

# Coordinating character and curriculum for learning and development

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Character and curriculum for learning

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Received 28 November 2019  
Revised 1 January 2020  
10 January 2020  
Accepted 10 January 2020

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper considers how online character education applications can be applied by educational practitioners within the school environment to meet curriculum requirements and increase the learning opportunities for citizenship education.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The Draft Curriculum for Wales 2022 is used as an example of how this can be achieved through innovative applications that are linked to the areas of personal development within the Margerison C-Model.

**Findings** – The five aspects of the framework focus on how practical applications can be used by teachers to enable individual development of character strengths. In particular, reference is made on how technology plays an increasing role in enabling both students and teachers to access learning opportunities.

**Practical implications** – The paper suggests practical applications to enable the integration of technology into personal and social learning.

**Social implications** – This aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, (SDG4), which highlights social-emotional development and learning as a specific area of educational importance.

**Originality/value** – The paper indicates ways to enhance identity and life-long learning.

**Keywords** Character development, Citizenship education, Practical applications, Competencies

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (SDG4) highlights social-emotional development and learning as a specific area of educational importance. SDG4 targets and indicators ‘promote sustainable development [ . . . ] through [ . . . ] promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development’. The United Nations suggests that this can be achieved through ‘global citizenship education’ (United Nations, 2019a). One barrier to delivering personal and social education is how to translate policy documents into practical applications. The problem is invariably how you make sense of the general principles in specific situations. This is particularly so when teachers have to convert curriculum guidelines into classroom lessons that enable students to meet not only the educational standards required but also to develop their personal and social skills. As a case example, Welsh schools must over the next few years adapt to a new curriculum, while incorporating practical applications.

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The authors would like to thank Frances Corcoran and Selena Whitehead, Amazing People Schools.



Journal of Work-Applied  
Management  
Vol. 12 No. 1, 2020  
pp. 97-104

Emerald Publishing Limited  
2205-2062

DOI 10.1108/JWAM-11-2019-0034

The SDG4 progress summary considers the increasing role of technology in educational settings and states that ‘the learning environment, the capacities of teachers and the quality of education have not kept pace’ (United Nations, 2019b). Research by Robertson-Kraft and Austin (2015), relating to the delivery of personal and social development, found that a low percentage of teachers delivered learning through practical applications. The Welsh government’s document, Education in Wales: Our National Mission Action Plan, 2017–2021 indicates that action is the key to raising standards. One area that teachers are asked to deliver is personal and social development. The document asks practitioners to determine how ‘we will support all of our young people to make the most of their potential, [ . . . ] build ambition and encourage learning for life, and equip our children and young people with the right skills for a changing world’ (Welsh Government, 2017, p. 2). As a starting point, practitioners will look at the New Draft Curriculum for Wales 2022 for ways that will help achieve an awareness of personal characteristics, encouraging a positive attitude to learning, citizenship and participation. The objective is to enable students to become the following:

- (1) Healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.
- (2) Ambitious, capable learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives.
- (3) Enterprising, creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work.
- (4) Ethical, informed citizens who are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world. (Welsh Government, 2019a).

These overarching aims consider the individual student and how they can develop the skills and attributes needed to succeed in a fast-changing world. It is also noted that the United Nations SDG4 policy document stresses the need for the development of similar factors on an international basis. In addition to the four purposes, there are six major elements which have been identified as areas of learning and experience (AoLE)—

- (1) Expressive arts
- (2) Humanities
- (3) Languages, literacy and communication
- (4) Mathematics and numeracy
- (5) Science and technology
- (6) Health and well-being

### **The role of educators**

It is the role of the teacher, as a facilitator, to plan and deliver the sessions that will enable the students to access personal and social development opportunities to meet the objectives within these learning experiences. Revans (2011) highlights the importance of learning from lived experiences and indicates that action is required to enable continual learning. In this context, the teacher is the manager of learning opportunities. Revans stressed that managers ‘learn as they manage, and they manage because they have learned – and go on learning’ (Revans, 2011, p. 64). Action learning from new applications and opportunities within educational environments will positively influence and inform the delivery and effectiveness of future sessions. Action learning opportunities can be used by both the teacher/manager and the student through personal and social development, and in particular, character education.

**Character education**

Understanding one’s own character and how to use character strengths is the foundation of learning, and practical character education opportunities are a key way in enabling personal and social development. Practical applications can be used to form a link with the SDGs by enabling students to learn how they will shape their own lives. Character and citizenship development can be approached through, for example, the growing educational narrative surrounding the ‘Sustainable Planet’. As a model framework (Figure 1), the following practical approaches encompass the aspects of learning and experience in the policy documents relating to character development and global citizenship.

*Character development*

This focuses on opportunities for students to become more confident, creative and communicative; able to deal with the ups and downs of life through their proactive problem solving and resilience, to enable active citizenship.

*Culture*

This refers specifically to an understanding of culture and community, on both a national level and in relation to local infinities and associations. Cultural learning provides the opportunity for individuals to consider their own identity and culture in relation to others within a widening, global community and learn from the similarities and differences.

*Citizenship*

Education in this area helps students to understand key issues, such as democracy, justice, participation and the willingness to take on roles and responsibilities. This prepares students



Figure 1.  
The Margerison  
C-Model

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for participation in life-long learning and opportunities within their communities. Citizenship and cultural understanding are key focuses of SDG4.

### *Competencies*

These refer to the academic and personal skills which students will need to succeed, not only in school but in life. These can be learnt through experiences and developed by action learning and reflection.

### *Communication*

The extent to which people succeed depends on their ability to communicate in various forms: reading, writing, speaking and through multi-media. This is particularly important in terms of helping the students develop their self-identity and roles in life, enhancing their ability to contribute in teams, in school, at home and eventually in the work they do.

### **Inspiring students**

We have researched the links between the new curriculum for Wales and the lives of amazing people who have proved through their achievements that they succeeded in the above factors and contributed as global citizens. They did so in different ways. For example, Dr Marie Curie developed her character to become a researcher and doctor; Beethoven developed his creativity and competencies to become a musician of outstanding ability; Michelangelo came from humble beginnings to develop his skills and is now regarded worldwide for his contribution to art and culture.

It is important that students learn with and from the best. This is the focus of the Amazing People Schools project. It shows how students become aware of their own ability to contribute once they are able to learn from the lives of outstanding individuals who have developed their character to communicate and inspire other people through their achievements.

### **Case examples**

Through their work with teachers, the Amazing People Schools' project has seen how the above approach has been integrated into school activities, such as assemblies, tutor time and lessons. They have also recorded a number of interviews with students. These indicate that the students identify with the challenges faced by people such as Einstein, Marie Curie, Helen Keller and Shakespeare. The evidence indicates that students were inspired by realising that the people who made major contributions in science, medicine and the arts developed their abilities through hard work, persistence and determination. As a result they realised that character development is at the centre of personal development and achievement.

The approach that the Amazing People Schools project has used is now being extended to help students with an action learning approach to character development. The Amazing People Schools project also encourages students to write their own stories. They can go into their own communities and explore who has made contributions or research someone they admire. In the 'How to Write an Amazing Person Story' resource, students can access a step-by-step guide to write a story about someone they find inspiring. The teacher's toolkit also provides many different activities such as interviews which help students learn about character.

### **Curriculum and amazing people schools**

All of the resources support the purpose of study for the areas of learning and experience within the curriculum by providing opportunities to discover how to become ambitious, capable, life-long learners. Sustainable learning and development is at the centre of the

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resources. By focusing on character development they support the key role schools play in ensuring the future progression and the success of its students.

Amazing people stories reflect real lives and real-world experiences. Through learning about amazing people in history and spending time thinking about the characteristics that helped them succeed students can develop a sense of who they want to be. This prepares students for the future and helps them achieve their potential as active, life-long learners and valued members of society.

### **Practical applications**

Amazing People Schools activities encourage and support the development of character strengths through the life stories. Researching and writing about amazing achievers encourages empathy and understanding of the challenges and difficulties these people needed to overcome. This facilitates the exploration of self and supports the students as they develop an understanding of their cultural heritage and their own character strengths, values and beliefs and how these can be applied in everyday life. Amazing People Schools activities are differentiated and diverse. For example, role-playing, interviewing, and hot seating all encourage students to develop their collaborative and language skills while also building an understanding of how exemplars approached challenges. These transferable skills enable learners to explore historical and contemporary issues in different contexts and consider how they may approach a similar situation to ensure an effective and responsible outcome.

### *Character development*

Through the Amazing People Schools project, students have the opportunity to learn about how people from diverse backgrounds have achieved and understand that every human has the opportunity to be respected for his/her contribution to society. Through an understanding of character strengths, students can apply this to their role as a global citizen. By encouraging students to practice kindness, humility, integrity and initiative, these strengths can be put to good use to help meet the SDG4 target. Amazing People Schools is a resource that can support students to develop an idea of their own beliefs and values in relation to ethical considerations that could impact on their own practice.

The science and technology area of learning and experience encourages students to develop the ability to meaningfully ask the question, 'Just because we can, does that mean we should?' (Welsh Government, 2019b, p. 3). This question can be explored through the Amazing people stories. Students are encouraged to question the social and moral impact of scientific and technological advancements. The life stories highlight the implications of decisions and encourage the students to evaluate and consider their own moral viewpoints and beliefs in relation to their own opportunities.

### *Culture*

The expressive arts area of learning and experience encourages understanding of identities, cultures and values. The Amazing people stories enable exploration of these areas by highlighting how amazing achievers such as Helen Keller and Dr Elizabeth Blackwell stood by their beliefs and values whilst overcoming circumstances and societal restrictions. This shows how cultural factors influence identity and personal development and impacts on the personal aims and ambitions of an individual within a progressive society.

### *Citizenship*

The humanities area of learning and experience what matters statement links character and self-awareness with the ability to act in an informed, ethical and sustainable way:

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Informed, self-aware citizens engage with the challenges and opportunities that face humanity, and are able to take considered, ethical and sustainable action. (Welsh Government, 2019c, p. 70).

The life story resources serve a variety of purposes, from showing how individuals have contributed to providing exemplars to students.

Through the Amazing People Schools' activities, students can explore their own ideas, beliefs and arguments in relation to societal progress. This helps students to develop an awareness of self in an ever-changing world. By providing differentiated activities, students of all abilities are encouraged to think critically about challenges in life and consider and discuss how decisions can have an impact on the future. Stories of amazing exemplars, such as Albert Einstein and Dr Marie Curie, provide examples of the characteristics needed to become an effective citizen who is able to make a positive, ethical contribution to society.

### *Communication*

In the languages, literacy and communication area of learning and experience students are encouraged to 'explore and articulate factors that influence social and cultural values' (Welsh Government, 2019d, p.15). The Amazing People Schools project encourages students to do this through a range of practical activities. These range from reading non-fiction stories of amazing people from different periods and cultures, answering quiz questions and thinking about the characteristics these inspirational individuals possessed that helped them overcome barriers in society. This gives students the opportunity for self-expression and encourages development of their oracy skills through debates and discussions.

### *Competencies*

The opportunity to develop competencies enables students to fulfill their achievements and goals, as highlighted in the expressive arts area of learning and experience. This area of learning will do the following:

foster creativity and critical thinking skills which will aid learners' capacity to question, make connections, innovate, solve problems, communicate, collaborate and reflect critically. These are higher-order skills in demand by employers and essential for learners to become active twenty-first century citizens. (Welsh Government, 2019e, p. 3).

Interacting with the stories of amazing achievers develops critical thinking skills, encouraging students to reflect on the decisions made by the amazing person and make connections to their own lives. Critical thinking encourages innovation, enabling students to develop their ideas and sustain interest in their learning. Students can learn from the many creative, enterprising innovators and problem solvers, who had to communicate and collaborate to make their ideas a reality. For example, Shakespeare, Frida Kahlo and Leonardo da Vinci displayed these characteristics by developing innovative ideas. The teaching resources ask students to critically engage with the lives of the amazing people and make connections between character and achievement. Students discuss and debate different aspects of character, and by focusing on positive characteristics, such as curiosity, resilience and perseverance, they can develop the attitude and approach needed to succeed in all areas of learning and transfer these skills into further study, the workplace and their communities.

For the purposes of application in Welsh schools, the Amazing People Schools team is developing a number of applications relating to the life stories of those who were born in Wales and made amazing contributions; these include Elizabeth Andrews and Aneurin Bevan. These are examples of people who used their time to develop contributions that have enhanced Welsh identity. We are encouraging students in Welsh schools to research the lives of people in their communities who may not be as famous. Our aim is to encourage students to

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take pride in finding people who exemplify high levels of achievement from whom they can learn. That is the essence of action learning.

### Summary

Fostering a positive attitude to character development through action learning and participation is a key element of Amazing People Schools, the SDG4 and the New Draft Curriculum for Wales 2022. This can be achieved through the teacher, as a manager and facilitator, using online applications that focus on a student's understanding of character strengths, and enabling a sustained interest in development and progression. Practical applications enable further advancement and flexibility for teachers whilst encouraging learners to develop their active citizenship. Both the curriculum and Amazing People Schools resources provide these opportunities and nurture this positive attitude to continuing development through the utilisation of personal strengths and characteristics to encourage confident, ethically informed future global citizens.

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**Further reading**

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