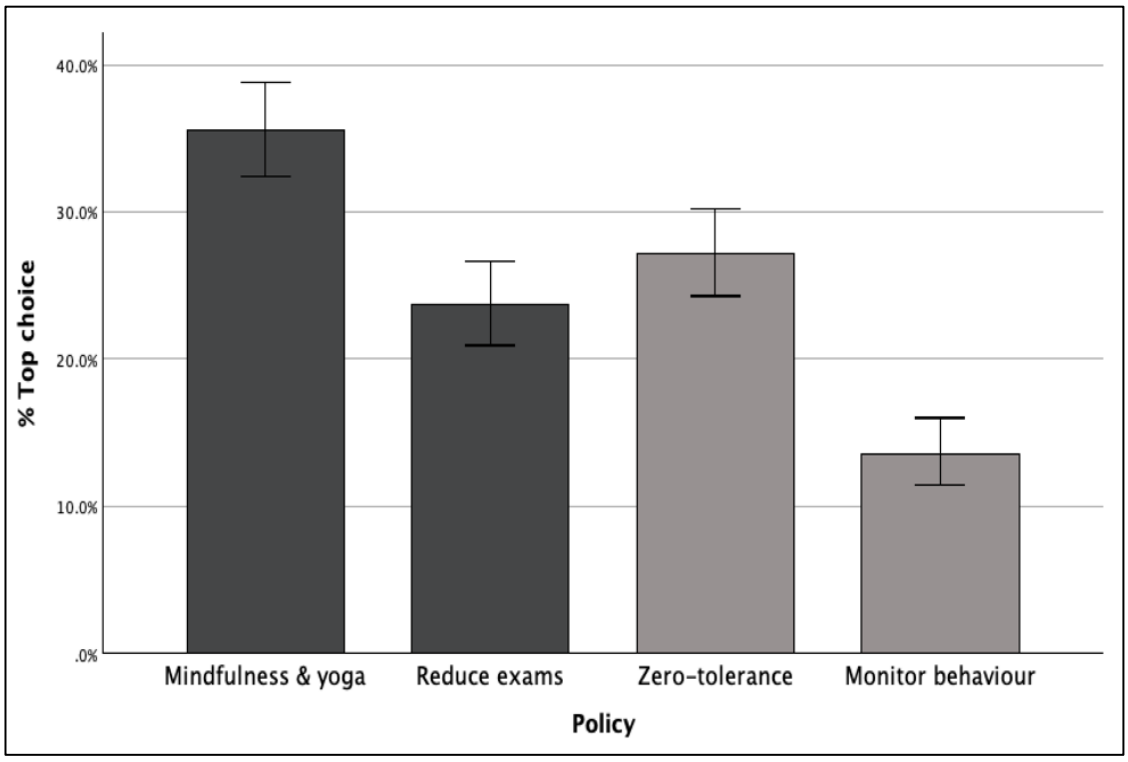
Table 4: Sample demographics (framing experiment)

	N	%
Gender		
Male	423	49.9
Female	425	50.1
Age		
18-24	116	13.5
25-34	242	28.1
35-44	206	24.0
45-54	140	16.3
55+	156	18.1
Ethnicity		
White	751	87.7
Asian/Asian British	53	6.2
Black/Black British	26	3.0
Mixed/Other	26	3.0
Education		
Postgraduate degree	153	17.9
College or university	409	47.8
Further Education	206	24.1
Primary/secondary school	88	10.3
Politics		
Left	157	18.2
Centre-left	251	29.2
Centre	230	26.7
Centre-right	123	14.3
Right	37	4.3
Prefer not to say	63	7.3

Amongst respondents (*n*=861), roughly half identified as male (49.9%). Thirteen participants declined to indicate gender (i.e., *prefer not to say*), with these cases excluded from all further analyses (i.e., considered missing). This group was too small to conduct robust statistical analyses, nor would I wish to make inferences about the policy preferences of e.g. non-binary people from such an unrepresentative sample. (Across other demographic variables there were a further 11 cases treated as missing). As with gender, my sample is ethnically representative of the population in England. Examining recent census data from England and Wales (ONS, 2021), 81.7% of the population are White, 9.3% are Asian, 4.0% are Black, and 2.9% are mixed, with my sample following a similar distribution. Regarding the remaining demographic variables, my sample reflects the nature of the platform from which participants were recruited, leaning towards the young, educated and politically left wing. For example, combining left and centre-left, right and centre-right, 47.4% of participants identify as left whereas only 18.6% identify as right. Similarly, 65.7% of my sample are educated at or beyond college/university level, higher than the population average. Given these discrepancies, older, less-educated, right-wing participants are underrepresented in the sample. One possible approach to mitigate this would be to apply weightings to the underrepresented categories, however I have chosen not to do this due to my sample being both relatively small and self-selected. Weighting these groups would result in amplifying the responses of a small number of self-selecting participants, thus distorting interpretations further. It is more methodologically responsible to accept this as a limitation of the study.

Figure 11 shows participants' responses to the survey experiment, independent of framing. Combining the policies as per the norming study, 510 participants (59.2%) chose one of the two 'nurture' policies as their top choice, with the remainder opting for one of the two 'discipline' policies.

Figure 11: Participants' top policy choices



After ranking the policies, participants were asked to recall the metaphor used in the scenario. Overall, 497 participants (57.7%) remembered the metaphor, with the remainder providing incorrect responses or claiming not to remember. Interestingly, of those who remembered, 337 participants (67.81%) received the garden frame and 160 (32.19%) received the business frame, a statistically significant difference (χ^2=142.384, p=<0.001). A possible interpretation is that the garden frame was more evocative than the business metaphor, conjuring more vivid

images in the participants' minds. A less charitable interpretation might suggest the garden frame was more conspicuous and struck participants as incongruous with education. However, of those who did not explicitly remember the metaphors being used, several responded with words from related semantic domains ('forest', 'plant', 'flower' and 'maze' in the garden condition; 'priority', 'sector', 'investment' and 'discipline' in the business condition). This suggests that some participants processed the entailments of the respective metaphors without explicitly remembering the wording, perhaps lending some credence to the former interpretation. Participants' responses to this question were manually coded 1 for 'Remembered' and 0 for 'Forgot' and entered as a potential covariate in regression models.

Binary logistic regression

Results of logistic regression analysis examining the relationship between frame and policy choice are presented in Table 5. In modelling this relationship, the analysis investigates the assertions of *H1*, which proposes that participants exposed to the garden frame would be more likely to choose a 'nurturant' policy as their top choice, whereas participants exposed to the business frame would be more likely to select a 'disciplinary' policy. Following listwise deletion of responses for which one or more variable values were missing (n=21), 840 respondents were included in the final model. Multicollinearity was examined based on variance inflation factors (VIF < 2 for all predictors) and outliers were inspected based on standardised residuals and Cook's Distance. Whilst several potential outlier cases were identified, these cases were retained following inspection, considered reasonable reflections of population variation. Offering statistically significantly better explanation of policy

preference than the null model ($\chi^2[11]=123.941$, $p<.001$), the final model explained 18.4% (Nagelkerke R^2) of observed variance in policy preference and correctly predicted the policy preference of 67.5% of respondents. The final model was developed iteratively, with blocks of variables added in three stages, described below.

Table 5: Output of binary logistic regression

	Model 1		**Model 2**		**Model 3**	
Predictor	B	Odds Ratio	B	Odds Ratio	B	Odds Ratio
Constant	0.210	1.234	0.777	2.176	0.829	2.290
Metaphor (Garden)	0.062	1.064	0.052	1.053	-0.017	0.983
Politics (Left)	1.340***	3.820	1.271***	3.565	1.279***	3.595
Politics (Centre-left)	0.294	1.341	0.264	1.302	0.271	1.311
Politics (Centre-right)	-0.996***	0.369	-0.683***	0.505	-0.691**	0.501
Politics (Right)	-0.630	0.533	-0.487	0.614	-0.480	0.618
Politics (Prefer)	0.021	1.021	-0.142	0.868	-0.095	0.909
Age	-	-	-0.269***	0.764	-0.272***	0.762
Gender (Female)	-	-	0.473**	1.604	0.443**	1.558
Ethnicity (Asian)	-	-	-0.157	0.855	-1.062*	0.346
Ethnicity (Black)	-	-	0.017	1.017	0.448	1.565
Ethnicity (Other)	-	-	0.368	1.445	0.709	2.031
Ethnicity*Metaphor	-	-	-	-	-	-
Asian*Garden	-	-	-	-	1.832**	6.245
Black*Garden	-	-	-	-	-1.033	0.356
Other*Garden	-	-	-	-	-0.491	0.612
Loglikelihood	1060.6		1031.0		1021.1	
Nagelkerke R^2 (%)	12.8		17.0		18.4	

(* p <.05, ** p <.01, *** p<.001)

In the first model, the two predictors were metaphorical frame (either garden or business) and politics (measured by self-ID). In this model (as well as subsequent iterations) metaphor was not a significant predictor of policy choice (B=.062,

p=.676) and the null hypothesis was accepted. This implies that respondents demonstrated a similar likelihood of indicating preference for nurture versus discipline when education was framed, metaphorically, as either a garden or business. Controlling for metaphorical frame (though not itself significant), politics was a statistically significant predictor of policy choice, explaining 12.8% of the variance in outcome. Left-wing participants were significantly more likely than centrists to endorse a nurturant policy (B=1.34, *p*<.001), whereas those on the centre-right were significantly less likely (B=-.996, *p*<.001), as predicted by *H2.*

In model two, age, gender and ethnicity were entered as further predictors. The significant effect of politics holds when controlling for these variables, with age and gender also significant. Controlling for covariates, females were more likely than males to endorse a nurturing policy (OR=1.604, p<.01) and the odds of endorsing a nurturing policy decreased with age (B=-0.269, *p*<.001). This suggests that younger, female participants tended towards nurture, whereas older, male participants tended towards discipline.

In the third and final model, interaction effects between metaphor and demographic variables were entered sequentially, based on extant literature suggesting that different groups might be differentially susceptible to framing effects (Thibodeau et al., 2016). Ethnicity by frame was retained based on statistical significance. When both groups received the business frame, Asians/British Asians were significantly more likely than White British participants to choose a 'discipline' policy as their top choice. However, for Asians/British Asians who received the garden metaphor, the odds of choosing a 'nurture' policy were over six times higher (OR=6.245) than the

reference group (i.e. White British participants who received the business frame). The effects of politics, age and gender also hold. Controlling for covariates and interaction effects, females remain more likely than males to endorse a nurturing policy (OR=1.558, p<.01), as do younger participants (B=-0.272, *p*<.001). Similarly, for those on the political 'left', the odds of choosing a nurturant policy were over three and a half times higher (OR=3.595) than political centrists; for those on the 'centre-right', the odds were roughly half (OR=.501).

Before discussing these results, a brief methodological aside. Thus far, I have reported coefficients in terms of log odds (B) and odds ratios (OR) since this is the most mathematically appropriate language through which to interpret logistic regression models. However, odds are not especially intuitive, nor do they indicate the magnitude of effects of predictor variables. Moreover, there is often confusion in reporting logistic regression, whereby odds ratios are misreported as relative risk (a ratio of probabilities rather than odds), thereby exaggerating the effect of predictors (Niu, 2020). For example, in my sample, the odds of a left-winger choosing a nurture policy were over three and a half times higher (OR=3.595) than political centrists. This is often reported as 'over three and a half times more likely', mistakenly using the language of probability. In fact, when the odds ratios are converted to probabilities and expressed as relative risk, left-wingers are twice (not 3.5 times) as likely to endorse nurture (RR=2.057). Whereas relative risk is calculated based on observed probabilities, SPSS also calculates predicted probabilities based on the regression model, and it is these that I interpret in my discussion. Predicted probabilities allow me to discuss different variables/demographics independently, rather than relying on comparisons with

reference groups. They also allow me to visually display the results of the logistic regression model, and thus all subsequent graphs control for covariates. For reference, in the overall sample the mean predicted probability of choosing a nurture policy is $\hat{p}$=.591, a useful baseline for comparison. In the figures shown in the discussion, this value is represented by the horizontal interpolation line.

Discussion

Framing effects

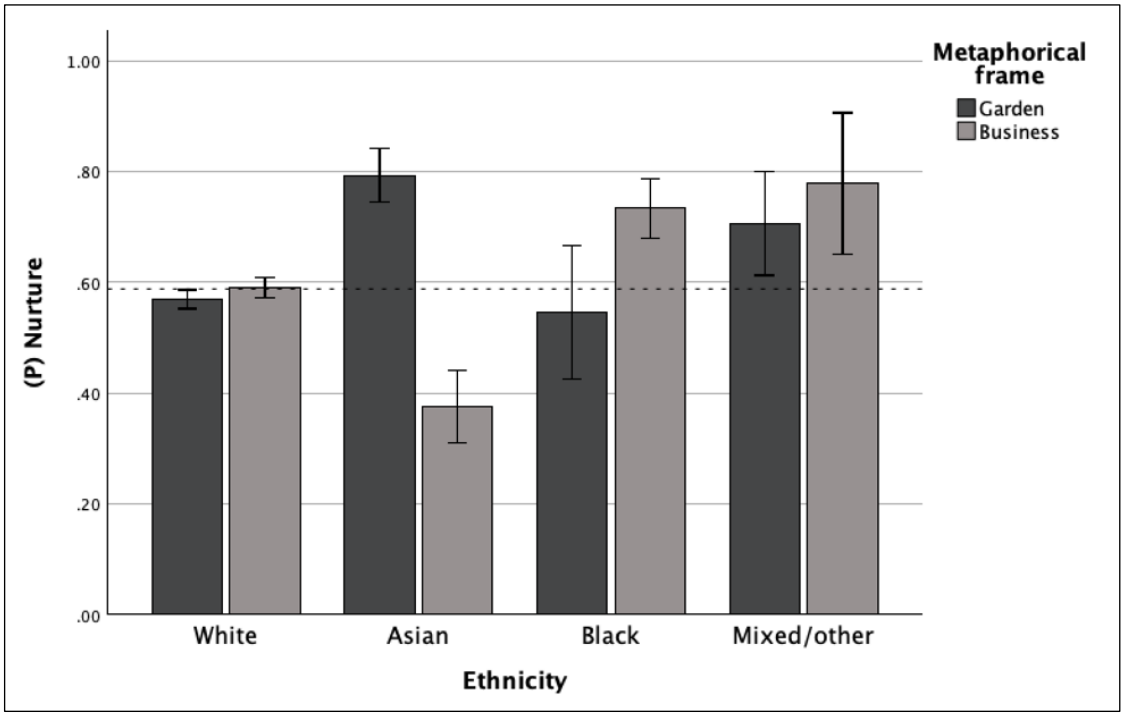
The predicted probability of choosing a nurturant policy was almost identical in the garden ($\hat{p}$=.596) and business ($\hat{p}$=.587) conditions, reflecting an overall absence of framing effects. Metaphorical framing effects have been demonstrated consistently across a range of conceptual domains, from the economy (Jia & Smith, 2013) and the environment (Flusberg et al., 2017) to COVID policies (Schnepf & Christmann, 2022) and cancer treatment (Semino et al., 2018). Various systematic reviews have noted aggregated effect sizes to be around r=.07 (Sopory & Dillard, 2002), r=0.09 (Van Stee, 2018) and d=0.11 (Brugman et al., 2019). Notwithstanding these effects, the null result in this study is consistent with previous studies and meta-analyses (e.g. Brugman et al., 2019; Thibodeau & Gehring, 2015), which indicate that education is less susceptible to framing effects than other conceptual domains. In Thibodeau & Gehring's (2015) study, they compared framing effects across ten domains (e.g. cheating, crime, ecology, education etc.). Interestingly, they found that of all ten, participants were *most* likely to match the policies to their respective frames in education (indicating that they understood the entailments) but were *least* likely to be affected by framing in terms of their reasoning. Indeed, Thibodeau concludes that

there is '[d]efinitely something interesting going on with the domain of education - that it seems more resistant to metaphor framing than other domains' (Thibodeau, 2022, personal communication, 13 April). To understand why this might be the case, we can look to the various factors that impact the persuasiveness of metaphor. An initial hypothesis was that because people are especially familiar with education (almost everyone has one), they might be less likely to depend upon metaphor to facilitate their reasoning, relying instead on the cold, hard statistics. However, this contradicts the aforementioned meta-analyses, which suggest that familiarity with the target domain actually increases the effectiveness of metaphor. This remains an open question.

In reference to the null hypothesis, it might be tempting to assert that the language that educators use to frame educational issues is of little significance, and therefore we need not concern ourselves with it. It is worth noting, however, that just because framing effects do not manifest themselves in a one-shot, controlled study, this does not mean they are not present in everyday language, where they can develop over hundreds of iterations. Baker (2014) highlights the 'incremental or cumulative effect of discourse' … [where certain] words or phrases occur in particular contexts, repeatedly, priming text recipients so that certain representations or ways of looking at the world are not only automatically triggered but gradually appear to be common-sense ways of thinking' (p. 214). It is plausible, then, that framing children's social and moral development in the language of business does result in a greater emphasis on 'control and management', as argued by Pring et al. (2009, p. 17), but the present study was unable to detect these effects. There is one further

caveat to *H1*, namely that for Asians/British Asians, metaphorical frame did predict policy preference, shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12: Predicted policy choice by metaphor and ethnicity



(Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals)

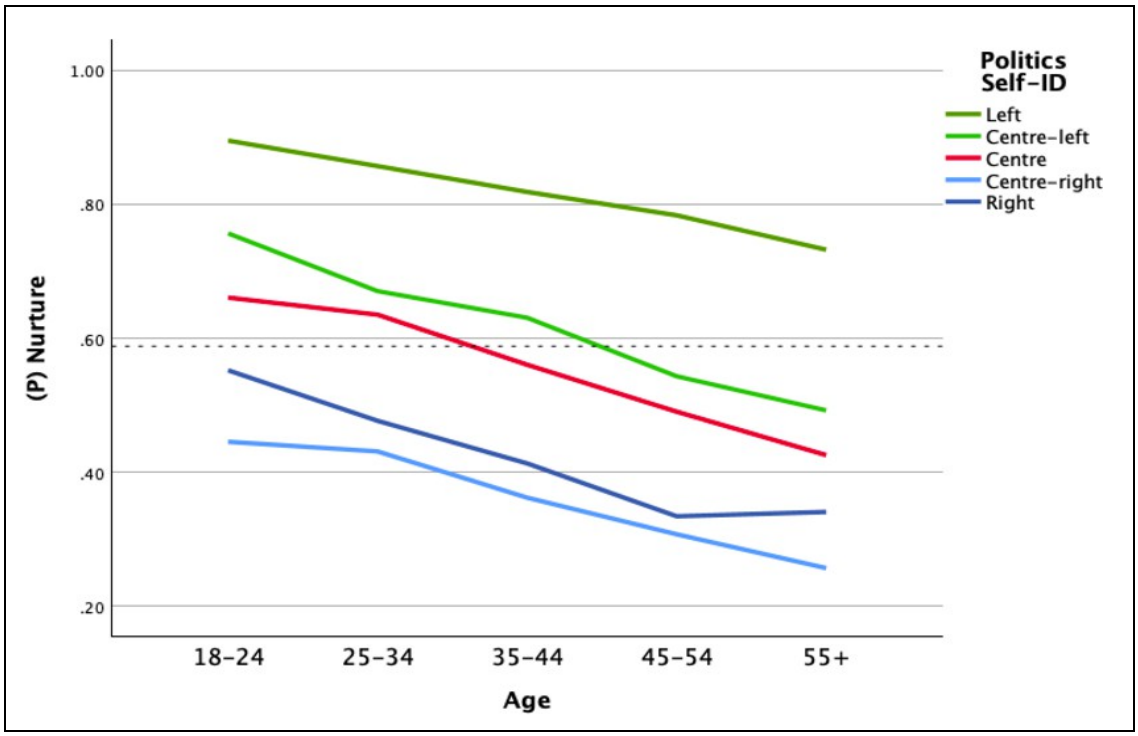
Controlling for covariates, for Asians who received the garden frame, the predicted probability of choosing a nurturant policy was $\hat{p}$=.79; for Asians who received the business frame it was $\hat{p}$=.38. By comparison, for White British participants the values were $\hat{p}$=.57 and $\hat{p}$=.59 respectively. As Fairclough writes, 'different metaphors have different ideological attachments' (Fairclough, 1989, p. 119) and for this particular group, these entailments appear to have significantly affected their reasoning about moral education. Unfortunately, any hypotheses as to the significance of this result are blunted by the fact that 'Asians' is an ethnically and culturally heterogenous group, with sample size precluding a more granular analysis. It may be that gardens and businesses have different cultural significance

for certain groups, leading to different associations with nurture and discipline. Equally, it could be that English language proficiency affects susceptibility to framing effects, but these are not questions that can be answered using the present sample.

Demographic effects

H2 predicted a discrepancy between the policy preferences of left- and right-wing participants, independent of frame, and this was borne out by the data, leading to a rejection of the null hypothesis. The regression analysis indicates that the British public are ideologically divided on the issue of children's social, emotional and moral education. Politics was the strongest predictor of policy preference, with left ($\hat{p}$=.82) and centre-left ($\hat{p}$=.63) participants more likely to emphasise nurture than those on the right ($\hat{p}$=.40) and centre right ($\hat{p}$=.31). Similarly, those under 25 ($\hat{p}$=.73) had a higher predicted probability of emphasising nurture than those over 55 ($\hat{p}$=.43). The relationship between these two variables - age and politics - is shown in Figure 13.

Figure 13: Predicted policy choice by age and politics



An email that I received following the experiment highlights the extent of the polarisation regarding children's moral development, and the degree to which people are invested in their opinions: '… two of the ideas I found very concerning, namely monitoring children with computer software and enforcing a strict uniform & attendence [sic] policy. If this study is going to inform education in any way I would like to categorically state that these ideas would be detrimental to the goal of improving a student's wellbeing and I do not support them in any way' (email communication, 9/04/2022). As predicted by the model, this participant (a young left-winger) chose 'mindfulness and yoga' as their top policy choice, ranking the two discipline policies as least desirable.

Conclusion

There are two sets of conclusions that arise from this paper, the first being relevant to the framing power of metaphor in a general sense, the second being relevant to character education policy in England. As discussed, the language and metaphors used to frame character education policy, at least in this study, appear to have no statistically significant effect on people's policy preferences. Given the ubiquity of metaphorical framing effects across a range of conceptual domains, it is interesting that education appears to be exempt. It is also noteworthy that Asians/British Asians *were* significantly swayed by metaphor, whereby the garden frame predicted more nurturant policy choices, the business frame more discipline-oriented choices. This suggests that different cultural or ethnic groups might be differentially susceptible to metaphorical framing effects.

Independent of framing, the analysis also reveals the degree of divergence regarding public opinion on children's sociomoral education. The scenarios that participants read were carefully constructed to reflect the education landscape in England. In response to statistics about rising school exclusion rates and declining mental health, participants in the sample were divided in their response, with policy preference varying significantly by gender, age and especially politics. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the character education debate is contested, given that people hold such different views regarding the proper trajectory for children's moral and emotional development. Cross-party solutions may be the best way forward in ensuring continuity and bipartisanship in policies that deal with these non-academic, but equally crucial, aspects of children's education.

Chapter six:
Survey

Character education in England: A potential sea change?

After a tempestuous decade for English schools, the new Labour government has defenestrated the Conservatives, promising generational reforms. The new government face myriad problems regarding both the academic and non-academic functions of schooling, the latter exemplified by rising exclusions and deteriorating mental health. This paper provides a snapshot of public opinion regarding these non-academic aspects of children's education, i.e. their social, moral and emotional development. 400 participants were recruited online and asked to read a short passage (including statistics) reflecting recent educational trends in England, before being asked to recommend policies in response. A thematic analysis reveals that, broadly speaking, the public recommend systemic and holistic solutions, emphasising funding, mental health provision, and the role of the community, as well as the reform of curricula and behaviour policies, instead of targeted programmes of character development.

Keywords: Character, moral education, mental health, behaviour, survey

Introduction

Future historians of education will reflect on the previous decade of Conservative government as one characterised by curriculum and assessment reform. Michael Gove (Secretary of State for Education 2010-2014) and Nick Gibb (Schools Minister 2010-2012; 2014-2021) were the torchbearers for the standards and accountability movement in UK schools, denouncing vast swathes of the educational establishment – teachers, academics and unions – as 'the Blob' (Gove, 2013). Less discussed are the various non-academic reforms undertaken during this period, which saw 'character and resilience', 'British Values' and 'zero-tolerance' enter the educational lexicon. Following the London riots in 2011, the government became especially concerned with character education, viewing schools as conduits for moral reform. Children's character was linked with positive behaviour and mental health. For example, the recent Character Education Framework states that:

> Schools have an important role in the fostering of good mental wellbeing among young people so that they can fulfil their potential at school and are well prepared for adult life. Schools with clear expectations on behaviour and with well-planned provision for character and personal development can help promote good mental wellbeing (DfE, 2019, p. 2).

The government argued that character education was key not only to behaviour and mental health, but also academic attainment (Morgan, 2016), employability (Hinds, 2019) and social mobility (Hinds, 2019). In turn, critics accused them of presenting character education as a 'panacea' (Jerome & Kisby, 2019, p. 3), whilst ignoring more systemic problems, which have come into sharper focus following the pandemic. Recent data indicates that suspensions and exclusions are at a record high (DfE, 2025), and that UK children are facing a 'happiness recession', ranking lowest in Europe for life satisfaction (Chollet et al., 2024). The Labour party has vowed to deliver 'the biggest transformation in education that we have seen for a generation' (Phillipson, 2024), immediately launching a review of the curriculum upon taking office. However, the problems in English schools are not just confined to the academic aspects of children's education. Thus, the aim of this paper is to understand what the public think would be most helpful to address the problems with the *non*-academic aspects of schooling - children's behaviour and mental health, their moral and emotional development - at this potential turning point in education policy.

Methods

This study builds on two previous papers investigating the rebirth of character education in England since 2011 (Chapters four and five). The first paper focused

specifically on character education policies and their criticisms, as well as the language in which they were framed. Building on this, in a second study participants completed an online experiment to test whether the language of policies could influence their preferences in a subsequent task. Aside from framing effects (which were present in some groups but not the sample as a whole), I was also interested in participants' policy preferences, independent of metaphorical frame. When participants were asked to rank four policies in order of their benefit to children's moral and emotional development, the most popular was 'include mindfulness and yoga in school timetable' (35.5%), followed by 'implement zero-tolerance attendance and school uniform policies' (27.2%), 'reduce examinations before GCSEs' (23.7%), and 'use computer software to record and monitor children's behaviour' (13.6%). A regression analysis indicated that right-wing Britons were supportive of the then government's discipline-focused policies, whereas those on the political left favoured more 'nurturing' alternatives. Based on these findings, I wanted to understand public opinion when participants were permitted an open response, rather than being constrained by a menu of policy options. I hoped this would provide a more organic and representative snapshot regarding the public's views on children's moral and emotional development. This resulted in the following two research questions, derived from the hypotheses in the experimental study (Chapter five), but in reverse order to reflect the difference in emphasis. The main aim of the current paper is to understand which policies the public recommend; any insights regarding framing effects are of secondary significance.

> RQ1: What policies do participants recommend in response to the perceived problems with children's moral and emotional development?

RQ2: Are different framings of children's moral and emotional development associated with different policy preferences?

In this survey, participants were presented with the same scenario (below) as the previous paper, based on genuine statistics about declining mental health and rising exclusions (framed in either gardening or business language). The scenario was constructed to be as ecologically valid as possible, reflecting both the reality of schooling in England, as well as the language in which policies are framed. The exclusion numbers were taken directly from government statistics (DfE, 2020), and the mental health statistics were taken from the international *Good Childhood Report* (The Children's Society, 2020).

> Education is a **garden/business** involving many **gardeners/stakeholders**: parents, teachers and others. As well as developing knowledge, education also aims to **cultivate/build** children's character and resilience, so they can **flourish/compete** in a rapidly changing world. In Greenville, however, there is cause for concern. In 2010 the city was thriving, but after a decade of cuts its schools are **wilting/failing** and its youth have become **disenchanted/disengaged**. The number of pupils being excluded from school has increased by 71% in the past seven years, whilst 1 in 5 struggle with their mental health. Greenville's policymakers are concerned that unless they act soon, it may be too late to recover children's moral and emotional development.
>
> Policymakers know they must respond to the problem in the city's schools, but they don't know which policies to change or how much to change them. In your opinion, what would be most helpful to address the problem, as described on the previous page?

The only difference between this survey and the previous experiment is the question itself, which is open-ended rather than closed, and should better reflect the genuine views of participants, with the caveat that some people may be more adept than others at engaging with the question and generating policy solutions. The passage that participants read was identical in both studies, such that meaningful

comparisons might be drawn between the two datasets. After completing the main task, participants were asked to complete a short socio-demographic questionnaire pertaining to age, gender, ethnicity, education level, and political affiliation. This demographic information provides context for participants' responses and is referenced where relevant in the results.

Sampling and recruitment

Participants were recruited from the crowdsourcing website *Prolific* and asked to participate in a study about education policy. Crowdsourcing platforms, the most prominent being *Amazon MTurk*, allow one to outsource tasks to online workers in exchange for money. *Prolific* is tailored towards academics and is especially useful given the large pool of online workers based in the UK (other platforms are more generic and skew towards the US). On average, workers received an hourly equivalent wage of £9.90 per hour. The demographics of the participants are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Sample demographics (survey)

	N	%
Gender		
Male	200	50.0
Female	197	49.3
Other/prefer not to say	3	0.7
Age		
18-24	69	17.3
25-34	138	34.5
35-44	85	21.3
45-54	50	12.5
55-65	36	9.0
65+	22	5.5
Ethnicity		
White	340	85.0
Asian/Asian British	31	7.8
Black/Black British	9	2.3
Mixed	13	3.3
Other/prefer not to say	7	1.8
Education		
Postgraduate degree	83	20.8
College or university	175	43.8
Further education	101	25.3
Secondary school	41	10.3
Politics		
Left	76	19.0
Centre-left	113	28.2
Centre	106	26.5
Centre-right	54	13.5
Right	12	3.0
Prefer not to say	39	9.8

In terms of gender and ethnicity, my sample follows a similar distribution to that of the population. In terms of age, education and politics, the sample skews towards the young, educated and left-wing. This reflects the nature of the platform from which participants were recruited, a necessary trade-off given its large and readily available pool of British citizens. Given that I am not analysing my data statistically, this imbalance is less problematic since I can ensure that under-represented groups are adequately acknowledged in the written results. Still, it is important to bear in

mind that these groups remain underrepresented in the dataset as a whole, and therefore I am unlikely to reach saturation point in terms of adequately representing their views.

Analysis

The 400 responses to the task were coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There is no 'correct' way of coding qualitative data, with different researchers opting for different strategies. Coding is therefore best conceptualised as a 'decision-making process' (Elliott, 2018, p. 2850), informed by research questions and other methodological considerations. In my case, I coded the data inductively (i.e. bottom-up) because I wanted the data to 'speak for itself', rather than reflecting any *a priori* theoretical commitments or coding schemes. Thus, the coding process began descriptively, with *in vivo* codes coalescing into more coherent clusters. I followed Creswell (2013) in differentiating between codes and categories, the latter being 'broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea' (p. 186). I found it useful to differentiate between first order codes (purely descriptive) and second order codes (i.e. categories), which involve a greater degree of abstraction and therefore researcher interpretation. In the remainder of this section, I explain how I coded the data, moving from the descriptive to the more analytical.

I began by reading the 400 responses to familiarise myself with the data. I then read through the data again, this time creating *in vivo* codes (i.e. directly quoting respondents), which resulted in a list of 107 codes. In the next stage, I re-read the data and in parallel refined my analysis by merging or deleting

overlapping/redundant codes. This resulted in a shorter list of 24. Upon a final reading of the data, I categorised these codes according to superordinate themes, used to structure the results section. Before explaining these results, I first provide an example of decision making in the coding process, which highlights the need for consistency in assigning chunks of data to codes. I use the examples of 'funding' and 'mental health' to illustrate my point, as these were the two most prevalent themes in the data. For example, if I were coding the response 'increase funding and improve mental health support', the first segment would be coded as 'funding', the second 'mental health'. Conversely, in the case of 'increase funding for mental health support', the entire statement would be coded as both 'funding' and 'mental health', reflecting their interconnectedness (i.e. the funding is *for*, and not in addition to, mental health support). Finally, 'increase funding as this could improve mental health' would be coded only as 'funding', since this is the policy being recommended; improved mental health is an effect of this policy, which is not what the question asked. This approach meant that responses could be coded into more than one category; whereas some respondents mentioned only one or two codes, many mentioned more, resulting in 590 datapoints derived from 400 responses. To minimise bias in the coding process, I recruited a second coder with whom I discussed and refined the appropriateness of my codes and categories. I provided the coder with a sample (n=100) of participants' responses, along with a codebook (below) detailing the superordinate categories. Because thematic analysis is reflexive and dependent on researcher interpretation, it is not meaningful to provide a quantitative measure of inter-coder reliability for all 590 coded data. Rather, the second coder assigned each response to one or more of the

superordinate categories, any disagreements were discussed, and amendments were made as appropriate. Table 7 shows the final codebook.

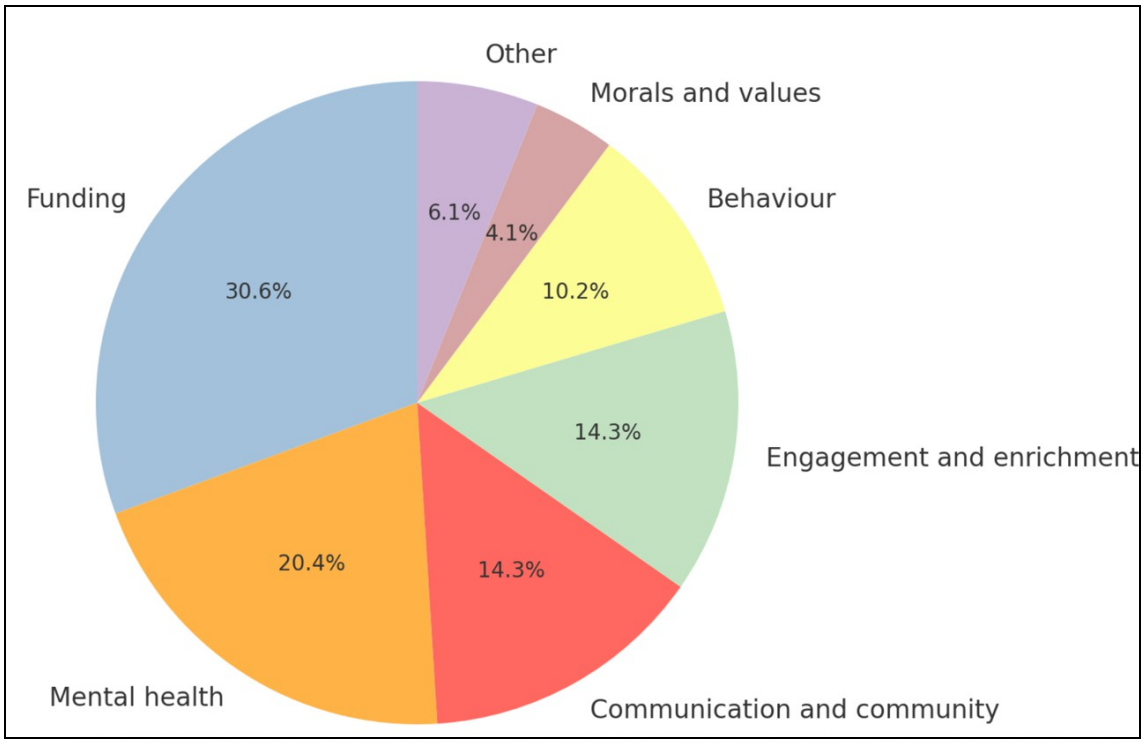
Table 7: Codebook

Category	**Description**	**Examples**
Funding	References school funding, cuts, resources etc.	● Reverse the cuts ● Increase funding
Mental health	Directly mentions children's mental health or related terms and/or professionals (attachment, psychologists)	● Support children's psychological wellbeing ● Introduce counsellors into schools
Behaviour	Refers to management of pupils through attendance, behaviour or exclusions	● Ban exclusions ● Make behaviour policies more flexible
Communication and community	Foregrounds identifying root causes and/or communicating with stakeholders i.e. children, parents and communities	● Ask children and parents their opinion ● Introduce community outreach programmes
Engagement and enrichment	Focuses on children's engagement with school, either curricular or extra-curricular	● Make lessons more interesting ● Include more after-school clubs and sports
Morals and values	Mentions children's moral development, for example through direct instruction	● Teach children values in schools ● Use literature to teach morals
Other	Refers to any response that does not fall into any of the above categories, as well as ones that are unclear	● Improve the schools ● Go back to basics

Results

Figure 14 depicts the thematic analysis of 400 responses organised into seven overarching categories, each of which contained a handful of codes, ranging in number between three and six (except for 'other', which contained twelve).

Figure 14: Analysis of responses by category



In this section, I present these superordinate categories in order of their prevalence in the data. For example, I begin by discussing funding, which was referenced by almost a third of participants, and end by discussing morals and values, referenced by only 4.1%. Before examining these categories in detail, I briefly discuss framing effects, i.e. whether the garden or business metaphors influenced participants' policy responses, as per RQ2. Before presenting these results, a brief aside about direct quotations. In the interest of readability, I have made minor amendments to

participants' spelling and grammar without explicitly referencing these changes in text. Without wishing to unnecessarily compromise the integrity of participants' responses, I have ignored any errors that do not diminish readability, i.e. where commas are used to separate independent clauses. Finally, where I have added or removed whole words from the quotations, these are indicated with square brackets and ellipses, respectively.

In terms of framing (i.e. RQ2), participants who read the 'garden' frame sometimes explicitly referenced the metaphor. One wrote, 'we need to increase the amount of staff available to young people in education so that their "garden" is as big as it can be to support them'. Another responded, 'as suggested, education is like cultivation, the more you invest the higher the reward', an interesting mixing of metaphors. Others appeared to echo the metaphors used in the passage less consciously, with one writing that we need to 'help [children] to flourish and give them more chances', another advocating that we 'cultivate policies which centre around mental health and wellbeing'. Similarly, participants who read the business condition recommended that policymakers 'discuss with stakeholders, such as parents and government experts', or conversely, 'reduce the bureaucracy of having multiple stakeholders'. In rare cases, the metaphors appeared to directly influence participants' policy choice. One participant who read the garden frame suggested introducing 'garden clubs' in schools. Others who read the business frame - suggested 'offering' or 'increasing incentives' i.e. for 'free school meals, or afterschool childcare', though this is a more tenuous link. In the remainder of this section, I describe policy preferences independent of framing.

Funding

Nearly a third of respondents foregrounded funding as the means by which to address the perceived problems with children's 'moral and emotional development'. Whilst many respondents simply advocated for 'more money', 'increased investment' or 'stopping all future cuts', many also suggested how this funding should be allocated. Of those who stipulated, the majority focused on either staffing or material resources. Several argued that funding should be used to attract 'more', 'experienced', 'highly qualified teachers', with the aim of creating 'smaller class sizes', whereas others emphasised 'equipment', 'buildings' and 'books'. Combining the two, one suggested 'investing money in the schools, to attract better teachers and get better resources [because] poor environments can lead to poor behaviour'. This was echoed by another participant, who argued that the …

> decline of the children was as a result of the cuts. It would therefore probably make sense to invest the money that was cut or spend more money on the school, facilities and teachers to try and change the schools and hopefully the children's attitudes towards education (Participant 112: White female, 18-24, centre-left).

Aside from resources, many also linked funding with mental health (the next largest category). For example, one argued that policymakers should 'address funding for schools first because lack of education is what impacts other areas like unemployment and mental health'. Another suggested increased funding 'so the resources are there to assist children with their education and mental wellbeing', and another advocated for 'increased funding for mental health and emotional support'. There was consensus among several participants that tackling funding and mental health would positively benefit children's 'confidence', 'engagement', and

'morale'. A final quotation shows how funding is often seen as a prerequisite to other solutions, many of which are articulated in subsequent themes:

> Reverse the funding cuts applied over the past years and apply restored funding to remedial work in mental health and behavioural areas as part of an integrated programme of restoration of teaching quality, pastoral care, developmental breadth and raising of aspirations (Participant 313: White male, 65+, left-wing).

Mental health

A fifth of participants prioritised children's mental health in their policy response. Taking all 400 responses collectively, 'mental' and 'health' were the third and fourth most common words in the corpus, behind 'schools' and 'children'. As with 'funding', many participants simply referred to 'support[ing] students with their mental health' or 'increas[ing] their resilience'. One stated that 'mental health is the most important and should be addressed through a holistic approach'. Again, others offered specifics, with many focusing on institutional practices and staffing. For example, one participant suggested that schools should 'cultivate policies which centre around mental health and wellbeing of students [through] awareness and staff training'. Some further specified the nature of this training; one argued for 'training on attachment and its principles for policy makers', where another suggested a 'trauma-informed' approach. Other participants focused on staff, either psychologists, counsellors, or other mental health professionals. Interestingly, there were far more mentions of 'counsellors' than 'psychologists', but this may simply reflect linguistic differences, and it is possible the terms are being used interchangeably.

Others suggest that mental health should form part of the school curriculum. One argues that policymakers should 'change the syllabus so there is more focus on mental health' and another recommends 'lessons to teach students about the different mental struggles they may face, how to overcome them or cope with them'. Another participant draws a parallel between mental and physical health: 'school should provide classes on dealing with mental health as well as the already compulsory physical health classes', and another fleshes out this apparent disparity of esteem:

> Teach kids about mental health from an early age. We are taught and shown how to look after our bodies physically, with sports and PE and food technology. However, (particularly with technology playing such a huge part in our lives) the mental health aspect in children growing up should be nurtured too (Participant 301: White male, 18-24, left-wing).

Communication and community

Approximately fifteen percent of participants foregrounded the importance of understanding problems from the perspectives of children, parents and the wider community. The 'golden thread' that runs through this category is that respondents see schools as embedded within networks of families and communities, rather than being silos for children's development. As such, many participants stressed the importance of identifying the 'root causes' of exclusions and mental health problems, rather than simply changing school policies to ameliorate problems. In most responses, this involved communicating with children, parents and communities to understand their various perspectives, rather than relying on policies dictated by government. Responses differed in the extent to which they valued the opinions of these various groups. One suggested holding a 'discussion with those who have been excluded and those suffering mental health issues to

understand if there is a common theme behind their troubles', another 'sitting down with pupils and getting their perspectives on things as well as behaviours which are happening at home and in school'. Conversely, instead of focusing on the children, others argued policymakers should:

> Start with the parents. You can provide all the pre and post school programmes, all the mentoring, all the guidance for the children and young people, but unless there is a solid social safety net and support for parents, then all the good at school will be undermined by poor parenting choices (Participant 82: White female, 45-54, centre).

Others viewed this as a false dichotomy, advocating that policymakers should:

> Improve communication between parents and children. Parents these days often leave schooling and education entirely to teachers, greater dialogue would improve child engagement and mental health (Participant 133: White female, 35-44, centre-left).

Yet others advocated involving a wider range of 'stakeholders', such as 'teachers' and 'communities', in addressing the perceived problems. One participant illustrates the role of community in child development, whilst also emphasising the twin themes of communication and mental health:

> There should be a focus on a youth community project enabling young people to … interact with each other freely without the pressures of school or society. It would be a way for young people to express themselves and learn more about the world when growing up, as well as helping them mentally (Participant 216: Asian male, 18-24, centre-left).

Engagement and enrichment

Approximately fifteen percent of participants focused on children's engagement with school, arguing that education should be made more enriching, either through

curriculum reform or extra-curricular activities. Two participants seemed sceptical of the entire enterprise in its current form:

> They should change the fact that school teaches you what they want you to learn and not what you want to learn. Not enough life skills education, people are set up to fail on purpose with the current school system (Participant 121: White male, 45-54, centre-left).

> Tutors must have a bond with students, instead of a hostage scenario where students only go to school because they are forced to, not for their wellbeing or future benefits. Students will only engage when they feel interested or when they can believe the outcome would be beneficial and life changing (Participant 350: Asian male, 18-24, prefer not to say).

Others echoed these sentiments, albeit in milder terms. There was an acknowledgement among several respondents that the academic function of education was unfit for purpose, requiring reform:

> I personally think these days and reflecting to my experience is that we work primarily in a traditional way which I don't think is fit for purpose for all children. Especially teenagers, by this point some of them just can't concentrate and won't sit reading about maths etc. I think introducing a hands-on approach would be ideal … which would both keep them happy outdoors for example and physically busy (Participant 349: White male, 25-34, left-wing).

Others, many identifying with the political right, advocated for a more traditional approach to the curriculum, such as one who advocated a 'Return to the three R's'. This was reiterated by another, who referenced 'going back to basics, looking back on what worked previously and working out why it isn't working now', and another who suggested that schools should 'get back to core subjects and do away with gender studies, CRT [Critical Race Theory], etc.'. Interestingly, this reflects recent debates in the United States around children's sociomoral development, which are dominated by questions of identity i.e. gender, sexuality and race. In some states,

this has culminated in banning books that deal with these themes, but this censoriousness has not yet sailed the Atlantic. Whereas my participants were divided over the direction of the academic curriculum, they fundamentally agreed upon the importance of extra-curricular activities for children's development. Several emphasised the importance of 'breakfast' and 'after school clubs', bookending the school day, as well as suggesting that the school itself should become more balanced, the curriculum less narrow:

> Allow the kids to enjoy school again by funding extracurricular activities or elective courses that are fun. Things like art, band, drama, foreign languages, sport, etc. can help children focus on school (Participant 40, Hispanic female, 25-34, centre).

Behaviour

Ten percent of responses focused on the more behavioural aspects of children's development, encompassing discipline, exclusions, and attendance. Within this category, there was more divergence in participants' responses. The majority favoured relaxing rather than tightening current behaviour policies, and exclusions were exclusively denounced, with responses such as 'ban school exclusions' prevalent in the data. Some linked exclusions with the previous concern for 'root causes', suggesting that 'instead of expelling students, understand what it is that is making them behave in ways that gets them excluded'. There also seemed to be a consensus that exclusion should be used (if at all) as a 'last resort', when all other avenues have been exhausted. That said, several responses were more consistent with previous policy, focused on tough discipline. One suggested schools should 'install a rigid discipline system with parents, teachers and children's representatives involved, to promote respect and a listening culture'. Others argued

that ‘teachers should have more power and authority’ and be encouraged to ‘discipline without violence’. As a further participant summarises:

> The behaviour of children has changed because of the government making rules to not be able to punish them therefore the children know they can get away with unruly behaviour. Proper punishment would solve the problem (Participant 134: White female, 55-64, centre-left).

Linking with a previous theme, some respondents emphasised that explanations for (and solutions to) behavioural problems were not confined to schools. For example, one participant referenced the community, arguing for ‘strong measures to police the neighbourhood and drive out dealers etc.’. Another underscored the role of parents:

> Parents need to educate kids at home how to behave in school. Most of the parents teach kids that teachers can't do anything and can't say anything. That is why so many kids these days [are] very rude in classrooms [e.g.] using phone. If teachers say something kids complain to parents and they come to school and yell at teachers. Even some kids say bad words to teacher; it's not like before when kids had some fear from teachers and discipline was high (Participant 383, White male, 35-44, prefer not to say).

Where I have quoted more ‘traditional’ opinions here, this is partly because they were voiced by participants who were otherwise under-represented in the data. It is important to remember that overall this was a minority view, even accounting for discrepancies in the sample. Most participants were vehemently against exclusion, and broadly in favour of more flexible, child-centred behaviour policies

Morals and values

Although there were relatively few responses in this category, I have chosen to briefly discuss them given the relevance to my overall thesis. Whereas the UK

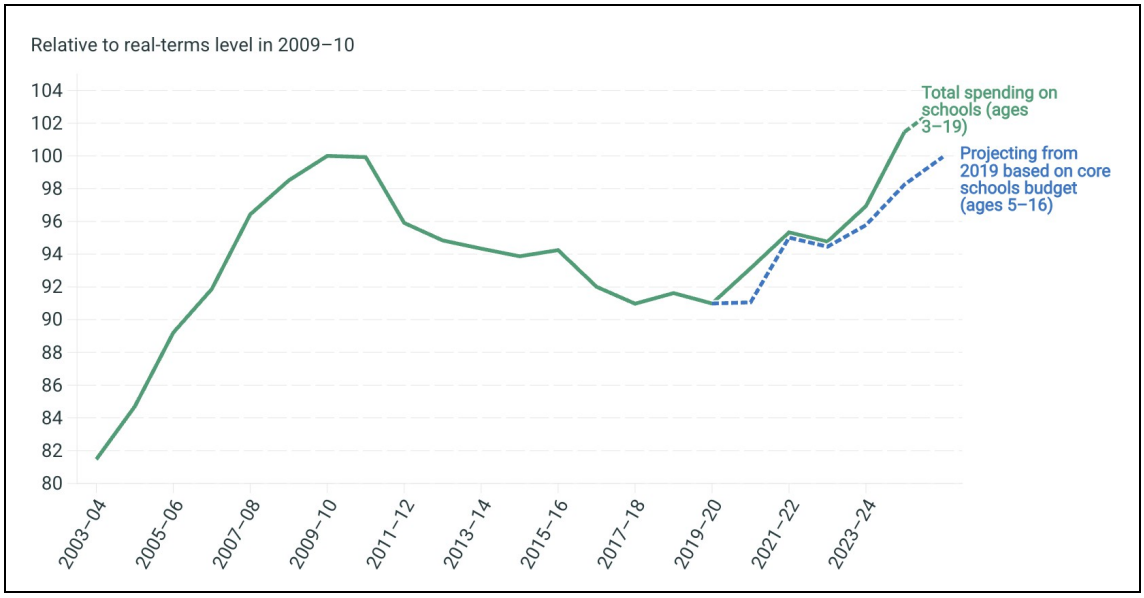
government have presented ‘character education’ as a potential solution to various non-academic problems, very few participants referenced ‘character’ or the explicit teaching of morals and values. One argued that schools should ‘invest in the moral and mental health of students’, others that they should focus on ‘building children's moral and emotional development’ or ‘instil[ling] values in the children’. Others suggested this be achieved through the curriculum i.e. through ‘teach[ing] citizenship’ or updating the ‘teaching syllabus to include moral and ethics themes’. A final participant went further, suggesting that schools should ‘focus less on exams and more on developing skills and character’. Whilst the former government were key advocates for character education, they always emphasised that this should be in the service of (rather than compromising) academic standards and testing.

Discussion

In this section, I show graphically the statistics that participants read before being asked to recommend policies. I include them by way of providing some context for the current trends in England, and as a relevant lens through which to interpret my data. The original aim of the study was to calibrate public opinion against existing government policy. The change in government means this discussion can now be more forward facing, cross-referencing public opinion with the new Labour Manifesto (2024) and associated publications regarding education. Participants in this study emphasised systemic and holistic solutions to children’s moral and emotional development, foregrounding funding, mental health and community, whilst advocating for reform of existing curricula and behaviour policies. Though we are still in the early stages of the new government, and there has not been enough time for significant policy changes, it appears that the emerging discourse around

children's non-academic development is more consistent with public opinion than previous policies. Interestingly, only a handful of participants mentioned strict discipline or explicit attempts at teaching morality, policies advanced by the previous Conservative government as a potential solution to various problems in UK schools. One of the main contradictions of the character education movement was that it accompanied a decade of austerity, a trend reflected in Figure 15, from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (Drayton et al., 2025).

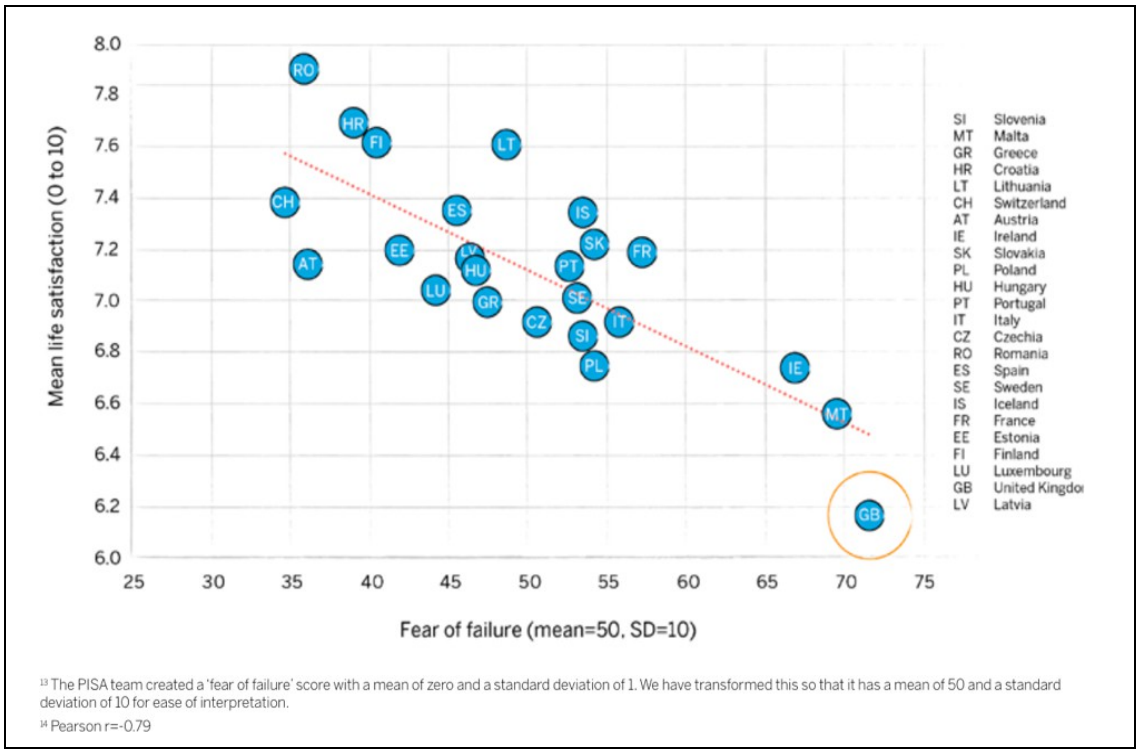
Figure 15: Total school spending per pupil in England



There was a certain irony, according to critics, in telling children to build their character and resilience (especially those deemed 'struggling', 'disaffected' or 'disadvantaged') whilst simultaneously cutting funding to education and other government departments. Between 2010 and 2020, schools in England received cuts to real-terms per-pupil spending of 11%, whereas other areas such as justice (31%), housing and communities (52%) and local government (77%) suffered more

severe budget constraints. Against this backdrop, in many ways it is unsurprising that 'more funding' was the most prevalent theme in the data. One participant argued that 'a big increase in funding would be a starting point [because] without that, fine words and ideas, important as they are, don't stand much chance', and another questioned, 'without funding how can they provide the resources for an enriching education?' However, 'more funding' is arguably an easy answer to a hypothetical problem where trade-offs need not be considered by the proposer. Participants may have been less likely to foreground funding were this to come at the expense of other public services, such as the NHS or welfare provision. Notwithstanding this caveat, many policy reforms (around the curriculum or behaviour, for example) do not *necessarily* entail increased funding, only a change in approach. Of those participants who stipulated the nature of increased funding, the majority emphasised mental health, and this is one area in which funding may well be a prerequisite to policy change. I discuss mental health next, based on Figure 16 (Children's Society, 2020).

Figure 16: Life satisfaction and fear of failure among young Europeans



[13] The PISA team created a 'fear of failure' score with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of 1. We have transformed this so that it has a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10 for ease of interpretation.

[14] Pearson r=-0.79

The passage that participants read in this study quoted the Good Childhood Report (2020), which showed that a fifth of British children were struggling with their mental health. Four years later, this has risen to a quarter (Chollet et al., 2024). According to Booth (2024), Mark Russell, chief executive of The Children's Society, called the current decline in child wellbeing a 'happiness recession', with 15-year-olds recording the lowest life satisfaction on average across 27 European nations. Disadvantaged children (particularly girls) are most affected, with the decrease in mental health linked to food poverty, NHS waiting times, and school absences. The Labour party manifesto promises to integrate mental health professionals into schools, such that 'every young person has access to early support, resolving problems before they escalate' (2024, p. 12). This was a common theme in participants' responses: some argued that schools should introduce more mental-

health oriented policies, whereas others suggested the curriculum itself should be transformed.

Poor mental health might go some way to explaining why young people in England seem dissatisfied with their lives, but it does not explain their unusually high fear of failure, shown in Figure 6. Although this paper is focused on the non-academic aspects of children's development, these are inextricable from issues of curricula and assessment, since children spend most of their school day in lessons. Indeed, the Good Childhood Report (2024) indicates that, alongside poor overall mental health, children's satisfaction with schoolwork is the lowest since the survey began in 2009/2010. As a former primary school teacher, I have witnessed first-hand the anxiety that high-stakes testing can induce in students, regardless of ability, and weekly mindfulness classes (or any other targeted mental health interventions) are unlikely to mitigate these systemic stressors. This anecdotal evidence is supported by a wealth of studies (Putwain, 2009; Roome & Soan, 2019) and systematic reviews (Steare et al., 2023). Interestingly, whilst a fifth of participants mentioned mental health, only a couple linked this with academic pressures, one advocating for 'making sure that school isn't a place of stress for children [because] some students get extremely stressed about schoolwork', another acknowledging there should be 'less pressure on deadlines and work'. Labour have recently launched a curriculum review, vowing to 'modernise the school curriculum' and 'reform assessment', whilst maintaining a commitment to 'drive up standards', deeming accountability a 'non-negotiable' (Labour Party, 2024). It will be interesting to see where the party land on this issue, since it clearly has ramifications outside of children's academic development. Many participants in my sample advocated for

reform of the curriculum such that it might better engage students and improve their experience of school. Some suggested this may ameliorate behavioural problems in schools, exemplified by the soaring exclusion rates shown in Figure 17.

Figure 17: Permanent school exclusions in England

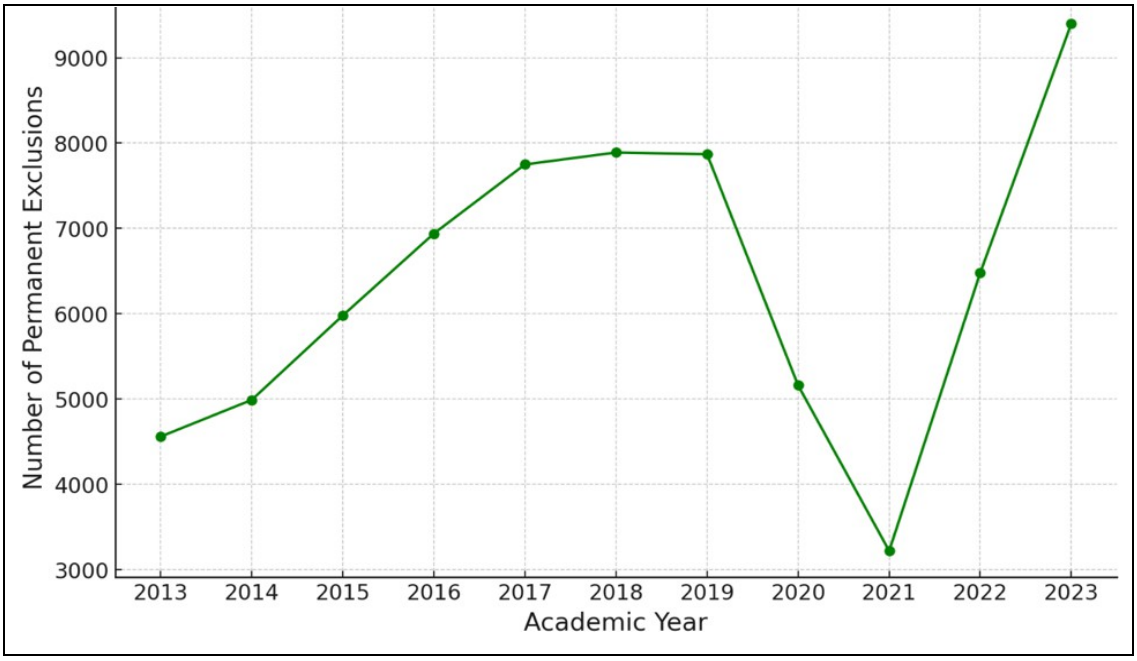


Figure 17 (DfE, 2025) shows that school exclusions have risen precipitously for the past decade and, along with suspensions, are now at a record high following three anomalous COVID years. In 2017, the government's school behaviour tsar, Tom Bennett, published a national review of schools in England. Among key recommendations were creating a national database of school behaviour that could be used to inform OFSTED inspections, and funding more 'internal exclusion units', which are currently used in over half of secondary schools (Mills & Thompson, 2018). Bennett (2022) argues that 'removal rooms are essential in a school with any level of challenge', and that banning exclusions would infringe on the life chances of other students, subjecting them to 'indignity and harassment'. However, the use of

exclusion units has been widely criticised by teachers, parents and unions. The new Labour government's rhetoric appears to signal a shift in focus that is more congruent with the views expressed by my participants, focused on flexible discipline policies that address the 'root causes' of poor behaviour and exclusions. One of the new Education Ministers, Stephen Morgan, has stated that behavioural problems are often 'rooted in wider issues', and that the government is 'determined to get to grips with the causes of exclusions'. Alongside Liz Kendall (Work and Pensions Secretary), the new Secretary of State for Education co-chairs the child poverty task force, which aims to 'break down the barriers to opportunity' (2023). This aim chimes with the main criticisms of the previous character education movement, namely that it individualised responsibility for social problems and adopted a 'fix the kids' approach to children's moral and emotional development, themes which shine through my data.

Conclusion

The main finding of this paper is that public opinion appears out of step with the decade of Conservative policy regarding children's moral and emotional development, being more consistent with the rhetoric espoused by the new government. This is encouraging and perhaps unsurprising if the democratic system is functioning as intended, where parties are elected to represent the changing views and interests of citizens. In a previous paper, where participants were asked to rank four policy solutions in response to the perceived problems with children's social and emotional development, the analysis revealed a distinction between left- and right-wing participants, with the former emphasising nurturant policies, the latter emphasising discipline. In this paper, when participants were offered an open-

response to the problem, these differences were less pronounced. Indeed, many right-wingers offered more child-centred and progressive approaches, whereas several left-wing (usually older) participants advocated for more traditional policies. Overall (i.e. independent of demographics), the 400 respondents broadly advocated for holistic and systemic solutions to the various problems (i.e. with behaviour, morals and mental health) facing today's children. Labour may not yet have the solutions to these problems, but they appear to be asking the right questions, as far as public opinion is concerned.

Chapter seven:
Discussion

> Structures of mass education, modelled on the housing projects which developed with such speed on the edges of Europe's cities and towns in the postwar years to house its new families, conveyed unitary discourses of morality, which were reinforced through political and civic associations, local government, the churches, and the all-conquering reach of the media … radio, cinema, and subsequently television … Those vessels of civic morality have largely disappeared (Conway, 2020, p. 9).

Introduction

This thesis was motivated by a set of philosophical and sociological questions concerning the resurgence and contested legitimacy of character education in England. Since 2011, debates around character have intensified, reflecting deeper ideological divisions. On one side, advocates frame it as a necessary response to perceived moral decline, civic disengagement, and the erosion of shared values (Arthur, 2011; Cameron, 2011; DfE, 2019). On the other, critics denounce it as a thinly veiled vehicle for neoliberal victim-blaming (Allen & Bull, 2018; Ecclestone, 2012; Gillies, 2011), conservative nostalgia (Taylor, 2018), or religious moralism (Jerome & Kisby, 2019). Given how polarised the literature has become, this thesis sought to contribute a more empirically grounded and methodologically replicable account of this terrain. The first study used corpus linguistics to uncover ideological patterns and discursive framings in English policy between 2011 and 2021, the second used experimental methods to test the impact of framing on policy preferences, and the third employed survey design to explore public opinion.

This chapter synthesises the findings of these empirical studies and turns more explicitly to the normative questions that animated the original inquiry. The

preceding chapters examined character education through linguistic, psychological, and sociological lenses. The aim of the discussion is not simply to reiterate these empirical conclusions, but to situate them in dialogue with relevant theoretical traditions - moral education, political and moral philosophy, and the moral sciences - to better understand their implications. This provides not only an assessment of what character education has been, but a reflection on what it could become.

The chapter is structured in two main parts. The first revisits the empirical findings and evaluates them in light of extant research and current debates. The second part addresses four central questions that arise from this research. In addressing these questions, the chapter seeks to evaluate character education not as an abstract idea, but as a historically situated and politically contested educational project. Rather than reject character education outright, the chapter attempts to appraise it on its own terms and explore the conditions under which it might be reconstructed as a viable and defensible form of moral education. In *Aristotelian Character Education*, Kristjánsson outlines four criteria against which any successful programme should be assessed. Namely, it should:

> align with public perceptions and speak to the dominant anxieties and vulnerabilities of the given context;
>
> attract relatively broad political consensus, ideally appealing to both the political 'left' and 'right';
>
> be underpinned by a respectable philosophical theory that offers a stable methodological, epistemological, and moral foundation; and
>
> be supported by a plausible psychological theory, explaining how the ideals of the educational theory fit into actual human development and are generally attainable (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. x).

These criteria provide a useful benchmark, which I use to assess whether the 2011–2021 programme of character education 'made the grade' in practice, and if not, whether a revised model might do so, at least in theory.

Discussion of findings

Ideological content of policies

This section explores whether the corpus analysis conducted in Paper 1 supports the widely circulated claim that character education in England is underpinned by neoliberal, conservative, individualist, and religious assumptions (Kristjánsson, 2021; Jerome & Kisby, 2019). Rather than treating these dimensions as analytically separate, for the sake of discussion I group neoliberalism and individualism together under the broad category of economic and psychological responsibilisation, while treating conservatism and religiosity as markers of moral-traditionalist ideology. This division reflects not only the policy emphases evident in the corpora but also their conceptual affiliations: neoliberalism and individualism share an emphasis on personal agency and behavioural regulation, while conservatism and religiosity both appeal to tradition, moral authority, and collective identity. Before turning to the analysis, it is useful to define these four key terms as they are understood in this context:

> *Neoliberalism* refers to a political-economic ideology that emphasises market logic, competition, and individual responsibility. In education, this often manifests in performativity, accountability regimes, and employability-focused curricula.

Individualism involves a psychological and moral emphasis on personal traits, autonomy, and internal self-regulation, often at the expense of social or relational accounts of human development.

Conservatism denotes a normative orientation towards tradition, authority, and moral order, often involving a scepticism towards progressive social change and a valorisation of past social norms.

Religious tethering refers to the explicit or implicit embedding of theological assumptions or frameworks within educational discourse, particularly those grounded in Christian doctrine.

The corpus analysis revealed that government character education policy is saturated with neoliberal and individualist assumptions. These tendencies emerge most clearly in the alignment of character traits with economic utility: 'resilience', 'discipline', and 'grit' are prized not for their intrinsic moral worth, but for their capacity to enhance performance, perseverance, and employability. The Department for Education's official framing repeatedly links character with social mobility, employability, and overcoming adversity, implicitly casting moral development as a set of psychological traits that enable individuals to succeed within existing social structures. Such a framing deflects attention away from structural inequalities and locates moral deficiency within the child. Allen & Bull (2018) go further, arguing that this model constitutes a form of moral neoliberalism, where behavioural interventions function as proxies for justice. As Ecclestone & Lewis (2014) note, emotional resilience programmes are

disproportionately targeted at socio-economically marginalised groups, reinforcing the assumption that poverty is a matter of mindset rather than circumstance. Government discourse rarely questions why some children face adversity in the first place, simply demanding they bounce back from it.

Alongside the strong individualist tendencies in government character education policy, there is also a clear conservative strand. While neoliberal discourses foreground personal responsibility and self-management, the policies also draw on moral frameworks that emphasise tradition, authority, and social cohesion. This conservative orientation manifests in the prioritisation of group values - discipline, respect, loyalty - and a concern with restoring moral order in the face of perceived social decline. Traditional virtues such as obedience and respect are frequently invoked, especially in connection with behaviour management, military-style interventions, and appeals to national identity. These values echo what Haidt (2013) identifies as key moral foundations of conservatism: authority and loyalty. Rather than fostering autonomy or critical reflection, character education is often framed as a means of instilling compliance, patriotism, and deference to established norms. This is particularly evident in initiatives such as the Troops to Teachers scheme and the Cadet Expansion Programme, which have been disproportionately implemented in disadvantaged schools. These programmes reflect a hierarchical and disciplinary model of virtue, positioning military ethos as a vehicle for moral regeneration. Critics such as Forces Watch (2018) have challenged this approach, arguing that it

promotes a narrow, authoritarian conception of character and functions as a form of soft military recruitment targeting vulnerable communities.

Notably, this moral conservatism is not strongly underpinned by religious doctrine. Explicit references to Christianity are sparse, limited mostly to mentions of festivals or church schools. While many of the political advocates of character education are themselves religious, the policies adopt a secularised moral language. In this sense, character education draws less on theological principles and more on residual Protestant ideals - hard work, self-restraint, moral uprightness - refracted through a culturally Christian lens. Taken together, these elements contribute to a vision of character that is not only individualist but also moralising and socially conservative. Yet the combination is far from coherent. As Taylor (2018) observes, the tension between economic individualism and moral conservatism gives rise to a fragmented and ideologically hybrid policy landscape. Communitarian rhetoric, such as that found in the 'Big Society' or National Citizen Service, appears as an uneasy supplement to a framework still dominated by market logic. The result is a set of policies that pull in different directions, invoking duty, discipline, and cohesion while continuing to prioritise personal responsibility and self-advancement.

The Jubilee Centre presents a more intellectually coherent and philosophically grounded model of character education. Rooted in neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, its publications invoke concepts like *eudaimonia* and *phronesis*, situating moral development within a broader account of human flourishing. Unlike government policy, which often instrumentalises character as a means to academic or economic success, the Jubilee Centre emphasises character as a good in itself. This is most

clearly seen in their policy documents, which regularly cite Aristotle, Aquinas, and MacIntyre, proposing a developmental model of moral education that combines cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions. Kristjánsson (2021) explicitly distinguishes this model (Model 3) from both the inclusive, affective approach of positive psychology (Model 1) and the narrow, instrumental approach adopted by many governments (Model 2). Based on the corpus analysis, this seems a reasonable distinction.

The Centre's emphasis on moral reflection, emotional cultivation, and the role of narrative in shaping character offers a more holistic alternative to the behavioural and cognitive emphasis of government materials. Their policy corpus avoids authoritarian language and focuses on virtues like compassion, honesty, and justice, reflecting a pluralist sensibility and commitment to shared goods. Yet this philosophical sophistication is not always mirrored in the Centre's pedagogical resources. The *Knightly Virtues* programme - its most widely circulated educational product - leans heavily on Christian symbolism and medieval narratives. According to the programme:

> The traditional chivalric ideals of knight-hood provided a particularly noble and exalted distillation of moral ideals that are no less educationally and otherwise relevant to today than they were at the time of their conception (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, n.d.).

Quantitative analysis of the teaching materials largely supports Jerome & Kisby's (2019, 2020) previous critique of the programme, highlighting its socially conservative and religious overtones. The materials are replete with references to God, churches, and religious values, standing in stark contrast to the Centre's

formal claim to ideological neutrality. Kristjánsson (2021, p. 7) reports that Professor Arthur has stated unequivocally that the Centre takes no position on religion. However, Arthur's own writing contains statements such as 'assumptions about right and wrong are undergoing a profound change and our culture is moving away from its Judeo-Christian foundations to such an extent that there seem to be no agreed moral criteria left for judging right and wrong' (Arthur, 2005, p. 249). Such comments raise questions about the extent to which the Centre's moral framework is truly neutral. The discrepancy between its policy discourse and pedagogical resources suggests an unresolved tension between its philosophical and cultural commitments. Although the Knightly Virtues materials predate the Centre's founding, they continue to be distributed and promoted. According to the Centre's website, over 20,000 primary pupils have used the programme, making it one of the largest of its kind. The persistence of these materials, and their implicit moral worldview, complicates the Centre's claim to ideological openness. Finally, while the Centre has challenged the narrow focus on individual resilience in government policy, it has also been criticised for insufficient engagement with structural inequality. While the Centre discusses flourishing in relational terms, it rarely addresses how systemic conditions constrain moral development.

In sum, the corpus analysis lends partial support to the claim that character education in England is shaped by neoliberal, individualist, conservative, and religious assumptions. Government policy reflects a fragmented amalgam of ideological influences, combining neoliberal performance metrics with conservative moral tropes, leaning on behavioural psychology and rhetorical appeals to tradition. The Jubilee Centre, by contrast, offers a more consistent and philosophical

grounded account, but its widely used pedagogical materials introduce implicitly religious and culturally conservative themes that sit uneasily alongside claims to neutrality. Together, these findings suggest that the field of character education is internally diverse and ideologically contested. While many of the criticisms levelled at the policies are empirically substantiated, it would be reductive to treat character education as a singular or monolithic project. A philosophically serious and politically attentive approach would distinguish between its various models and evaluate them on their own terms.

The significance of framing

> Whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap (Galatians 6:7).

The second conceptual strand explored in this thesis concerns the metaphorical roots (or foundations) of character education policy. As Lakoff & Johnson (1980) argue, metaphors are not mere rhetorical flourishes but cognitive scaffolds: they structure thought by highlighting some features of a concept while obscuring others, thereby shaping what is foregrounded and backgrounded in rendering complex social realities intelligible. The corpus analysis in Paper 1 revealed a striking contrast in the metaphorical framing employed by the government and the Jubilee Centre. Government policy used industrial, instrumental, and managerial language to describe the process of character development. Terms like *instilling* (MI=6.09) and *building* (MI=4.83) were common collocates of character, while significant semantic fields included *money and pay* (LL=76.17), *success* (LL=34.67), *architecture* (LL=10.76), *transportation* (LL=22.23), and even *warfare* (LL=20.73). These domains conjure up images of construction sites, factory lines, and military training

grounds. By contrast, the Jubilee Centre's materials drew on metaphors of organic growth and environmental responsiveness. Common semantic domains included *farming and horticulture* (LL=38.76) and *plants* (LL=14.71), with character most frequently collocating with verbs such as *formation* (MI=5.08) and *cultivation* (MI=4.69), implying care, graduality and nurture. The ideological implications of these metaphors are not incidental.

Metaphors are laden with epistemological and normative assumptions. To speak of 'producing' certain kinds of children invokes industrial imagery - schools as factories, children as outputs - rather than communities of ethical dialogue and shared growth. Conversely, to cast character as a garden is to suggest a moral ecology, a vision in which moral development is contingent on interpersonal relationships, environmental conditions, and time. The language used in the government policies is consistent with Burman's (2018) critique of the *Character and Resilience Manifesto* (2014), which she argues 'hardens up' the idea of 'soft skills' by way of making them more cognitive and less emotional. She argues, 'a common narrative identified across both texts reformulates emotions away from their "soft", culturally feminised, associations to become "hard and tough", and abstracted from relationship and (sociopolitical) context' (Burman, 2018, p. 1). This is mirrored in the government corpus, where Morgan argues that 'for too long, character has been seen as "soft" and a "nice thing to do"' (2016). Part of the government's mission has been to legitimise character among its base, moving away from a 'touchy-feely' interpretation, but Sayer (2020) notes the moral ambiguity of such framings: '"Character" has often been taken to be synonymous with strong character – with

having a commanding, forceful and perhaps charismatic personality – an attribute possessed by a Hitler as much as a Mandela' (p. 462).

The experimental study in Paper 2 was designed to test whether these metaphorical framings had any measurable effect on public reasoning. Specifically, it tested Pring's (2001, 2009, 2019) hypothesis that language structures educational possibility: that business metaphors encourage us to 'think in business terms' and that this 'insidious growth of the impersonal' subverts the aims of education itself. As Pring (2001, p. 108) puts it: 'we shall depend upon a particular language and a particular set of metaphors – a language which lends itself to more effective control and management, rather than to an engagement between minds'. Participants were randomly assigned to read a scenario about moral education framed either in gardening or business language, and were then asked to rank four policies. The key hypothesis was that 'participants exposed to the gardening frame will be more likely to choose a "nurture" policy as their top choice, whereas participants exposed to the business frame will be more likely to select a "discipline" policy'.

The results did not support this hypothesis in the general population, with the predicted probability of choosing a nurturing policy virtually identical in the garden ($\hat{p}$ = .596) and business ($\hat{p}$ = .587) conditions. Despite the widespread assumption that framing affects public reasoning - supported by work across political science and psychology (Flusberg et al., 2017; Schnepf & Christmann, 2022) - this study produced a null result. However, this is not anomalous, aligning with findings from Thibodeau & Gehring (2015) and meta-analyses such as Brugman et al. (2019), which suggest that education may be more resistant to framing effects than other

domains. Why might education, and moral education in particular, resist framing? One plausible explanation is domain familiarity. Most adults have extensive personal experience with educational institutions, making their beliefs more stable and less susceptible to linguistic nudges. Unlike abstract topics like fiscal policy or foreign aid, schooling is familiar terrain. A second possibility is that moral education is already normatively saturated: people approach it with pre-formed values and deep-seated beliefs, making them less receptive to externally imposed frames. Ironically, if the participants have become autonomous moral agents - the very goal of character education - they may be resistant to rhetorical manipulation.

Notwithstanding the null result, Asian/British Asian participants were uniquely sensitive to metaphorical framing, with the garden frame increasing support for nurture-based policies and the business frame increasing support for discipline-based ones. This pattern may be explained by research showing that metaphors are most persuasive when they resonate with culturally familiar schemas (Thibodeau et al., 2016). The garden metaphor likely activated associations with gradual moral cultivation, relational interdependence, and communal responsibility - values emphasised in many collectivist contexts (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) - thereby making nurture-based interventions seem more appropriate. By contrast, the business metaphor, with its connotations of efficiency, accountability, and outcomes, may have primed a more rule-governed, hierarchical view of education, making discipline-oriented policies appear more legitimate. Thus, the divergence across frames likely reflects how each metaphor activated different culturally resonant schemas, shaping which policy response felt most congruent.

Unfortunately, the sample was not large enough to investigate these hypotheses further.

These results have implications for policymaking. First, they suggest that metaphorical framings are not universally effective or ineffective; they interact with identity, culture, and personal history. This aligns with Perrez et al. (2019), who argue that metaphorical salience is shaped by variation in political metaphor exposure and reception. Second, they underscore the importance of communicative pluralism. In a multicultural society, public discourse around moral education cannot easily assume a shared metaphorical grammar, and policymakers must remain alert to the fact that the metaphors they use will not resonate equally with all members of the public. Third, the findings complicate simplistic understandings of framing as a tool of influence. Metaphors do not merely persuade; they structure possibility by defining the terrain upon which minds are made up. To describe character as something we 'build' or 'instil' is to make some forms of moral agency imaginable and others unthinkable. In character education, then, the work of framing is less about affecting short-term attitudinal shifts and more about shaping long-term conceptual horizons. Such effects may be harder to capture in a one-shot, controlled experiment.

Public opinion of character education

Around the launch of the character education benchmarks, Damian Hinds 'called on young people, parents, teachers and community groups to give their views on what they think are the best non-academic activities to offer young people and how to make the most of them' (2019). Unfortunately, data on public opinion regarding

character education in England is notably sparse, a gap that Papers 2 and 3 aimed to address. The prescient questions is: if character education policies rest on particular moral assumptions, how far are these assumptions shared by the public? The question is not only empirical but normative, concerning the relationship between public policy and public values, and the democratic legitimacy of educational reform. Paper 3 addressed this question by analysing 400 open-ended responses from UK adults, collected in the context of a large survey experiment. The responses offer insight into what people think should be done to support children's social and moral development, without being channelled through pre-selected policy menus, as in Paper 2. In that earlier study, participants were asked to rank four policy responses to the perceived moral and emotional challenges facing young people, designed to reflect different metaphorical framings identified in Paper 1. The results revealed clear political polarisation. Participants on the left ($\hat{p}$ = .82) and centre-left ($\hat{p}$ = .63) significantly preferred nurture-based policies, while those on the right ($\hat{p}$ = .40) and centre-right ($\hat{p}$ = .31) were more inclined toward discipline. Preferences also diverged by age: younger respondents leaned toward nurture, older ones toward discipline.

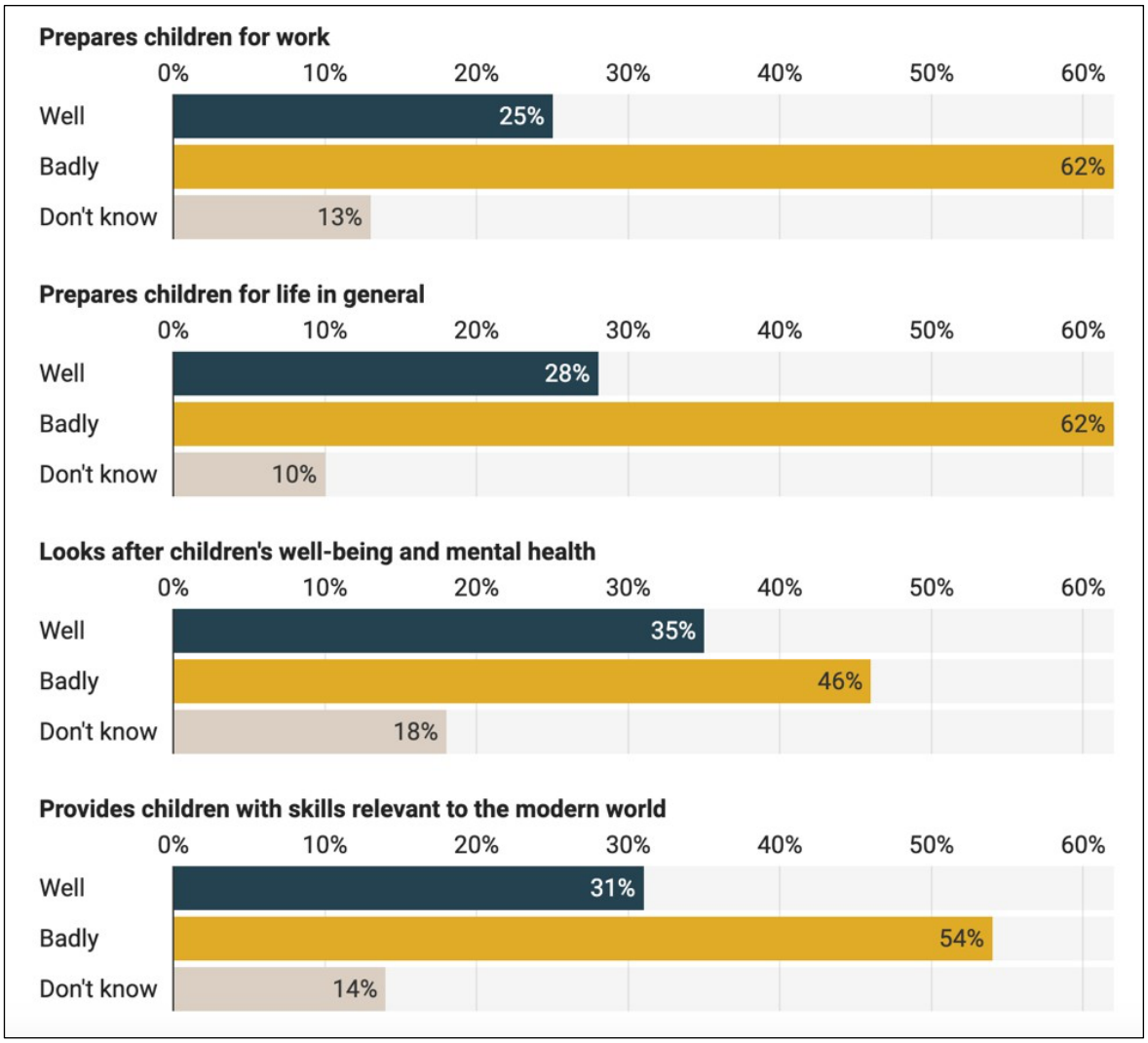
Paper 3 sought to test whether this polarisation would persist under less structured conditions. Instead of ranking fixed options, participants were invited to respond in their own words to a vignette about rising youth mental health issues and school exclusions. As in the experiment, the vignettes were metaphorically framed, but the open-ended format allowed participants to articulate their views without constraint. This approach was intended to elicit a broader and more reflective range of reasoning, and to test whether ideological cleavages persisted when participants

were not prompted by predefined policy choices. The thematic analysis revealed a wide range of responses, but with some consistent patterns. The most commonly cited priorities were: school funding (30.6%), mental health provision (20.4%), communication and community (14.3%), engagement and enrichment (14.3%), behaviour (10.2%), and morals and values (4.1%). These categories represent diverse concerns, yet they share a common thread: an emphasis on systemic and relational factors. Participants did not generally describe children as morally deficient individuals needing correction, but instead focused on the conditions and relationships that support development. This is consistent with findings from Vincent (2019) and Spohrer (2024), who argue that teachers and the public often resist deficit-based framings of moral education, interpreting policies through local contexts.

Nonetheless, the data also confirmed variation. Although funding and mental health were most frequently cited, a minority of participants emphasised discipline, structure, or values-based instruction. Behavioural priorities made up 10.2% of responses; some respondents called for firmer rules or stronger authority, but the majority advocated for more flexible or compassionate approaches. A small number (4.1%) did refer explicitly to teaching morals or character, although such responses were typically broad, and sometimes expressed scepticism about whether this was schools' responsibility. Taken together, the results suggest that while the public does not speak with one voice, there is a clear gap between many public concerns and the dominant framings of character education in policy discourse. Most notably, the Jubilee Centre's emphasis on explicit character instruction, and the government's focus on resilience, discipline, and behavioural framing, found limited

support in the open-text data. The disjuncture between policy and public opinion is further supported by broader national survey data. For example, a 2024 YouGov poll asked UK adults how well they believed schools were performing on several key aims. The results are shown in Figure 18.

Figure 18: Public opinion on education in the United Kingdom



The figure underscores widespread public scepticism about the current moral, civic, and emotional role of schools. Yet this scepticism does not amount to indifference. On the contrary, the public clearly sees a role for schools in supporting children's

broader development. According to the Jubilee Centre (2019), 85% of respondents believed schools should promote character, with common justifications centring on holistic development and fairness, values notably underrepresented in the policy language analysed in Paper 1. While the open-text responses in Paper 3 did not coalesce into a single shared vision, they repeatedly emphasised relationality, systemic support, emotional wellbeing, and holistic growth. These priorities diverge sharply from prevailing policy discourse, which emphasises individual traits - resilience, grit, and behaviour - as catch-all solutions to structural issues. Taken together, the findings suggest not only a disconnect between policy and public opinion, but a deeper clash between competing moral imaginaries of what education is for.

Key questions

The preceding section synthesised the empirical findings of the thesis. Taken together, the findings raise questions about the coherence and credibility of character education as currently conceived. This second half of the chapter turns from empirical interpretation to conceptual inquiry. Its purpose is to explore the philosophical and ethical questions that arise from the research, with reference to broader traditions in moral education and the moral sciences. While grounded in the preceding data, this section adopts a more speculative mode. Its concern is not whether UK character education policy was effective, but whether the underlying project is justifiable and/or redeemable.

A clarification of scope is required. Firstly, I am not arguing that 'character education' is the optimal or necessary framing for children's social, moral,

emotional, or civic development. The term is ambiguous and susceptible to ideological capture. It overlaps with, and is sometimes eclipsed by, adjacent traditions such as moral education, values education, citizenship, and social and emotional learning. Nor do I deny the considerable theoretical and practical challenges associated with character education: problems of definition and measurement, the risk of moral indoctrination, the conflation of morality with compliance, and the assumption of individual deficit. Nonetheless, for the remainder of the discussion, I grant the validity of the character education project *arguendo*, not as an endorsement but a means of exploring its potential implications. The discussion that follows is structured around four central questions: Can character education be rescued? How should character be defined and measured? What is the proper relationship between normative theory and empirical evidence? And, finally, what is the future of moral education in England?

Rescuing character

Character is one of the most enduring and divisive topics in education. The concept of forming moral character in schools has long held intuitive appeal, suggesting that education is not merely a cognitive enterprise but also (maybe primarily) a moral one. Yet contemporary debates are polarised. The term 'character' is itself deeply contested, evoking connotations of conservatism, resilience, and moral prescription; disagreements emerge not only over which values should be taught, but whether such an endeavour is legitimate in pluralist, democratic societies. Walsh (2018) helpfully organises the field into three camps: advocates, detractors, and reformers. Advocates - such as Arthur, Kristjánsson, and others - argue that character education is essential for personal flourishing and civic

cohesion, maintaining that virtue cultivation is an inescapable dimension of education. Detractors, including Allen & Bull (2018) and Jerome & Kisby (2019, 2020), counter that character education is conceptually vague, politically regressive, and often deployed to blame individuals for structural problems. Meanwhile, reformers like Walsh (2018) and Sayer (2018) attempt a critical reconstruction. They grant the legitimacy of many critiques but argue that moral formation remains a necessary goal of education, one that can be reclaimed on more socially just and philosophically defensible grounds. For example, Walsh states:

> While I conclude that the model promoted by the Jubilee Centre runs the risk of supporting a neoliberal agenda that is incompatible with social justice, I suggest that, rather than abandoning it completely, character education could be re-constructed with clear and explicit commitments to social justice, recognising the roles of social context, power relations and politics (Walsh, 2018, p. 1).

By engaging the reformist position, we can ask what it would require to rescue character education from its ideological, conceptual, and normative difficulties. Is the 'third way' envisaged by Walsh (2018) a viable solution to the liberal/conservative divide that besets moral education, and public policy more generally?

Character education is often assumed to belong to the political right. Its *lingua franca* - resilience, discipline, fortitude - has frequently been mobilised in support of conservative goals such as hierarchy, meritocracy, and personal responsibility. As this thesis has shown, such framings are not merely rhetorical. They shape how character is defined, which traits are selected, and how moral failure is explained. This political genealogy fuels the strongest critiques. For Allen & Bull (2018),

character education is a technology of responsibilisation: it shifts attention from structural injustice to individual deficit, training young people to conform to rather than challenge social norms. Yet the association of character with conservatism is not conceptually necessary. As Sayer (2020) argues, suspicion of moral normativity is understandable given its historical abuse, but moral judgement is not inherently oppressive and can be justified when used to underpin care, solidarity or resistance to injustice.

This opens the space for a left-wing conceptualisation of character, one rooted not in obedience or performance, but in civic responsibility, relational ethics, and critical agency. Drawing on an ethic of care, such a model might foreground virtues like empathy, humility, or justice. These are not traits of self-discipline, but of responsiveness to others, a commitment to shared humanity. But this vision, too, must be examined critically. First, it is not immediately obvious that the concept of 'character' - traditionally individualistic and trait-based – can accommodate this more relational and political framing, and it might be that 'citizenship' would be a more appropriate vehicle. Second, even a progressive character education risks moral paternalism. Which values are taught, who defines them, and how disagreement is handled remain crucial questions. Moral education can easily become a means of normative control, regardless of political orientation.

The most fundamental challenge for any model of character education lies in its assumptions about moral consensus. Classical models of moral education often presuppose that there exists - or ought to exist - a stable, shared set of moral values. In the Aristotelian tradition, the *telos* (aim) of education is *eudaimonia* (flourishing),

and virtue cultivation is oriented toward realising this end. In contemporary liberal democracies, such consensus is vanishingly rare. This predicament is not without precedent. Durkheim's (1912/1995) sociological analysis of modernity identified the disintegration of shared moral authority - what he termed the 'death of God' - as the defining challenge of secular societies. In this context, the role of the school becomes precarious, tasked with moral formation yet deprived of stable normative anchors. Arthur & Harrison (2012) frame this as the erosion of moral communities, wherein traditional sources of shared meaning (i.e. religion) have fragmented, and with them the legitimacy of transmitting moral norms *en masse.* Likewise, Conway (2020) describes the new moral landscape as one of 'honeycombed societies', in which individuals form self-selected communities based on identity, emotion, and affinity. In such contexts, the very idea of a shared national or civic morality may seem out of step or downright regressive.

Two major responses to this challenge have emerged in English education. The Jubilee Centre advocates a neo-Aristotelian model, structured around moral, civic, intellectual, and performance virtues. Its materials draw heavily on classical and Christian sources, including curated literary curricula such as the *Knightly Virtues.* While ostensibly secular, this framework gestures toward a moral universe rooted in tradition, family and religion. The UK government, by contrast, has embraced a secular civic model, encapsulated in the 'Fundamental British Values' (FBV): democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect. These are framed as universal and ideologically unproblematic, providing a minimal moral consensus suitable for public education. Yet both models face difficulties. The Jubilee Centre's framework has been criticised for its cultural exclusivity and lack of responsiveness

to social conditions. The FBV model, while more inclusive in aspiration, suffers from narrowness, performativity, and potential jingoism. Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that even this minimal civic consensus, embodied in FBV, is weakening. According to an Open Society Foundations (2023) survey of 36,344 participants across 30 countries, only 57% of 18–35 year-olds endorsed democracy as the best form of government, whilst 42% supported military rule, and 35% favoured a 'strong leader' unconstrained by elections. Their top concerns - poverty, climate change, and corruption - suggest a shift from procedural norms to substantive moral crises.

At the heart of these debates lies a deeper philosophical dilemma: the grounding problem. In educational theory, as in moral philosophy, this refers to the challenge of justifying moral claims without appealing to contested metaphysical foundations. Traditional virtue ethics grounds character in teleology: to live virtuously is to flourish according to human nature. In pluralist societies, however, such assumptions cannot be taken for granted. The FBV framework attempts a procedural solution, grounding moral education in democratic values and human rights. But as discussed, this may not command sufficient commitment, too thin and shallow to guide ethical life, too contested to function as a shared platform.

One promising alternative is Rawls' (1993) idea of overlapping consensus. Rather than imposing a single moral doctrine, public institutions should identify principles that can be affirmed from within diverse worldviews. Applied to education, this would mean cultivating capacities - deliberation, perspective-taking, mutual respect

- that are not tied to any one vision of the good life but are necessary for coexistence under conditions of moral disagreement. Another approach is inquiry-based moral education. Rather than prescribing virtues, schools can create conditions for students to engage in ethical reflection, dialogue, and critical thinking. This is echoed by Walsh (2018), who recommends reconstructing character education with 'clear and explicit commitments to social justice', grounded not in doctrine but in the lived moral and political concerns of students.

So, can character education be rescued? If by 'character education' we mean the current orthodoxy, then perhaps not. But if treated as a question rather than a doctrine - as an open-ended inquiry into how education might support ethical life in pluralistic societies - then the answer is more hopeful. A viable character education would be pluralist in content, dialogic in method, and democratic in spirit, closer to the model envisaged by Dewey than Aristotle. It would view character not as a fixed set of traits, but as a cultivated responsiveness to others, shaped through experience, reflection, and dialogue. Whether or not such an approach continues under the name 'character education' is less important than its substance. What matters is that education reclaims its moral purpose, not as a vehicle for moralising, but as a shared endeavour to equip young people to navigate uncertainty, act with integrity, and build lives of meaning in relation to others.

Defining and measuring character

> Progressive educationalists have long advocated that individual development should not be hindered by 'controversial' moral content and they have cast suspicion on the motives of others who propose such explicit content. It is not surprising, therefore, that most academic discussions of

> character and citizenship education have been rife with controversy, with constant disputes about definitions and methods (Arthur, 2005, p. 249).

In government publications, Nicky Morgan specifies that '[t]here is no one clear definition of character … It's a combination of the traits that set people apart so they can achieve their dreams' (Morgan, 2016). Although this [non-]definition is inspirational in tone, at the heart of any coherent educational endeavour lies the need for conceptual clarity. In the case of character education policy, this demand is both especially urgent and unusually neglected by government. While the term 'character' is widely invoked in educational policy, psychological research, and classroom discourse, its precise meaning remains diffuse. As Arthur (2020) observes, 'definitions of character and its development reflect different theoretical approaches and traditions and in turn favour one or more pedagogical methodologies' (p. 2). Without a clear definition, the aims and methods of character education become unstable, and the instruments of its evaluation become circular. In the absence of conceptual clarity, measurement risks becoming a proxy for institutional norms or policy goals, rather than a reflection of actual moral development. This section examines the challenges of defining and measuring character education in England, linking conceptual ambiguity to the operational strategies of current policy frameworks, especially those developed by the Department for Education and OFSTED. It also explores the methodological implications for educational research, particularly the use of randomised controlled trials (RCTs). It argues that unless character is more rigorously conceptualised, efforts to measure or evaluate it - whether in policy, practice, or research - will be normatively thin, epistemologically weak, and ethically precarious. Take the following definition of character, offered by Young:

> [C]haracter traits are inherited, not taught. I'm not talking about moral qualities, such as honesty, compassion and altruism. It may be that these can be cultivated. I mean performance-enhancing virtues, like stick-to-it-ness and the ability to bounce back from defeat, what exponents of character education call 'grit' (Young, 2014).

Young defines character traits as those that can be inherited (genetically), focusing entirely on performance virtues rather than moral qualities. On this account, character is shorn of its ethical dimensions and any attempt at developing it is doomed to fail, since 'performing-enhancing virtues' cannot be taught. Definition presupposes measurement. In English education policy, character is typically defined in functional and instrumental terms. The DfE, in its guidance on character education (2019), identifies character as 'a set of positive personal traits, dispositions and virtues that inform motivation and guide conduct'. These include 'resilience, perseverance, tolerance, honesty, courage, and humility'. While these traits appear commendable, they lack theoretical grounding, and are focused almost entirely on the individual, rather than others. No explanation is offered as to why these particular traits are selected, how they relate to one another, or what normative vision of the good life they serve. This reduces character to a bundle of individualised psychological traits, thereby eliding fundamental questions about what kind of person we are trying to educate and what kind of society we hope to build.

In England, the responsibility for evaluating character provision in schools falls largely to OFSTED, and schools are now required to demonstrate that they are developing pupils' character through their 'personal development'. Inspectors are tasked with judging whether pupils 'develop character, including resilience,

confidence and independence,' and whether they are 'prepared for life in modern Britain'. However, the framework does not clearly define character, nor does it provide robust tools for its assessment. Instead, inspectors are encouraged to look for 'evidence' that schools are promoting values such as perseverance and self-control, often taking the form of visible provision rather than evidence of moral development or ethical reasoning - the means rather than the end. This has two major consequences. First, it incentivises performative compliance: schools design programmes and displays to meet inspection criteria, regardless of their depth or impact, as is often the case with the academic curriculum. And second, it reinforces a narrow and behavioural conception of character, privileging traits that are observable, manageable, and measurable over those that are relational or deliberative. Fairness, humility, or critical moral judgment become sidelined because they are too difficult to quantify. The resulting and well-documented paradox is thus: what is easiest to measure is not necessarily what matters most.

These conceptual and policy-level ambiguities pose serious challenges for educational research. Over recent years, there have been increasing efforts to establish 'what works' in character education (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Berkowitz, 2011). Jeynes' (2019) systematic review notes that interventions often report 'positive outcomes', but these vary widely depending on what is measured and how. Frequently, character education is reduced to traits that are easily operationalised, such as resilience, academic attainment, or behaviour. Even the Jubilee Centre, despite its holistic and philosophically robust definition of character, often measures narrow slivers of character development, such as gratitude, honesty, or virtue literacy. As Kristjánsson (2013, p. 16) observes, the field lacks valid and

comprehensive measures, leaving researchers to construct eclectic combinations of existing instruments in an attempt to capture virtue.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in testing the impact of character education programmes using randomised controlled trials (RCTs), the so-called gold standard of impact evaluation. While RCTs can offer valuable evidence about causal effects, they too rely on clear definitions and measurements. If we cannot define character, we cannot reliably measure changes in it. A further problem is that RCTs, by design, are limited in their capacity to capture moral meaning. They work best with standardised interventions and quantifiable outcomes. But character development is not standardised. A student's expression of empathy, for instance, may look different across cultural settings, age groups, or personal histories. To address this, researchers might turn to mixed-methods approaches, embedding RCTs within ethnographic or qualitative case studies. This would allow for richer interpretations of what change looks like and how it is experienced by the students themselves.

Even in hybrid designs, however, questions of definition remain central. Without conceptual clarity, sophisticated instruments risk lacking validity, limiting the comparability and value of findings. Nevertheless, rather than abandoning quantitative approaches, they can be combined with richer interpretive insights. RCTs can make an important contribution to understanding causal effects, particularly when embedded within longitudinal and ethnographic case studies that capture processes, experiences, and contextual factors. Such mixed-methods designs allow researchers to examine not only whether change occurs, but also how

and why. Advancing the field therefore requires conceptual precision about what constitutes character, coupled with research approaches that integrate psychometric, behavioural, and qualitative evidence. By aligning robust measurement with a more holistic understanding of moral development, character education research can generate findings that are both empirically credible and educationally meaningful.

Theory and evidence

Two of Kristjánsson's criteria for character education insist that it be 'underpinned by a respectable philosophical theory … and supported by a plausible psychological theory' (2015, p.x). While much work has been done in recent decades to theorise the former, particularly through neo-Aristotelian ethics, less attention has been paid to the psychological assumptions underpinning contemporary moral education, especially in light of developments in the moral sciences. This neglect is problematic and, as Krettenauer (2020, p. 3) argues, 'moral education can shield itself from the larger scientific discourse on morality for a limited period of time only'. There is increasing recognition that philosophical arguments for moral or character education must be tested against what is empirically known about human moral functioning, i.e. how morality is acquired, expressed, and shaped by social context. The goal is not to derive values from facts - a move rightly critiqued by Hume (1978) - but to ensure that moral education is scientifically as well as philosophically viable. Scientific understanding helps identify what is possible in moral formation and where ideals may run up against empirical constraint. This section engages with two such empirical lenses: situationism and evolutionary moral psychology. Each offers a significant challenge to key assumptions underpinning character education.

Situationism undermines the idea that individuals possess stable, context-independent moral traits, whilst evolution and intuitionism question the centrality of reason in moral development. These are not offered as an exhaustive framework, merely as examples of the need to calibrate philosophical or normative theory with empirical evidence from psychology and anthropology.

Emerging from decades of empirical work in social psychology, situationism argues that moral behaviour is shaped more by context than by internal dispositions, thus challenging the belief that stable, cross-situational traits can be cultivated. In *Lack of Character* (2002), John Doris defines situationism as the view that 'behaviour is often better predicted by the situations in which people find themselves than by the traits they are presumed to possess' (p. 15). Research such as Darley & Batson's (1973) 'Good Samaritan' experiment and Milgram's (1963) obedience study demonstrate that seemingly trivial situational variables - time pressure, social roles, ambient noise - can significantly influence moral action. Zimbardo's (1973) Stanford Prison Experiment offers perhaps the most iconic and shocking example, where individuals internalised roles and behaved cruelly, not because they lacked virtue, but because the context shaped their behaviour. Doris argues that traditional virtue ethics, and by extension much of character education, 'is based on an empirically inadequate psychology' (2002, p. 62). Rather than fixed traits, what we observe are situationally contingent patterns of behaviour.

The educational and political consequences of this are significant. Character education in England has often been framed through a deficit model, where moral

shortcomings are attributed to personal failure or insufficient trait development. This aligns closely with a neoliberal agenda (Allen & Bull, 2018), shifting attention away from structural injustice and towards individual behaviour. But if situationism is right, then much of what we call 'character' may in fact be a function of context, i.e. social norms, institutional dynamics, and relational climates. As Sayer (2020) notes, moral education that ignores poverty, exclusion, or institutional inequality risks reinforcing injustice under the guise of virtue. Yet situationism is not fatal to character education; scholars such as Snow (2010) and Miller (2017) argue for revised models that take situationism seriously. These models reject the myth of global traits but preserve the importance of moral formation through situated practice, encouraging educators to shift from 'instilling values' to designing environments that encourage ethical behaviour.

If situationism questions the ontological foundation of character education, intuitionism challenges the assumption of moral cognition. The Jubilee Centre routinely characterises its approach as neo-Aristotelian, drawing on a rationalist tradition that stretches back over two millennia. But as Miller (1995, p. 336) argues, if this tradition is to retain relevance, 'advocates of character education [must] appraise the fundamental premises of Aristotle's thought in light of contemporary philosophical theory, scientific research and practical experience'. Among the most relevant scientific developments since Aristotle are the affective and automaticity revolutions in psychology, and the rise of intuitionism in moral psychology. For much of the 20th century, moral psychology (and moral education) was dominated by cognitive-developmentalism, particularly Kohlberg's rationalist theory of development. Building on Piaget (1965), Kohlberg (1969) proposed that

morality develops through increasingly abstract stages of reasoning, dismissing 'irrational emotional theories' as unscientific (1971, p. 188). While Gilligan (1982) and Turiel (1978) introduced important correctives, the basic model remained intact: moral education was a matter of cultivating reason, not emotion. This framework continues to underscore contemporary approaches to character education, as well as programmes such as the *Knightly Virtues* project, which encourages students to engage in comprehension-based analysis of moral stories. However, a growing body of research suggests that these models misunderstand the psychological basis of moral judgment. Haidt's (2001, 2007) social intuitionist model, for instance, challenges both of Kohlberg's foundational assumptions: that moral knowledge is rational, and that morality is fundamentally about individual rights and fairness.

From Plato to Kant, reason has been revered as the foundation of knowledge and morality, but Haidt argues this is a mistake. According to Haidt, moral reasoning is largely *post hoc*, employed 'like a lawyer' to justify preexisting conclusions, rather than 'like a scientist' searching for truth (2007). In *The Righteous Mind* (2012), he writes the 'worship of reason … is a delusion. It is an example of faith in something that does not exist' (Haidt, 2013, p. 107). The affective revolution in psychology (Zajonc, 1980; Bargh, 1999) and advances in neuroscience (Damasio, 1994) have shown that emotional responses play a critical role in moral judgment. According to Oatley & Jenkins (1996, p. 122), 'emotions have traditionally been regarded as extras in psychology, not as serious mental functions,' but this view is increasingly obsolete. Dual-process models of cognition (Kahneman, 2011) support the idea that

reasoning is often guided, and indeed distorted, by subconscious, automatic processes.

It follows from Haidt's theory that any model of moral education that ignores emotion and intuition is not only incomplete but ineffective. Haidt and Joseph (2004) frame morality as emerging from a 'heretofore ignored link: the link between intuitions … innate in important respects, and virtues, which by and large are social constructions' (p. 56). They adopt a Deweyan rather than Aristotelian view: virtues are not idealised traits but 'dynamic patternings of perception, emotion, judgment, and action' (2004, p. 61) - social skills embedded in context. Moral education, then, is not about imparting rules but about shaping the environments in which moral intuitions are expressed and refined, and this has clear implications for pedagogy. The authors argue that direct approaches to moral education - espousing rules, delivering principles - are useful only when complemented by indirect approaches, such as immersing children 'in environments that are rich in stories and examples that adults interpret with emotion' (p. 65). The comprehension-based and researcher-designed stories promoted by the Jubilee Centre would likely fall short of this ideal.

Haidt's intuitionism underpins his later Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Graham et al., 2011) which extends the argument by identifying a set of evolved psychological systems that give rise to diverse moral intuitions. MFT is particularly valuable for understanding moral education because it recognises moral pluralism**:** people draw on different foundations - such as care, fairness,

loyalty, authority, and sanctity - when making moral judgments. This invites the question:

> How can we all get along in a morally diverse society? The first step is simply to recognize that all sides in the debate are morally motivated … The second step is to try to frame appeals in language that may trigger new intuitions on the other side (Haidt & Joseph, 2004, p. 65).

Despite its seeming relevance, MFT is not widely used in education research. Maxwell & Narvaez (2013, p. 271) find this reluctance to engage 'especially surprising given that proponents of MFT present its theoretical framework as a necessary corrective to the paradigm that dominated the field in the latter half of the twentieth century'. Haidt's pluralist theory helps explain why moral disagreement persists even when all sides are morally motivated. For example, Arthur claims that 'liberal progressives in education often have difficulty grasping the "binding" moral and religious concerns that engage religious people' (Arthur, 2015, p. 326). This is probably true, but conservatives are also less likely to identify with more liberal intuitions such as fairness and social justice. Haidt & Joseph (2004, p. 56) argue that 'by recognizing that cultures build incommensurable moralities on top of a foundation of shared intuitions, we can develop new approaches to moral education and to the moral conflicts that divide our diverse society'.

Engaging with the moral sciences does not mean subordinating education or philosophy to science. Rather, it demands that they remain accountable to the best available evidence while preserving normative seriousness. Situationism challenges the deficit model, supporting sociological critiques of structural neglect, whilst intuitionism challenges rationalist models that dominate comprehension-based

programmes like the *Knightly Virtues*. Both point to the same conclusion: moral education must be reimagined as an emotionally intelligent, contextually grounded, and philosophically coherent endeavour. By integrating philosophy with science, aspiration with constraint, the field moves closer to a model of moral education that is both realistic and transformative.

The future of moral education in England

Most of this thesis explored the ideological roots and implementation of character education policy over a decade of Conservative government. With the election of a Labour government in 2024, the political landscape has shifted significantly, perhaps signalling the end of character education's prominence as a policy initiative. At the 2020 Jubilee Centre conference, Nicky Morgan called for the 2020s to be 'the decade of character'. Yet by that point, she had long left office, and her remarks could be interpreted as a tacit admission that the political momentum for character education had already begun to wane. Her successor, Justine Greening, had dismantled many of the initiatives Morgan had supported, only for them to be partially revived under Damian Hinds when the Character Education Framework (2019) came into being. Since then, however, references to character have disappeared from government publications, and broader discussion around children's social, moral and emotional development has faded. Whether one agrees with Morgan's advocacy or political leanings, her impact on character education policy has been significant, and serves as a case study in how UK education policy is often contingent on the influence of individual actors. Even changes in Education Secretary – much less entire governments - can upend long-term initiatives, raising

the central question of this final section: what comes next for children's social, moral and emotional development in UK schools?

As outlined in the introduction, moral and character education in England underwent multiple iterations over several decades: from moral education and values clarification to citizenship education, social and emotional learning (SEL), and most recently, character education. There is little evidence to suggest that any one approach has been significantly more effective than others, but that is not to say they have had no impact: while SEL was eventually scrapped, citizenship remains part of the statutory secondary curriculum, and character education has been integrated into OFSTED's inspection framework. Still, the short-termism generated by five-year election cycles means that successive governments often dismantle their predecessors' initiatives without serious evaluation. As Julia Cleverdon argues, 'the past is littered with well-intentioned Government programmes that have come and gone … it is time to take the politics out of this space and plan for the long term on a cross-party and cross-sector basis' (2020, p. 50). The political merry-go-round she identifies has beset the character education movement, contributing to wasted time, effort, and money on initiatives that have fizzled out in the fullness of time. The task for the new Labour government, then, is to establish a durable vision for children's moral and civic development, ideally through cross-party mechanisms such as parliamentary working groups. But any such plan must also confront the deeper issue of how moral education relates to the academic purpose of schooling.

The most recent iteration of the Jubilee Centre's Framework for Character Education states that schools 'should help prepare pupils for the tests of life, rather than simply

a life of tests' (Jubilee Centre, 2022, p. 11). This slogan captures a widespread anxiety: that the English education system has become unbalanced, with academic assessment usurping all other aims. And yet, policy documents are often quick to reassure sceptics that there is no trade-off between academic rigour and moral development. The Character Education Framework, for instance, insists that 'there is no tension between a rigorous and stretching academic education on the one hand and outstanding wider personal development on the other' (DfE, 2019, p.3). In principle, this may be true, but in practice many of the issues character education claims to address - stress, disengagement, low resilience - are symptoms of the high-pressure academic environment itself. For example, the previous Conservative government promoted 'resilience' as a solution to student wellbeing, yet a growing body of research demonstrates the negative correlation between high-stakes testing and student mental health (Putwain, 2009; Roome & Soan, 2019; Steare et al., 2023). This is not a party-political point. Tristram Hunt, Labour's Shadow Secretary of State for Education at the time, was also a vocal proponent of character education, listing 'resilience; curiosity; discipline; self- control; and grit' among its key virtues (Hunt, 2014, p. 4). He elaborated:

> We believe that character education is far more than a wish-list of wonderful qualities we should aspire to inculcate in all children … We believe it is far more than bolting cadets and cold showers onto the end of the school day … Indeed, for us character education represents a rigorous, evidence-based philosophy with the power to take us decisively beyond the top-down, target-driven, exam-obsessed culture which in recent years seems to have become our system's damaging default setting (Hunt, 2014, p. 6).

Despite strongly endorsing character, again the caveat arrives swiftly. Moments later, he asserts that academic performance remains paramount: 'we are zealots for minimum standards, rigorous assessment and intelligent accountability' (p. 7).

Thus, both Conservative and Labour rhetoric tends to suggest that character education must either serve academic priorities or at least not detract from them. This framing creates a false dichotomy, as if moral and intellectual aims must compete, rather than mutually enrich one another. The appetite for change was exemplified in a recent article in *The Times* (Sylvester, R. & Woodcock, N, 2024), where seven former education ministers from both major parties jointly questioned the system's current trajectory. Their intervention marks a growing consensus that the pendulum has swung too far, and that moral, civic and emotional growth deserve sustained attention, not as an add- on, but as part of education's core mission. The Jubilee Centre has also acknowledged this imbalance. As their 2019 survey finds, 'the strongest messages against character development referenced pressures on schools, teachers and the curriculum'. These pressures will not be resolved by rhetoric. If character education is to have a future, it must be integrated into a broader rebalancing of educational priorities.

Public support for reforming England's current assessment system is both broad and consistent across stakeholder groups. According to a 2022 Parentkind survey, 95% of parents believe SATs negatively impact children's wellbeing, with many calling for greater emphasis on individual learning needs and emotional development. A separate survey by the Education Reform and Assessment (ERA) group found that more than 70% of students, teachers, and parents believe secondary assessment is in urgent need of reform, particularly in relation to its narrow academic focus. Most recently, 2024 YouGov polling commissioned by the National Education Union revealed that a strong majority of the public considers current assessment practices outdated and insufficiently supportive of broader

educational development. Collectively, these findings reflect a growing appetite for a more balanced, humane, and future-focused education system.

These concerns about assessment regimes are not just about test anxiety. They also relate to the narrowing of the curriculum. Subjects most conducive to personal development - music, sport, art, and drama - have been systematically marginalised, and this disproportionately affects lower-attaining students, who are often pulled out of creative subjects to catch up in English or Maths (Hargreaves et al., 2021). This is not an issue in private schools, which continue to offer broad, rich curricula and are regularly celebrated as bastions of holistic character development (Ashton & Ashton, 2023; Hinds, 2019). There may be a place for explicit character education, through ethical discussion or storytelling, but character is equally formed in the arts, in sport, in collaborative projects and long-term commitment. There is surely no better way to develop grit, resilience and perseverance than learning a musical instrument, or to cultivate teamwork than by playing sport or performing a play. Yet these opportunities are increasingly rare in state schools, sacrificed at the altar of core subject attainment or wider funding cuts. As we look to the future, perhaps the most important task is to broaden our understanding of what education is for, and to build a system that reflects not only the demands of the labour market, but the complexity of human growth.

Conclusion

Character education, as this chapter has shown, is both a contested political project and a site of deep normative inquiry. In tracing its recent trajectory in English policy, the empirical findings offer a consistent pattern: government documents

instrumentalised character in service of economic productivity and behavioural regulation; the Jubilee Centre offers a more philosophically grounded but still culturally bounded vision; and public opinion tends to resist deficit-based framings, favouring instead a broader emphasis on care, relationality, and systemic support. These findings complicate any simple narrative of failure or success. If the government's version of character education was ideologically narrow and theoretically thin, the Jubilee Centre's is arguably more coherent but insufficiently responsive to pluralism. Both fall short of the democratic, dialogic ideal required in liberal societies. Yet, as the second half of this chapter argued, the project of moral formation in education should not be abandoned. Rather, it must be rethought.

The four fundamental questions considered in the latter half of this chapter – the viability of character education, the challenges of definition and measurement, the role of normative theory and empirical science, and the potential future of character – are collectively underscored by a central problem: how to educate for moral agency in a world without shared foundations. This is the dilemma that Durkheim (1912/1995) famously framed as the metaphorical death of God: not the collapse of a particular faith tradition, but the broader dissolution of the moral certainties that once anchored civic and educational life. In many ways, character education represents an attempt to respond to this moral vacuum, but it also reflects its contradictions. Ostensibly designed to instil shared virtues, character education too often lacks clarity about what those virtues are, why they matter, or whose interests they serve. As this chapter has shown, its current formulations are vulnerable to ideological co-optation, conceptual imprecision, and empirical naivety. And yet, to abandon the moral aims of education altogether would be to

leave a vacuum in their place, one likely filled by market logic and bureaucratic instrumentalism. A more defensible path, this chapter has argued, lies not in rejecting character education outright, but in reconstructing it as a pluralistic, philosophically-grounded and empirically-informed, project of ethical formation. Whether it continues under the name 'character education' is less important than whether it can help young people navigate moral complexity in a rapidly changing world.

Chapter eight:
Conclusion

The former gods are growing old or dying, and others have not been born
(Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 429).

Introduction

This thesis set out to explore the ideological resurgence of character education in English schools, asking not only what character education is, but how it is framed, legitimised, and received. Comprising three integrated papers, the research combined corpus linguistics, experimental psychology, and survey methods to examine character education as both policy and discourse, before assessing its alignment with public attitudes. This concluding chapter draws the findings together, outlines key contributions and limitations, and offers recommendations for future research, policy, and practice. It ends with a brief reflection.

Summary of contributions

The thesis aimed to answer three overarching research questions:

1) How is character education framed by key policy actors in England?
2) Do different framings of character predict different policy responses?
3) To what extent do current policies align with public preferences?

It advances three interconnected contributions. First, it offers a theoretically informed and empirically grounded analysis of character education policy in England, drawing on corpus linguistics and moral psychology to move beyond anecdotal or ideologically framed critiques. It demonstrates that language -

particularly metaphor and moral emphasis - is central to how character is framed and understood in policy. Second, it develops a novel methodological synthesis by combining corpus linguistics, experimental psychology, and public opinion research. While these methods are rarely used together in education research, their combination in this project offers a triangulated view of the problem. This approach allows for cross-validation: the corpus analysis identifies discursive patterns, the experiment tests interpretive responses, and the survey gauges broader social values. Finally, the thesis contributes to debates on the normative foundations of education by showing that character education cannot be extricated from wider moral and political assumptions. The distinction between ostensibly neutral policy language and its moral resonances is not merely semantic but ethical, since policy is not just about content but about the terms on which educational goods are defined and distributed.

Paper 1: Policy analysis

The aim of the first paper was to empirically assess the claim that character education policies are 'neoliberal, conservative, individualist and religiously tethered' (Kristjánsson, 2021, p. 1), as argued by critics. Over the past decade, there has been an explosion of research into the theoretical underpinnings, ideological motivations, and practical manifestations of character education in the UK. Much of the previous criticism had been qualitative in nature, often analysing individual policy documents, leaving one open to accusations of motivated reasoning, confirmation bias or cherry picking. Kristjánsson also objects that current critiques 'betray an inadequate grasp of significant factions within its group of advocates' and rejects 'the suggested idea of a single policy network' (Kristjánsson , 2021, p. 1). By

contrast, this paper applied quantitative and replicable corpus-linguistic techniques to a representative sample of character education policies published between 2011 and 2021, whilst also differentiating between key actors. The analysis suggests that some criticisms of character education are warranted, but also points to ideological cleavages within the movement. The findings support many critical claims: government policies reflected neoliberal and conservative ideological dispositions, emphasising discipline, responsibility, and economic productivity while marginalising more relational or civic virtues. The Jubilee Centre's materials, while more holistic and theoretically grounded, contain significant religious language, particularly in their teaching resources, challenging their claims of political and religious neutrality. In addition to its empirical insights, this paper contributed methodologically by introducing underutilised tools, such as the extended Moral Foundations Dictionary, into education research.

Paper 2: Framing experiment

The second paper investigated whether the language of character education influences public perception, by testing equivalence framing effects using different metaphors. Drawing on a sample of 861 participants, the results found no general framing effect, but a significant interaction with ethnicity: Asian/British Asian participants were more likely to support disciplinary policies when exposed to business metaphors, and nurturant policies when exposed to garden metaphors. This suggests that cultural schemas may mediate the influence of policy language. Beyond framing, the study showed that preferences for different character education policies were significantly shaped by participants' age, gender, and political orientation. Thus, the controversy surrounding character education may be

less about the policy itself than about the ideological lenses through which it is interpreted. This paper makes a novel contribution by combining corpus-based and experimental framing research within a single project.

Paper 3: Survey

The third paper explored public attitudes toward character education by analysing 400 open-ended responses. Thematic analysis revealed seven key categories: funding (30.6%), mental health (20.4%), communication and community (14.3%), engagement and enrichment (14.3%), behaviour (10.2%), morals and values (4.1%) and other (6.1%). The majority of respondents advocated for systemic, supportive approaches to moral education, grounded in well-funded schools, robust mental health provision, and stronger community ties. Very few endorsed the individualised, deficit-based framing found in previous government policy. These results highlight a disconnect between policy discourse and public sentiment and suggest that educational reform efforts should be more inclusive and responsive to stakeholder perspectives. As the first UK study to analyse public opinion on this topic in depth, this paper makes an original empirical contribution, especially timely given that the new Labour government is currently canvassing opinion on sweeping reforms to the education sector.

Limitations

This section highlights some of the limitations of the project, beginning with the individual papers, before outlining some general limitations of the research design overall. There are two main limitations of the corpus analysis, neither of which are avoidable. Firstly, the nature of corpus-building is such that trade-offs must be

made to ensure the integrity and precision of the sample. As such, the paper focused exclusively on character education policies published by the UK government and Jubilee Centre between 2011 and 2021. Accordingly, any conclusions are limited to the geographical and temporal constraints of these inclusion criteria. Similarly, although the paper offered a comprehensive analysis of character education, it has comparatively little to say about related domains such as behaviour, British Values, or sex and relationships education. Although these discussions overlap with character education, they remain outside the scope of this thesis.

The greatest limitation of both the experiment and survey is the nature of the sample, where participants were recruited through Prolific.ac, an online crowdsourcing platform tailored towards academics and students. Therefore, in both studies the sample skews towards the young, educated and politically left-wing, meaning that older, less-educated, right-wing participants are underrepresented versus the population. A further issue is the self-selecting nature of the samples, whereby participants volunteered to take part in the research rather than being randomly sampled by the researcher. This is a common problem when conducting online surveys and experiments, and can lead to selection bias and lower generalisability, as well as an overrepresentation of extreme views. For example, it may be that individuals with especially strong opinions about moral education volunteered to take part, whereas those with more balanced views may have chosen not to, thus skewing the results.

As an integrated thesis, the policy analysis was comprehensive in that it studied the policies themselves (Paper 1), as well as how they were perceived (Paper 2) and

supported (Paper 3) by the general public. The main limitation, however, is that it did not study the effects of the policies in practice, i.e. 'on the ground' in schools. This was mostly because the research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, at which time researchers were prohibited from visiting schools. Nevertheless, studying the enactment of policies in local settings is an important aspect of analysis in the policy cycle. For example, Vincent (2019) studied the enactment of Fundamental British Values, which have been roundly criticised for being reactionary, exclusionary and jingoistic. She found that teachers 'were effective in absorbing the requirement to promote British values' but also attempted to 'neutralize potentially exclusionary readings of the policy' (p. 7). Similarly, Spohrer (2024) identifies character education policies with the aim of sculpting responsible and resilient neoliberal citizens, but found that studying the policies *in situ* revealed that 'local enactments of character education go beyond mere instrumentalist aims of shaping a productive workforce' (p. 1). These papers suggest that schools and teachers have a significant degree of agency in terms of interpreting (and sometimes resisting) the mandates of education policy, without which no analysis is truly complete. Based on these limitations, the next section recommends various avenues for future research.

Implications for research, policy and practice

The perennial question for character education researchers is whether it actually works. The problem is that so much is contingent on definitions and outcome variables. For example, a randomised control trial may indicate that a certain programme results in a significant improvement in children's character, but this is often narrowly defined and measured in terms of performance virtues (i.e. grit or

resilience) or academic/behavioural outcomes (i.e. attainment or attendance). This risks oversimplification and distorts the aims of moral education. Future research should move toward multi-factorial assessments of character, combining behavioural, emotional, and cognitive indicators. It should also be embedded in whole-school contexts and enriched by ethnographic methods - interviews, observations, and focus groups - that capture the lived experiences of students and teachers. Such approaches would reveal not just whether character education 'works', but what it feels like, and how it interacts with school culture.

As useful as such analyses are, however, they would not shed any light on the ideological content of policies, which is where there has been the most academic debate. Research into moral education policy is especially intriguing as it represents the clearest means by which nations select, transmit and evaluate the morals and virtues they deem most salient. With some notable exceptions, current research is often nationally bounded, limiting our understanding of how cultural, religious, and political contexts shape moral education. A cross-national study, modelled on the World Values Survey, could provide new insight into which virtues are universally prioritised, and which are context-specific.

Policy-wise, this thesis arrives at a moment of potential change, as a new Labour government contemplates education reform. It recommends caution against importing ideologically loaded frameworks into classrooms. Policies should be inclusive, flexible, and attentive to the moral pluralism of modern Britain. They should empower schools to develop locally tailored approaches to character education, grounded in the values and needs of their communities. For practitioners,

the thesis highlights the importance of high-quality resources. The Knightly Virtues teaching pack, while well-intentioned, often feels heavy-handed. Designed by researchers to convey explicit moral messages, the prose is flat and the pedagogical strategy reductive, functioning more as a moral comprehension test than as a source of inspiration or critical discussion. In contrast, high-quality children's literature - with complex characters, ambiguous dilemmas, and aesthetic richness - offers far greater potential for moral reflection. Moral education should be dialogic, not didactic.

Closing remarks

> In modern times there are opposing views about the practices of education. There is not general agreement about what the young should learn either in relation to virtue or in relation to the best in life: nor is it clear whether their education ought to be directed more towards the intellect than towards the character of the soul (Aristotle, Politics VIII, I, 1337a).

Since the impromptu conversations and informal seminars of Ancient Greece, education has flourished into a global network of institutionalised schooling, lifting millions out of poverty (UNESCO, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). Notwithstanding this remarkable progress, if Aristotle's account of 'modern times' is to be believed, then humanity seems to have made comparatively little headway on the fundamental problems. Aristotle raises two main questions: which virtues should we teach, and how should we weight children's intellectual versus moral development? Such questions are likely intractable, with each generation demanding new answers, calibrated against prevailing social, scientific and economic trends. Potential answers to the first - which virtues? – are historically contingent. Where a Victorian might answer 'manners', or a Catholic 'piety', a modern advocate of character

education might reply ‘grit’ or ‘resilience’. Whether there are universal virtues, pertaining throughout history and across cultures – as believed by various Greek, Roman and Christian philosophers – is a matter of empirical evidence, and such questions are best tackled by psychologists and anthropologists. The task for philosophers and educators is to ensure that current programmes of moral education are well-defined, theoretically and empirically robust, and commensurate with the features and problems of the modern age.

The second question posed by Aristotle is perhaps even more germane today. Since the industrial revolution and the rise of the knowledge economy, education has steadily prioritised academic attainment over moral cultivation. This shift has been amplified by the exponential pace of technological development, which places increasing pressure on curricula to keep up. Yet rather than cramming ever more content into an already crowded syllabus, the challenge for modern education is to cultivate the intellectual flexibility, critical discernment, and moral awareness needed to navigate a rapidly changing world. The current emphasis on high-stakes, standardised testing reduces education to a narrow academic pursuit, often at the expense of pupils’ physical, mental, social, and emotional development, a reality widely recognised by students, teachers and parents alike.

In the 21st century, school leavers inherit a world unlike any before: shaped by globalisation, technological acceleration, climate instability, and deepening political divides. In such a context, education cannot be limited to preparing individuals for private success. It must also foster the capacities to cooperate, act with moral purpose, and confront shared challenges together. Yet within schools, rising mental

health difficulties, increasing exclusions, and narrowing curricula risk leaving too many children alienated from this broader vision of flourishing. Moral education, done thoughtfully and critically, can be part of the solution: not as a nostalgic return to 'character' as compliance, but as a forward-looking project that empowers children both to thrive as individuals and to contribute to the collective good in an uncertain future.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1: Ethics application

SECTION A: Filter for CUREC 2 application		
This section determines whether the application for ethics review should be made using the this form (CUREC 1A) or the CUREC 2 form (for research with more complex ethical issues).		
Please indicate with an 'X'.	**Yes**	**No**
1. Does the research involve the deception of participants?	☐	☒
2. Are the research participants vulnerable in the context of the research, or classed as people whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question? For example, ● Participants aged 16 or under (also answer question A5); ● Participants aged 16 – 18 (refer to competent youths for guidance); ● adults at risk; Note the University's Safeguarding Guidance and Code of Practice and its implications for researchers involving young people or adults at risk.	☐	☒
3. By taking part in the research, will participants be at risk of criminal prosecution or significant harm?	☐	☒
4. Does your research raise issues relevant to the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (the Prevent Duty), which seeks to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism? Best Practice Guidance 07 on the Prevent Duty provides further guidance.	☐	☒
If you answered **'No'** to all the questions above, go to Section B. If you answered **'Yes'** to any question above, continue to question 5 below.		
5. Is your project covered by a CUREC Approved Procedure?	☐	☐
If yes, list the CUREC Approved Procedure(s) you will follow		
If you answered '**Yes**' to ANY of questions 1-4, and answered '**No**' to question 5, **stop** completing this form and do not submit it for ethical review. You will instead need to submit a CUREC 2 application form. If you answered '**Yes**' to **any** of questions 1-4, and your project is covered by an Approved Procedure, **go on to Section B**. If more than one Approved Procedure applies, contact the SSH IDREC or your DREC for advice on whether a CUREC 2 form should be submitted instead.		

SECTION B: Researchers

1. Name of Principal Investigator or student's supervisor	Dr Ian Thompson and Dr Velda Elliott		
2. Department or Institute	Education		
3. University of Oxford telephone number	01865274024		
4. University of Oxford email address	Ian.thompson@education.ox.ac.uk		
Copy and paste the following six rows as necessary to complete for each additional researcher who will be involved in this study, including student(s) and those external to the University.			
5. Name of researcher or student	Edward Palmer		
6. Department or Institute	Education		
7. University of Oxford telephone number	07725914923		
8. University of Oxford email address	Edward.palmer@gtc.ox.ac.uk		
9. Role in research	Student researcher		
10. Degree programme, if student research	DPhil		
The whole research team			
11. Have the researchers undertaken research ethics and integrity training?		**Yes ☒**	**No ☐**
12. Please provide details of any research ethics and integrity training undertaken, including the dates of the training. Alternatively state relevant research experience.	- Doctoral training session on ethics - Philosophy of education research module with Dr Nigel Fancourt - Supervisions with Dr Ian Thompson and Dr Velda Elliott		
13. State any conflicts of interest and explain how these will be addressed.	No conflicts of interest		

SECTION C: The research project	
1. Title of the research project	
Framing moral education: a discourse analysis and experiment	
2. Anticipated start date of the aspect of the research project involving	01/01/2022

human participants and/ or personal data (**dd/mm/yy**).	
3. Anticipated research end date (**dd/mm/yy**).	01/01/2023

4. Provide a brief lay summary of the aims and objectives of the research. This should cover the questions it will answer and any potential benefits. (max 300 words)
This research aims to contribute to the emerging debate around character education in England. The two main advocates for character education - the Conservative government and the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues – agree on its necessity but package their arguments in different language, or metaphorical frames. Whilst the government use inorganic, business language (teachers should build children's character so they can succeed as adults), the Jubilee Centre use more organic, gardening language (teachers should cultivate children's character so they can flourish as adults). This study aims to test whether these metaphorical frames have any bearing on how people reason about moral education policies. Are people more likely to advocate for progressive policies when character education is framed as a garden, or more likely to advocate for conservative policies when character education is framed as a business? This research will shed light on whether [moral] education policy is guided more by fact or fiction, by statistics or rhetoric.

5. Please indicate the methods to be used (indicate with an '**X**'):	
Analysis of existing records	☒
Snowball sampling (recruiting through contacts of existing participants)	☐
Use of casual or local workers e.g. interpreters (refer to guidance in BPG 01: Researcher safety)	☐
Participant observation	☐
Covert observation	☐
Observation of specific organisational practices	☐
Participant completes questionnaire in hard copy	☐
Participant completes online questionnaire or other online task (refer to guidance in BPG 06: Internet-mediated research)	☒
Using social media to recruit or interact with participants (refer to guidance in BPG 06: Internet-mediated research)	☐
Participant performs paper and pencil task	☐
Participant performs verbal or aural task (e.g. for linguistic study)	☐
Focus group	☐

Interview (refer to guidance in BPG 10: Conducting research interviews)	☐
Audio recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☐
Video recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☐
Photography of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☐
Others (please specify below)	☐

6. Provide a brief summary of the research design and methods. What will research participants be asked to do? (max 300 words) Please also submit a copy of the questions participants will be asked, if applicable, or some information about the sorts of topics that will be covered.
Having provided consent, participants will be randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In all three they will read a brief vignette about moral education in the fictional city of Greendale, which includes some genuine statistics (from the UK) about declining mental health and rising exclusions. The first condition is framed in organic, gardening language (cultivate, flourish) and the second is framed in inorganic, business language (build, succeed). The third condition is a control, written in literal (non-metaphorical) language. After reading the vignette, participants will be asked to rank a range of policy options in order 1-7 of which they think would be most beneficial. Following the experiment, participants will answer five questions about their age, gender, educational background, geographical location, and political persuasion, and a further 22 questions taken from the Moral Foundations Questionnaire. Part one asks, 'When you decide whether something is right or wrong, to what extent are the following considerations relevant to your thinking?'. Example statements include 'Whether or not someone acted unfairly' or 'Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society'. Part two states, 'Please read the following sentences and indicate your agreement or disagreement'. Example statements include 'Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue' and 'I am proud of my country's history'.

7. List the location(s) where the research will be conducted, including any other countries.	UK (online)
8. Clarify which parts of the research will be conducted in-person and which will take place remotely, e.g. online.	All online

9. If your research involves fieldwork or travel and your department requires a travel risk assessment, will you have	Yes	☐
	No	☐

completed and returned a risk assessment form beforehand? Please indicate with an '**X**'. (This must be approved by your department before you travel. If you are travelling overseas, you are advised to take out University travel insurance.) Refer to guidance available from your Department, the Safety Office, the Social Sciences Division, and the Humanities Division, and on travel for University business.	Not required in this instance	☒
10. In the case of international or collaborative research, explain how you will address any ethical issues specific to the local context. Please provide details of the local review, approval or permission obtained or required. Refer to the BPG 16: Social science research conducted outside the UK. If there will be no local review, explain why not. Please also address any physical or psychological risks for Oxford researchers and local fieldworkers in Section G.		
N/A		
11. Name of departmental/ peer reviewer (if applicable)	N/A	
12. External organisation funding the research and grant reference (if applicable)	N/A	
13. Please refer to the CUREC Best Practice Guidance and list any that have been used to develop your research.	BPG 05 Payments and incentives in research BPG 06 Internet-mediated research BPG 09 Data collection, protection and management	

SECTION D: Recruitment of research participants		
1. Number of participants	100s	
2. How was the number of participants decided?	The number of participants will be calculated using the	
3. Age range of participants	18+	
4. Inclusion criteria	18+ Living in UK	
5. Exclusion criteria	Amazon MK 'Turkers' with lower than 90% feedback	
	Poster advert	☐

6. Indicate with an '**X**' all intended recruitment methods **Please submit copies of the recruitment material that will be used, e.g. advertisement text, introductory email text.**	Flyer	☐
	Email circulation	☐
	Social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook)	☐
	Website	☐
	In-person approach	☐
	Snowball sampling	☐
	Recruitment sites (e.g. Mechanical Turk)	☒
	Existing contacts or volunteer database	☐
	Other (please specify):	☐
7. How will potential participants be identified and approached?	Participants will be recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk. I will include a filter such that only 'Turkers' with a rating of 90% or better will qualify to participate.	
8. Will informed consent be obtained from the research participants or their parents/ guardians? If not, please explain why not.	Yes	
9. For each activity or group of participants, explain how informed consent will be obtained from the participants themselves and/ or their parents/ guardians, if applicable. How will their consent be recorded?	Informed consent will be obtained at the beginning of the survey/experiment. I enclose a copy of the informed consent page as an appendix. The consent forms will be answered online and then – like the rest of my data – will be downloaded onto my password-protected computer, where they will remain until the end of my research.	
10. Provide details of any payments and incentives and the rationale for providing these. Further guidance in Best Practice Guidance: 05 Payments and incentives in research.	I have chosen to provide incentives for participants as this is standard practice using the Amazon Mechanical Turk interface. Although there are legitimate concerns around coercion and bias, these are outweighed by the speed and feasibility that the platform offers. There is also growing academic literature to suggest that MK Turk is a valid and reliable source of participant recruitment/data collection. My main	

	ethical concern is that participants are fairly reimbursed for their efforts. Given the study will only take 10 minutes, I believe x constitute a fair payment.
11. Describe how participants ● may withdraw from the study ● may withdraw any personal information they have provided from the study State any limits to withdrawal, for example once the data has been anonymised or at some other specified stage prior to publication. Make sure participants are aware of any withdrawal limits.	Participants may withdraw from the study at any time by simply closing their internet browser. I have little control over this as a researcher since the participants are working remotely. Participants cannot withdraw once they have submitted their results and their data has become anonymised.

SECTION E: Research data			
All information provided by participants is considered research data for the purpose of this form. Any research data from which participants can be identified is known as personal data; any personal data which is sensitive is considered special category data. Management of personal data, either directly or via a third party, must comply with the requirements of the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018, as set out in the University's Guidance on Data Protection and Research. In answering the questions below, please also consider the points raised in the Data Protection Checklist and Data Protection Screening Assessment and whether, for higher-risk data processing, a separate Data Protection Impact Assessment may also be required for the research. Advice on research data management and security is available from Research Data Oxford and your local IT department. Advice on data protection is available from the Information Compliance team. For guidance on conducting internet-mediated research, refer to CUREC's Best Practice Guidance 06: Internet-mediated research.			
1. What data will be collected? (Indicate with an '**X**')			
Screening documents	☐	Task results (e.g. questionnaires, diaries)	☒
Consent records (e.g., written consent forms, audio-recorded consent, assent forms)	☒	IP addresses (refer to Best Practice Guidance 09: Data collection, protection and management for guidance)	☐
Contact details for the purpose of this research only	☐	Field notes	☐

Contact details for future use (guidance)	☐	Photographs	☐
Opt-out forms	☐	Information about the health of the participant (including mental health)	☐
Audio recordings	☐	Previously collected (secondary) data	☐
Video recordings	☐	Data already in the public domain. Specify the source of the data:	☐
Transcript of audio/ video recordings	☐	Other, please specify:	☐

2. During the course of the research, where will **each type of** research data be stored?	For the time that the experiment is running, all data (consent forms and survey/task results) will be stored online using the Qualtrics platform. Once sufficient participants have been recruited, I will close the experiment and download all data onto my personal computer, where they will remain thereafter.		
3. Who will have access to the research data during the project?	My supervisors will have access to the data, along with other designated individuals from the university.		
4. Please complete this section if your research involves the use of secondary (i.e. previously collected) data.	**Please indicated with an 'X'.**	**Yes**	**No**
	Are data access agreements in place for access to and use of this secondary data? (If so, please attach these.)	☐	☐
	Did the individuals agree that their data could be used for this purpose?	☐	☐
	Could anyone (including members of the research team) link the data back to an individual or individuals? If this is a possibility, please explain how the associated ethical issues will be addressed:	☐	☐
5. How do you intend to share the research	Depositing in a specialist data centre or archive	☐	
	Submitting to a journal to support a publication	☐	

data at the end of the project?	Depositing in an institutional repository	☐
	Dissemination via a project or institutional website	☐
	No plans to share the data	☒
	Other (please specify):	☐
6. How do you intend to report and disseminate the results of the research? (Indicate with an 'X')	Thesis publication	☒
	Publication in a peer reviewed journal	☒
	Publicly available report	☐
	Conference presentation	☒
	Publication on a website	☐
	Report to a research funder	☐
	Providing participants with a lay summary of the results	☐
	Submission for academic assessment	☐
	Other (please specify):	☐

7. Explain what will happen to the data at the end of the research project. This question must be answered for each type of data, including completed consent forms.
I will store consent forms for a maximum of three years, in line with the University of Oxford policy. These will likely be deleted immediately upon the publication of my thesis. All other data will be stored for as long as it has academic merit.

SECTION F: Protection of research participants and their personal data		
1. How identifiable will the participants be from the **research outputs**? (Indicate with an 'X')	Directly identifiable from the information included	☐
	Pseudonymised/ indirectly identifiable	☐
	Not identifiable – data is anonymous	☒
	Other, please specify:	☐

2. To what extent will the **data** be de-identified? How identifiable will any individuals be from the research data? Describe any measures you will take towards assuring confidentiality, potential risks to confidentiality.	The data will be fully anonymised and, due to the nature of the research, there is no need for me to refer to participants individually, even by pseudonym. Upon completing the survey/experiment, participants will be presented with a random three-digit code, which they will use to claim their reimbursement on MK Turk.
3. How will you ensure that third parties (e.g., interpreters and transcribers) are aware of and adhere to the measures described in this form?	N/A

SECTION G: Risks and benefits of the research
1. Will the research involve topics that could be considered sensitive? If so: a. Please provide more detail or supporting information (such as the interview questions) to show the range of questions; b. Explain what steps will be taken to reduce risk of distress; c. Consider seeking advice from within your Department or from the ethics committee including whether the application might benefit from additional ethics review (e.g., via a CUREC 2 application).
This research does not involve any sensitive issues that are likely to cause distress.
2. Describe any additional burden or risks to the participants and the steps you will take to address these.

Beyond the 10-15 minutes that it takes to complete the survey/experiment, I cannot imagine any additional burdens or risks to participants.
3. Describe any physical or psychological risks to the researcher(s) (including local fieldworkers or research assistants) and the steps you will take to address these.
There are no physical or psychological risks to me (the researcher).
4. Describe any benefits of the research, both to participants and to others.
The participants will be reimbursed for their time. They will also be contributing to research around an important and timely issue, namely the moral and emotional development of children in England.
5. Give details of any other ethical issues or relevant information.
N/A

SECTION H: Professional guidelines		
Please indicate with an '**X**' at least one set of professional guidelines you will follow.		
Research specialism/ methodology	**Association and guidance**	
Anthropology	Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK	☐
Computer Science	ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct	☐
Criminology	British Society of Criminology Statement of Ethics	☐
Education	British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research	☒
Geography	American Association of Geographers Statement on Professional Ethics	☐
History	Oral History Society of the UK Ethical Guidelines	☐
Internet-mediated research	Association of Internet Researchers Ethical Guidelines British Psychological Society: Ethics Guidelines for internet-mediated research Association for Computing Machinery Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct	☒

Management	Academy of Management Code of Ethics	☐
Political Science	American Political Science Association (APSA) Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science	☐
Politics	Political Studies Association. Guidelines for Good Professional Conduct	☐
Psychology	British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct	☐
Social research	Social Research Association: Ethical Guidelines	☐
Socio-legal studies	Socio-Legal Studies Association: Statement of Principles of Ethical Research Practice	☐
Sociology	The British Sociological Association: Statement of Ethical Practice	☐
Visual research	ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper: Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research	☐
Other professional guidelines		☐

SECTION I: Endorsements and signatures
Please ensure this form is endorsed by the Principal Investigator (or student's supervisor), the Head of Department (or nominee) and, if student research, by the student themselves. **The SSH IDREC Secretariat accepts either option below. If you have a DREC, check which signature option it prefers.** ● **Option 1: direct email endorsements** Each of the signatories should submit an email from a University of Oxford email address, indicating their acceptance of the responsibilities listed below. ● **Option 2: signatures** Please scan the signed form and email it to us as a PDF. Pasted images of signatures cannot be accepted.
Endorsement by the Principal Investigator/ student supervisor and student, if applicable
I/ we the researchers understand my/ our responsibilities as Principal Investigator (and student, if applicable) as outlined in the guidance on the CUREC website. I/ we declare that the answers above accurately describe the research as presently designed, and that the ethics committee will be informed of any changes to the project which affect the answers to this form. I/ we will inform the relevant IDREC if the Principal Investigator changes.

Name of Principal Investigator	

Principal Investigator's signature	Instead of a signature, endorsement may be provided by an email confirming the points above.
Date	
Name of student (if applicable)	Eddy Palmer
Student's signature	Instead of a signature, endorsement may be provided by an email confirming the points above.
Date	26/10/21

Departmental endorsement – from the Head of Department or nominee (Another senior member of the department may sign where the head of department is the Principal Investigator, or where the Head of Department has appointed a nominee. Example nominees include Deputy Head of Department, Director of Research, or Director of Graduate/ Undergraduate Studies.)	
I have read the research project application named above. On the basis of the information available to me, I: ● consider the PI and student researcher (if applicable) to be aware of their ethical responsibilities in regard to the ethical issues associated with this research; ● am satisfied that the proposed design and methodology are sound; the research has been subject to appropriate peer review and is likely to contribute to existing knowledge and/ or to the education and training of the researcher(s) and that it is in the public interest.	
Signature	Instead of a signature, endorsement may be provided by an email confirming the points above.
Name	
Role	
Date	

Appendix 2: Example policy document (Paper 1)

Nicky Morgan opens character symposium at Floreat School

The Education Secretary sets out her vision for character education.

Thank you for that kind introduction. It is a pleasure to be here.

And it is a pleasure to be hosting the Department for Education's first character symposium, alongside Floreat Education and Lord O'Shaughnessy - pioneers of what excellent character education looks like.

It's inspiring to see so many people debating this issue so passionately.

I know that Major Tim Peake has tweeted about this symposium all the way from the International Space Station - so that's definitely a badge of honour!

As the Prime Minister said in his life chances speech just last week, our aim in politics should be: "To give every child the chance to dream big dreams, and the tools - the character, the knowledge and the confidence that will let their potential shine brightly."

So this government has made it clear that character matters.

And, as many of you will know, the development of character and mental wellbeing are personal priorities of mine.

As a backbench MP I called for a debate on mental health in the main House of Commons chamber for the very first time and was privileged to lead that debate in 2012.

I was the first Secretary of State to give a minister specific responsibility for mental health - a role Sam Gyimah is carrying out with distinction.

And let me thank Edward Timpson, the minister in my department responsible for character, for his considerable work on this - I know you will hear from him later.

Good character is welcomed by schools, by businesses and by parents alike. It impacts both on educational outcomes and life chances, and I have seen first hand the impact it can have.

Just last week I attended an event being held by the Transformation Trust which gives disadvantaged young people the chance to participate in character-building activities which they otherwise wouldn't have access to.
I heard from 2 young women, Camila and Rihanna, both only 18 years old, who were articulate, ambitious and accomplished.

They were the embodiment of the impact character education can have on young people.

For too long, character has been seen as 'soft' and 'a nice thing to do'.

I am pleased to say that the debate is shifting and there is greater awareness than ever before of just how important this is.

I firmly believe character education prepares our young people for life in modern Britain, regardless of their background or where they grew up.

A truly one-nation government cannot accept that only some people deserve the opportunities that will help them to get on in life.

Every single child deserves that chance.

And we're not promoting character on a whim.

Evidence clearly shows that character matters.

Carole Dweck's work at Stanford, Angela Duckworth's work on Character Lab, as well as the evidence collected by the Early Intervention Foundation, all point to success being closely linked with character.

This is evidence showing that developing excellent character traits in young people can help them to realise their true potential.

People often ask what we mean when we talk about character.

For me character traits are those qualities that enhance us as people: persistence, the ability to work with others, to show humility in the joy of success and resilience in the face of failure.

Character is about being self-aware, playing an active role within communities. It's about selflessness and self-discipline as well as playing a full role in society.

It's fair to say that's a long list of traits!

But that goes to the very heart of this debate - there is no one clear definition of character.

There is no one easy list of boxes to tick.

We don't want to set down rigid guidelines on this because character isn't a one-size-fits-all concept.

It isn't just one thing.

It's a combination of the traits that set people apart so they can achieve their dreams.

Business leaders - big and small - tell us time and time again that character is a key component to success.

And we welcome a diverse approach to teaching character.

Our reforms over the last 6 years in education have been about liberating schools to innovate and have the freedom to deliver what really works.

We want schools to choose how best to deliver character education in ways that suit their pupils, their teachers and their communities.

We've heard this morning from Janet, and the inspiring work done here in Floreat to instil these traits in their pupils.

We've also heard from Ali about the difference the ReachOut mentoring programme has had on his life, and from Danielle - who spoke about the determination that has helped her achieve her goals both academically and in sport.

One of the other myths I'm keen to dispel is that character education, and academic attainment are mutually exclusive. Far from it.

For me, they are 2 sides of the same coin.

Consider for a moment the student who reads aloud for the first time and gets tongue tied - will they rush to do it again without encouragement?

What about another who is asked to recite times tables in front of their class and gets stuck - will they fall over themselves to repeat the exercise?

Probably not.

But with character comes the confidence and determination not to be beaten.

It's that attitude that says "dust yourself off and try again".

We know that some of the best schools are already prioritising good character education.

Whenever I go to visit schools - and I've visited my fair share - I always make a point of asking what they do to promote character, mental health and wellbeing.

And at the Department for Education my officials talk to those schools doing it well - to understand the key to their success. And the one thing I've heard over and over again is that the best schools embed character in everything they do - from their ethos, to their curriculum, to the extra-curricular activities they offer.

Oakthorpe Primary School in Derbyshire has developed an ethos that's focused around reciprocity, reflection, resourcefulness and resilience.

Haywood Academy in Stoke-on-Trent offers a range of character-building activities through motivational speakers, army cadet units and theatre programmes.

I have had the pleasure of visiting the Birmingham University Free School where character education runs through everything they do, as well the Goldbeaters Primary School in London, where we launched the On the Front Foot programme with elite rugby coaches.

And also Redhill School in Stourbridge where students are encouraged to play a positive role in the life of the school and the wider community through fundraising, work experience and sports.

Pupils were invited to speak at the Conservative Party Conference and talk about why character education matters to them - and let me tell you, they received one of the biggest standing ovations of the day.

I want every single pupil to benefit from that kind of character education.

That's why we are building the evidence base so we can develop the best approaches and make sure all schools have access to this information.

That's why we will provide an online digital platform where teachers can share best practice about character education, evaluate new ideas and find online professional development materials - as well as sharing their own data to build a proper evidence base.

And we will look to the Character Awards as a gold standard as to what works in character education.

Today is a celebration of the excellent work already being done. To those schools whose efforts are to be applauded - thank you.

But also to the businesses who are building lasting partnerships with schools and doing their bit to further the building of character in our young people - thank you, too.

I think it's vitally important that businesses take a role here because the character traits we instil in young people should reflect the type of workforce our modern economy wants and needs.

That includes companies like Barclays, which has developed a Life Skills programme to develop the skills young people need to increase employability, and British Gas, which is supporting the fantastic Duke of Edinburgh scheme.

We have sought, like no government before us, to bring business people into the education system.

That's why we now have businesses sponsoring schools, becoming governors and offering work experience.

We want this relationship between business and education to continue to go from strength to strength.

That is why we will be launching, as the Prime Minister set out, a new business mentoring programme, led by the Careers and Enterprise Company.

I know their chief executive, Claudia Harris, is here today and will be leading the conversation on how we can make sure all young people develop the skills they need to thrive in the workplace.

And that's just one of the many conversations happening today.

We want to give you the opportunity to influence our thinking on character and, ultimately, our policies.

So we'll be asking for your views on how we can work with voluntary and charitable sector organisations to really expand this agenda.

And there are plenty of avenues for our young people to go down in the pursuit of character building.

For example, the National Citizen Service, which gives children the chance to benefit from character education no matter their background, and no matter where in the country they live.

We want every child to be able to access this, and that's why the Prime Minister announced we'll be expanding funding to the programme by more than a billion pounds so that 60% of 16 and 17 year olds will be able to take part.

We are keen to work with as many partners as possible and make sure that schools can access the best evidence possible.

Because, as I have said, I want excellent character education to be the norm across schools - so that every single child in every single school knows that they are

getting the education they deserve and so that when they leave school, they are truly prepared for the next steps they take.

I hope you enjoy the rest of your afternoon and I look forward to seeing how we can work together to put character education to the top of the agenda and make sure it benefits all young people.

Every single child deserves the best education possible, and we owe it to children everywhere to make sure that character is at the heart of that.

Thank you.

Appendix 3: Norming study (Paper 2)

Start of Block: Information sheet

Moral and emotional education in schools

Who am I?
My name is Eddy Palmer, a research student from the University of Oxford.

What is this research about?
I am interested in the re-emergence of moral and emotional education in schools. This research aims to provide greater understanding for teachers and researchers.

What will this survey involve?
This survey comprises two short tasks about education policy and five questions about your background. It should only take a few minutes to complete.

Why am I asking for your involvement?
I am asking for your involvement because you are aged over 18 and living in the United Kingdom.

How will the data be used?
By completing this survey, you are giving me permission to use your answers in my PhD thesis. Your fully anonymised data will be stored securely on a password-protected computer and I will continue to store this data upon completion of my research, as it may be useful for further work.

What if there is a problem?
If you encounter any problems with this survey, please contact me using the following email address: edward.palmer@education.ox.ac.uk.

Anything else?
This study has received ethical clearance via the University of Oxford Research Ethics procedure. If you have any concerns about this research, please contact my supervisors, Dr Ian Thompson (Ian.Thompson@education.ox.ac.uk) and Dr Velda Elliott (Velda.Elliott@education.ox.ac.uk)

End of Block: Information sheet

Start of Block: Consent form

Consent form

By consenting to take part in this research, you agree to the following:

I confirm that I have read and understood the information provided on the previous page, and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary.

I understand that research data collected during this study will be shared with designated individuals from the University of Oxford.

I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethical clearance through, the University of Oxford Central Research Committee.

I understand who will have access to the personal data provided, how the data will be stored, and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

I understand that this research will be written up and published.

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

Do you consent to take part in this research?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Skip To: End of Survey If By consenting to take part in this research, you agree to the following: I confirm that I have... = No

End of Block: Consent form

Start of Block: Prolific

Please enter your Prolific ID:

_____

End of Block: Prolific

Start of Block: Questions

Task 1

Education is a system involving many people: parents, teachers and others. As well as developing knowledge, education also aims to develop children's character and resilience, so they can effectively participate in a rapidly changing world. In Greenville, however, there is cause for concern. In 2010 the city was thriving, but after a decade of cuts its schools are underperforming and its youth have become disillusioned. The number of pupils being excluded from school has increased by 71% in the past seven years, whilst 1 in 5 children struggle with their mental

health. Greenville's policymakers are concerned that unless they act soon, it may be too late to recover children's moral and emotional development.

Policymakers know they must respond to the problem, but they don't know which policies to change or how much to change them. Two politicians are leading the debate.

One argues that 'Education is a GARDEN where children can CULTIVATE their character'.

The other argues that 'Education is a BUSINESS where children can BUILD their character'.

If you had to guess, which of the following policies are supported by each of the politicians? Pick the 2 policies you think are most consistent with the garden expression, then drag and drop those items into the 'Garden' box. Do the same with the 2 policies that are most consistent with the business expression by dragging those items into the 'Business' box (2 policies in each box).

Garden	Business
___ Include mindfulness and yoga in school timetables	___ Include mindfulness and yoga in school timetables
___ Reduce examinations before GCGEs	___ Reduce examinations before GCGEs
___ Implement zero-tolerance attendance and school uniform policies	___ Implement zero-tolerance attendance and school uniform policies
___ Use computer software to record and monitor children's behaviour	___ Use computer software to record and monitor children's behaviour

Page Break

Task 2

The following six education policies vary in the degree to which they emphasise nurture versus discipline. For each of the policy options below, please rate the extent to which, in your view, each option emphasises nurture versus discipline. Use the slidebar to indicate your rating for each of the six policies. Lower values (0-49) indicate a view that the policy approach is relatively nurture-oriented; higher values (51-100) indicate a view that the policy approach is relatively discipline-oriented.

Nurture Discipline

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Include mindfulness and yoga in school timetables	
Reduce examinations before GCGEs	
Implement zero-tolerance attendance and school uniform policies	
Use computer software to record and monitor children's behaviour	

End of Block: Questions

Start of Block: Demographic questionnaire

Thank you. You will now be asked five questions about your background.

Q1. How old are you?

- ○ 18-24
- ○ 25-34
- ○ 35-44
- ○ 45-54
- ○ 55-64
- ○ 65+
- ○ Prefer not to say

Q2. Which gender do you identify as?

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Other (please specify) _____
- ○ Prefer not to say

Q3. Which of the following best describes your race or ethnicity?

- ○ White
- ○ Black/Black British
- ○ Asian/Asian British
- ○ Mixed
- ○ Other (please specify) _____
- ○ Prefer not to say

Q4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ○ Primary school
- ○ Secondary school up to 16 years
- ○ Higher education (A-levels, BTEC, etc.)
- ○ College or university
- ○ Post-graduate degree
- ○ Prefer not to say

Q5. How would you describe your political views?

- ○ Left
- ○ Centre left
- ○ Centre
- ○ Centre right
- ○ Right
- ○ I don't have political views

End of Block: Demographic questionnaire

Start of Block: Random ID

Thank you for taking part in this study. Please click the button below to be redirected back to Prolific.

End of Block: Random ID

Appendix 4: Framing experiment (Paper 2)

Start of Block: Information sheet

Moral and emotional education in schools

Who am I?
My name is Eddy Palmer, a research student from the University of Oxford.

What is this research about?
I am interested in the re-emergence of moral and emotional education in schools. This research aims to provide greater understanding for teachers and researchers.

What will this survey involve?
This survey comprises two short tasks about education policy and five questions about your background. It should only take a few minutes to complete.

Why am I asking for your involvement?
I am asking for your involvement because you are aged over 18 and living in the United Kingdom.

How will the data be used?
By completing this survey, you are giving me permission to use your answers in my PhD thesis. Your fully anonymised data will be stored securely on a password-protected computer and I will continue to store this data upon completion of my research, as it may be useful for further work.

What if there is a problem?
If you encounter any problems with this survey, please contact me using the following email address: edward.palmer@education.ox.ac.uk.

Anything else?
This study has received ethical clearance via the University of Oxford Research Ethics procedure. If you have any concerns about this research, please contact my supervisors, Dr Ian Thompson (Ian.Thompson@education.ox.ac.uk) and Dr Velda Elliott (Velda.Elliott@education.ox.ac.uk)

End of Block: Information sheet

Start of Block: Consent form

Consent form

By consenting to take part in this research, you agree to the following:

I confirm that I have read and understood the information provided on the previous page, and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary.

I understand that research data collected during this study will be shared with designated individuals from the University of Oxford.

I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethical clearance through, the University of Oxford Central Research Committee.

I understand who will have access to the personal data provided, how the data will be stored, and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

I understand that this research will be written up and published.

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

Do you consent to take part in this research?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Skip To: End of Survey If By consenting to take part in this research, you agree to the following: I confirm that I have r... = No

End of Block: Consent form

Start of Block: Prolific

Please enter your Prolific ID:

_____

End of Block: Prolific

Start of Block: Garden

Please carefully read the following text, in bold. When you have finished reading the text, please click the button to confirm this.

Education is a garden involving many gardeners: parents, teachers and others. As well as developing knowledge, education also aims to cultivate children's character and resilience, so they can flourish in a rapidly changing world. In Greenville, however, there is cause for concern. In 2010 the city

was thriving, but after a decade of cuts its schools are wilting and its youth have become disenchanted. The number of pupils being excluded from school has increased by 71% in the past seven years, whilst 1 in 5 struggle with their mental health. Greenville's policymakers are concerned that unless they act soon, it may be too late to recover children's moral and emotional development.

○ I have read this text

End of Block: Garden

Start of Block: Business

Please carefully read the following text, in bold. When you have finished reading the text, please click the button to confirm this.

Education is a business involving many stakeholders: parents, teachers and others. As well as developing knowledge, education also aims to build children's character and resilience, so they can compete in a rapidly changing world. In Greenville, however, there is cause for concern. In 2010 the city was thriving, but after a decade of cuts its schools are failing and its youth have become disengaged. The number of pupils being excluded from school has increased by 71% in the past seven years, whilst 1 in 5 struggle with their mental health. Greenville's policymakers are concerned that unless they act soon, it may be too late to recover children's moral and emotional development.

○ I have read this text

End of Block: Business

Start of Block: Questions

Q1. Policymakers know they must respond to the problem in the city's schools, but they don't know which policies to change or how much to change them. Please rank in order which policies you think would be most helpful to address the problem, as described on the previous page. Drag and drop the policies into your desired order, so that number 1 (at the top) is the most helpful policy and number 4 (at the bottom) is the least helpful policy.

_____ Include mindfulness and yoga in school timetables
_____ Reduce examinations before GCSEs
_____ Implement strict attendance and school uniform policies
_____ Use computer software to record and monitor children's behaviour

Page Break

Q2. The report about children's education, which you read before ranking the policies, began:

'Education is a……**'**

From memory, please fill in the missing word. Write your response in the box below. Please do not attempt to click 'back' in your browser, as this will invalidate the survey.

_____

End of Block: Questions

Start of Block: Demographic questionnaire

Thank you. You will now be asked five questions about your background.

Q1. How old are you?

- ○ 18-24
- ○ 25-34
- ○ 35-44
- ○ 45-54
- ○ 55-64
- ○ 65+
- ○ Prefer not to say

Q2. Which gender do you identify as?

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Other (please specify) _____
- ○ Prefer not to say

Q3. Which of the following best describes your race or ethnicity?

- ○ White
- ○ Black/Black British
- ○ Asian/Asian British
- ○ Mixed
- ○ Other (please specify) _____
- ○ Prefer not to say

Q4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ○ Primary school
- ○ Secondary school up to 16 years
- ○ Higher education (A-levels, BTEC, etc.)
- ○ College or university
- ○ Post-graduate degree
- ○ Prefer not to say

Q5. How would you describe your political views?

- ○ Left
- ○ Centre left
- ○ Centre
- ○ Centre right
- ○ Right
- ○ I don't have political views

End of Block: Demographic questionnaire

Start of Block: Random ID

Thank you for taking part in this study. Please click the button below to be redirected back to Prolific.

End of Block: Random ID

Appendix 5: Survey experiment (Paper 3)

Start of Block: Information sheet

Moral and emotional education in schools

Who am I?
My name is Eddy Palmer, a research student from the University of Oxford.

What is this research about?
I am interested in the re-emergence of moral and emotional education in schools. This research aims to provide greater understanding for teachers and researchers.

What will this survey involve?
This survey comprises two short tasks about education policy and five questions about your background. It should only take a few minutes to complete.

Why am I asking for your involvement?
I am asking for your involvement because you are aged over 18 and living in the United Kingdom.

How will the data be used?
By completing this survey, you are giving me permission to use your answers in my PhD thesis. Your fully anonymised data will be stored securely on a password-protected computer and I will continue to store this data upon completion of my research, as it may be useful for further work.

What if there is a problem?
If you encounter any problems with this survey, please contact me using the following email address: edward.palmer@education.ox.ac.uk.

Anything else?
This study has received ethical clearance via the University of Oxford Research Ethics procedure. If you have any concerns about this research, please contact my supervisors, Dr Ian Thompson (Ian.Thompson@education.ox.ac.uk) and Dr Velda Elliott (Velda.Elliott@education.ox.ac.uk)

End of Block: Information sheet

Start of Block: Consent form

Consent form

By consenting to take part in this research, you agree to the following:

I confirm that I have read and understood the information provided on the previous page, and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary.

I understand that research data collected during this study will be shared with designated individuals from the University of Oxford.

I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethical clearance through, the University of Oxford Central Research Committee.

I understand who will have access to the personal data provided, how the data will be stored, and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

I understand that this research will be written up and published.

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

Do you consent to take part in this research?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Skip To: End of Survey If By consenting to take part in this research, you agree to the following: I confirm that I have r... = No

End of Block: Consent form

Start of Block: Prolific

Please enter your Prolific ID:

_____

End of Block: Prolific

Start of Block: Garden

Please carefully read the following text, in bold. When you have finished reading the text, please click the button to confirm this.

Education is a garden involving many gardeners: parents, teachers and others. As well as developing knowledge, education also aims to cultivate

children's character and resilience, so they can flourish in a rapidly changing world. In Greenville, however, there is cause for concern. In 2010 the city was thriving, but after a decade of cuts its schools are wilting and its youth have become disenchanted. The number of pupils being excluded from school has increased by 71% in the past seven years, whilst 1 in 5 struggle with their mental health. Greenville's policymakers are concerned that unless they act soon, it may be too late to recover children's moral and emotional development.

○ I have read this text

End of Block: Garden

Start of Block: Business

Please carefully read the following text, in bold. When you have finished reading the text, please click the button to confirm this.

Education is a business involving many stakeholders: parents, teachers and others. As well as developing knowledge, education also aims to build children's character and resilience, so they can compete in a rapidly changing world. In Greenville, however, there is cause for concern. In 2010 the city was thriving, but after a decade of cuts its schools are failing and its youth have become disengaged. The number of pupils being excluded from school has increased by 71% in the past seven years, whilst 1 in 5 struggle with their mental health. Greenville's policymakers are concerned that unless they act soon, it may be too late to recover children's moral and emotional development.

○ I have read this text

End of Block: Business

Start of Block: Questions

Q1. Policymakers know they must respond to the problem in the city's schools, but they don't know which policies to change or how much to change them. In your opinion, what would be most helpful to address the problem, as described on the previous page?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Page Break

Q2. The report about children's education, which you read before offering your opinion, began:

'Education is a……**'**

From memory, please fill in the missing word. Write your response in the box below. Please do not attempt to click 'back' in your browser, as this will invalidate the survey.

_____

End of Block: Questions

Start of Block: Demographic questionnaire

Thank you. You will now be asked five questions about your background.

Q1. How old are you?

- ○ 18-24
- ○ 25-34
- ○ 35-44
- ○ 45-54
- ○ 55-64
- ○ 65+
- ○ Prefer not to say

Q2. Which gender do you identify as?

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Other (please specify) _____
- ○ Prefer not to say

Q3. Which of the following best describes your race or ethnicity?

- ○ White
- ○ Black/Black British
- ○ Asian/Asian British
- ○ Mixed
- ○ Other (please specify) _____
- ○ Prefer not to say

Q4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ○ Primary school
- ○ Secondary school up to 16 years
- ○ Higher education (A-levels, BTEC, etc.)
- ○ College or university
- ○ Post-graduate degree
- ○ Prefer not to say

Q5. How would you describe your political views?

- ○ Left
- ○ Centre left
- ○ Centre
- ○ Centre right
- ○ Right
- ○ I don't have political views

End of Block: Demographic questionnaire

Start of Block: Random ID

Thank you for taking part in this study. Please click the button below to be redirected back to Prolific.

End of Block: Random ID