THE ROLE OF CHARACTER EDUCATION: EXPLORING HOW 7–8-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN ENGAGE WITH VIRTUES IN TWO PRIMARY SCHOOL CONTEXTS

by

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This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Jermaine Browne & two children, Maali, and Maliya who inspire me everyday to dream big and achieve my goals.

Abstract

A lack of consensus about what exactly is meant by 'character' and what 'virtues' should be taught has deterred the success of character education being implemented effectively in pluralistic and multicultural societies. Similarly, the weight of bureaucratic and curricular burdens – along with a strict educational focus on academic attainment, performance, and qualifications – often makes it difficult for schools to make space in the timetable and provide opportunities for children to cultivate a sense of moral direction. In this thesis, I explore the extent to which virtue literacy – specifically focusing on six moral virtues (honesty, kindness, gratitude, humility, loyalty, and courage) – can be taught. In particular, the empirical component of this research project focusses on two contrasting primary schools in Birmingham, England: a virtue-focused school that has an established virtue ethos and another primary school that does not. This study adopts a qualitative approach using rich, descriptive methods to explore how children understand, perceive, conceptualise, reason about, and reflect on moral virtues. By designing and implementing an explicit and structured virtue-focused intervention, the study responds to a gap within the character education research: the use of age-appropriate approaches that align with children's developmental needs. In this way, the study attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice by exploring new pedagogical methods that support children's understanding and application of virtues in ways that are both meaningful and accessible. Although the findings emphasise the importance of explicitly teaching moral education to help children cognitively develop certain virtues, the findings also point to the pedagogical pitfalls inherent in developing children's understanding of more abstract virtues.

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Table of Contents

Abstract ..... *iii*
Table of Contents ..... *v*
Chapter 1: Introduction *1*
1.1 Background Context **1**
1.2 Originality **5**
1.3 Research Questions **7**
1.4 Research Aims **7**
1.5 Thesis Overview **8**
Chapter 2: Background Literature *9*
2.1 Introduction **9**
2.2 Moral Theories **10**
2.2.1 Deontology 10
2.2.2 Utilitarianism 12
2.3 Introduction to Virtue Ethics **14**
2.3.1 The Nature of Virtue 18
2.3.2 Virtue Ethics and Character Education 21
2.4 The *Telos* of Character Education – *Eudaimonia* **22**
2.5 Contemporary Character Education in the Context of Virtue Ethics **24**
2.5.1 Neo-Aristotelian Character Education 26
2.5.2 Character Education as a Practical Application of Virtue Ethics 26
2.5.3 Objections to Character Education 30
2.5.4 *Phronesis* in Ethics 34
2.5.5 Defining Pre-*Phronesis*: Understanding its Significance in Moral Development 38
2.5.6 *Phronesis* in Education 42
2.6 Development of Virtues **46**
2.6.1 The Building Blocks of Character: Components of Virtue 47
2.6.2 The Six Moral Virtues 54
2.7 Virtue Literacy **65**
2.7.1 Virtue Knowledge and Understanding 65
2.7.2 Virtue Perception 69
2.7.3 Virtue Reasoning 72
2.7.4 Virtue Reflection 74
2.7.5 Virtue Literacy: A Revised Definition for Primary Education 78
2.8 Pedagogical Approaches to Enhance Character Development in Education **84**
2.8.1 Enhancing Character Education through Inclusive and Multicultural Narratives and Perspectives 85
2.8.2 Socratic Questioning in Character Education 89

2.8.3 Improving Recall and Retention in Character Education 91
2.9 Chapter Summary 95
Chapter 3: Methodology 97
3.1 Introduction 97
3.1.1 Overview of the Research Questions 97
3.2 Phases of Research Study 98
3.3 Positionality Statement 101
3.4 Research Design 102
3.5 Methods Overview 106
3.5.1 Phase 1: Preliminary Lesson 110
3.5.2 Preliminary Lesson Sampling 113
3.6 Phase 2: Main Study 117
3.7 Intervention Design 120
3.7.1 Integrating Virtue Literacy: Intervention Design 123
3.7.2 The 4R Model 125
3.7.3 Socratic Virtue Guide 129
3.7.4 Focus Group Guide 131
3.7.5 Designing the Intervention Schedule 134
3.8 Data Analysis 137
3.8.1 Development and Refinement of the Virtue Literacy Marking Rubric 137
3.8.2 Mind-Maps 140
3.8.3 Focus Groups & Themes 141
3.9 Advantages and Limitations of the Research Design 145
3.10 Ethical Considerations 152
Chapter 4: Findings 154
4.1 Introduction 154
4.2 Stage One: Preliminary Lesson Findings 155
4.2.1 Mind-Maps, Rubric Assessments and Amendments 157
4.2.2 Pre-and Post- Mind-Map: Rubric Assessment 160
4.2.3 Use of Socratic Questioning 165
4.2.4 Narrative Story: Preliminary Lesson – *We're All Wonders* by R. J. Palacio 168
4.2.5 Semi-Structured Focus Group 169
4.2.6 Pedagogical Application of the 4R Model: Read, Review, Reflect, Recall 171
4.2.7 Benefits of the 4R Model Used in the Preliminary Lesson 172
4.2.8 Summary of Preliminary lesson Key Findings & Amendments 173
4.3 Stage Two Findings: Main Study Intervention 176
4.3.1 Overall Virtue Literacy Scores: School A and B (Main Study) 178
4.3.2 Main Study Presentation of Mind-Map Findings 180

4.4 Main Study: Overall Pre- and Post-Intervention Analysis by Virtue – School A (Virtue-Focused) 181
4.4.1 Analysis by Virtue: School A 184
4.5 Main Study: Overall Pre- and Post-Intervention Analysis by Virtue – School B (Non-Virtue-Focused) 205
4.5.1 Analysis by Virtue: School B 207
4.6 The Differences in Children's Conceptualisations of Moral Virtues across Schools A and B 222
4.7 Focus Group Findings 233
4.7.1 Explanation of Transcript Collation 235
4.7.2 School A: Focus Group Findings 236
4.7.3 School B: Focus Group Findings 243
Summary of Focus Group Findings 248
Chapter 5: Discussion* *252
5.1 Introduction 252
5.2 The Role of a Virtue-Focused Intervention on Virtue Literacy 253
5.3 Differences in Virtue Literacy Development Across Two School Settings 269
5.3.1 Differences in Virtue Literacy Development Across School Settings 270
5.3.2 Differences in the Development of Individual Virtues 275
5.4 Exploring the Pedagogical Methods for Enhancing Virtue Literacy 309
5.4.1 The Role of Socratic Questioning in Engaging Children with Virtues 310
5.4.2 The Application of the 4R Model in Promoting Virtue Literacy 312
5.4.3 The Use of Focus Groups as a Pedagogical Tool 317
5.5 Summary of Discussion on Focus Groups 323
5.5.1 Comparison of School A and School B Focus Groups 324
5.6 The Role of Diverse Narrative Stories for Promoting Virtue Literacy 329
5.7 Reflections on Methodology and Summary of Key Conclusions 331
5.8 Areas for Improvement 337
Chapter 6: Conclusions* *339
6.1 Introduction 339
6.2 Limitations and Generalisability 340
6.3 Contributions to Character Education 342
6.4 Recommendations for Future Research 345
REFERENCES* *349
APPENDICES* *369
Appendix 1: Parent Child Consent Form & Information Sheet 369
Appendix 2: Socratic Questioning Guide 372

Appendix 3: Sample Semi-Structured Focus Group Guide.....373
Appendix 4: Link to Narrative Stories.....374
Appendix 5: Preliminary Lesson Slides.....375
Appendix 6: Mind-Maps Collated from Main Study.....379
Appendix 7: Focus Group Transcripts & Coding.....383

List of Tables

Table 1. Comparison of Current Definition Adopted by the Jubilee Centre and Thesis Definition 80

Table 2. Overview of the Research Design 99

Table 3. Breakdown of Methods and Researchers Role.....107

Table 4. School & Number of Participants.....108

Table 5. School Selection and Practices.....109

Table 6. Stage 1 Methodology and Tools 111

Table 7. Overview of Tools Used During and After Intervention.....118

Table 8. The Read-Review-Reflect-Recall (4R) Outline for Teaching Virtue Literacy.....127

Table 9. Socratic Questioning Guide for Children 130

Table 10. Outline of Focus Group Guide Before and After Intervention with Themes.....133

Table 11. Intervention Schedule and Narrative Selection.....135

Table 12. Virtue Literacy Marking Rubric 139

Table 13. Example of Coded Responses 143

Table 14. Scores for Preliminary School on Virtue Compassion 162

Table 15. Overview of Student Engagement During Preliminary Lesson.....166

Table 16. Overview of Strategies and Assessment Approaches 167

Table 17. Preliminary Key Findings and Main Study Amendments 174

Table 18. Overall Virtue Literacy Scores for Schools A and B 179

Table 19. Comparative Analysis of Overall Pre- and Post-Intervention Scores by Virtue (School A) 181

Table 20. Comparative Analysis of Overall Pre- and Post-Intervention Scores by Virtue (School B) 205

Table 21. Summary of Focus Group Themes 234

Table 22. Overview of Potential Advantages and Limitations of the 4R Model.....315

List of Figures

Figure 1. The Building Blocks of Character (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022)..... 47

Figure 2. Components of Virtue (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022) 48

Figure 3. Visualisation of Study Design 105

Figure 4. Outline of Lesson Aims.....124

Figure 5. A Visual 4R Model for Virtue-Based Teaching.....126

Figure 6. The 4R Model as a Framework for Effective Virtue-Based Learning 128

Figure 7. Stages of Thematic Analysis 142

Figure 8. Preliminary Participant No.5's Mind-Map of Compassion Post-Lesson 159

Figure 9. Preliminary Participant No.5's Mind-Map of Compassion Pre-Lesson 159

Figure 10. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Gratitude) – Participant 11* 185

Figure 11. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Gratitude) – Participant 11* 185

Figure 12. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Gratitude) – Participant 9.....187

Figure 13. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Gratitude) – Participant 9 187

Figure 14. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Kindness) – Participant 12 189

Figure 15. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Kindness) – Participant 12 190

Figure 16. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Kindness) – Participant 18 193

Figure 17. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Kindness) – Participant 18 193

Figure 18. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Honesty) – Participant 14 195

Figure 19. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Honesty) – Participant 14 195

Figure 20. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Loyalty) – Participant 17.....197

Figure 21. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Loyalty) – Participant 17 197

Figure 22. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 15 199

Figure 23. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 15 199

Figure 24. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 16 201

Figure 25. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 16 201

Figure 26. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Humility) – Participant 1 203

Figure 27. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Humility) – Participant 1 203

Figure 28. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Gratitude) – Participant 2 208

Figure 29. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Gratitude) – Participant 2 208

Figure 30. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Kindness) – Participant 9 210

Figure 31. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Kindness) – Participant 9 210

Figure 32. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Honesty) – Participant 23 212

Figure 33: Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Honesty) – Participant 23 213

Figure 34. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Loyalty) – Participant 4 214

Figure 35. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Loyalty) – Participant 4 215

Figure 36. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 1 216

Figure 37. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 1 216

Figure 38. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 19 218

Figure 39. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 19 218

Figure 40. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Humility) – Participant 13 220

Figure 41. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Humility) – Participant 13 220

Figure 42. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Humility) – Participant 24 221

Figure 43. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Humility) – Participant 24 222

List of Transcripts

Transcript 1. Understanding of Virtue **237**

Transcript 2. Application of Virtue **239**

Transcript 3. Decision-Making Process **240**

Transcript 4. Challenges in Applying Virtue **242**

Transcript 5. Understanding of Virtue **243**

Transcript 6. Application of Virtue **244**

Transcript 7. Decision-Making Process **245**

Transcript 8. Challenges Applying Virtue **247**

Chapter 1: Introduction

This introductory chapter outlines the research study that forms the foundation of this thesis. It introduces the background context of the research, identifies gaps in the current literature that this original research fills, and then concludes by outlining the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Background Context

The development of virtues and character has become a prominent feature of education around the world, as it is seen as a necessary element of any educational system (Arthur et al., 2016; Curren, 2017; Arthur & Harrison, 2023). In England, the development of virtues has been implemented through various programmes and initiatives to promote character education (CE) in schools (Arthur & Harrison, 2023; Department of Education, 2019). Character education is focused on promoting both intellectual and moral development. Its main aims are to create morally disposed individuals who not only excel academically but also have the dispositions to navigate the challenges of life with ethical sensitivity and while contributing positively to society. Character strengths – widely valued positive traits – are valued because they are seen as fundamental to optimal functioning and wellbeing. They initially emerge from inner dispositions, but they are also heavily influenced by experience and environmental contingencies (Lavy, 2020). They have broad potential to develop in people according to the contexts and situations in which they find themselves. As mentioned by Park and Peterson (2009, p. 65), ‘good character is what parents look for in their children, what teachers look for in their students, what siblings look for in their brothers and sisters, and what friends look for in each other’.

Throughout the educational system, from primary to secondary school and on to further education and higher education, children and young adults are required to develop skills and knowledge to prepare them for their future lives. However, academic education and the focus on qualifications have overshadowed the opportunity to develop students' character traits, with expectations focused on students becoming examination-ready. While skills and knowledge in subject-specific domains are certainly important, they are not sufficient in isolation. A recent exploration of character education opportunities and challenges across Europe highlights the increasing recognition of the need to integrate character development within educational frameworks to better prepare students for the difficulties of modern life, including, but not limited to, technology (e.g., social media and artificial intelligence) and environmental sustainability (Fernandez et al., 2024).

Developing, practising and utilising character strengths leads to increased wellbeing because they are the best manifestations of personal capabilities that are inherent in all people (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2012). This idea has empirical support that shows that children and adults who endorse character strengths and then use them (rather than just having them) experience fewer psychological problems (Gillham et al., 2011; Niemiec, 2013), more hedonic and *eudaimonic* happiness, and higher levels of engagement (Harzer, 2016; Littman-Ovadia & Lavy, 2012; Littman-Ovadia et al., 2017; Park & Peterson, 2006b; Park et al., 2004). In essence, children who develop character strengths are likelier to be successful in their personal and working lives (Park & Seligman, 2006; Tough, 2016; Obeldobel & Kerns, 2021). Taking inspiration from Aristotle and other philosophers, education is a character-building and not just a subject-driven or skills-based activity. It is the process of developing students towards human flourishing via virtuous living. The character-

building aspect of education falls on all members of society – parents, teachers, schools and the local community. This resurgence of interest in virtues and character reflects a wider international interest in support for character education based on a neo-Aristotelian approach (Bernhard et al., 2024).

As a subject specialist and a teacher in secondary schools, I have worked with a range of schools (affluent to disadvantaged areas), where I have observed different approaches to the development of SMCS (spiritual, moral, social and cultural) development. I started to question what was preventing children from developing character when, in 2019, during a personal development lesson with 70 pupils aged 11–18, we explored the virtue of the week: 'compassion'. During the lesson, a significant number of pupils in each age group were unable to articulate their understanding of compassion. As a result, I questioned how successful the school was at developing character virtues despite the fact that it was a school with a character and virtues-led ethos, given there were a number of students who did not understand the concept of specific virtues or how they related to their own lives. This episode inspired me to reflect on when are the most pivotal years for the development of virtue literacy and whether educators should be doing more to teach young children to be virtue-literate before entering higher education, where academic attainment often takes precedence over character development.

Despite much evidence to prove that CE can be effective and is a vital strand of children's development (Johnson et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2023), it is only beginning to receive more attention in England, particularly since the government announced CE as part of the curriculum (Department of Education, 2019). This acknowledgement from the Department of Education (DoE) was based on the premise that character education and the development of

character strengths are an important part of children's wellbeing and success. In addition, moral and civic character are increasingly recognised as being important in sustaining economic growth and democratic societies (Davidson, 2014). However, despite this growing attention, much of the research concentrates on theoretical goals rather than empirically driven pedagogic interventions. In other words, more attention is given to what character education should be (theory) rather than which methods are useful in teaching character (pedagogy). This approach, while theoretically useful, may leave policymakers and schools unprepared to move from theory into application. Bridging the gap between theory and practice is therefore critical and requires tangible, practical tools and strategies for teachers and parents to teach CE, which would then also transform CE into a practical pedagogical endeavour. The present dearth of pedagogical developments in CE means that schools often lack a clear framework for CE to work effectively; this thesis attempts to bridge this gap by developing a more holistic and theoretically sound version of CE that is suited to current educational needs.

The concept of virtue literacy, originally coined by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, attempts to bridge this gap by providing a practical framework to teach the building blocks of virtues to students. In this thesis, I refine and extend the framework to help bridge the theory-to-practice divide with a focus on accurately reflecting the cognitive capabilities of 7–8-year-old children and younger children more generally. The revised definition I propose consists of four interrelated components that can be taught in a structured, sequential manner (although they naturally interlink), facilitating effective delivery (for educators) and age-appropriate learning (for children). They include: 1) virtue knowledge and understanding (recognising and understanding virtues and their practices); 2) virtue perception (noticing the

morally salient features of a situation); 3) virtue reasoning with a focus on the constitutive function (how to best reason around individual virtues); and 4) virtue reflection (the thoughtful consideration of virtues in personal experiences and how they contribute to one's moral identity).This reconceptualisation creates a more robust framework for educators to nurture virtue literacy effectively at an earlier stage in their education, helping to connect the gap between theoretical principles and practical pedagogy.

1.2 Originality

Character education is a burgeoning field in educational research, which includes contributions to developing moral character (Arthur & Harrison, 2023), social-emotional skills (Dodds, 2016), and academic learning (Zulela et al., 2022). Much of this work has been carried out by examining established curricular forms of character education in the US, with growing interest and application in England and Europe over the past decade (Arthur et al., 2016; Fernandez et al., 2024; Kristjánsson et al., 2022). However, a lacuna exists in the research on pedagogical development or, more specifically, the range of virtues emphasised in CE, especially considering the developmental capacities of younger children.

Despite contributions over the years from educationists, philosophers, and psychologists on how to best teach and promote character traits, much of the research focuses on children over the age of nine, with little attention paid to the pre-*phronesis* understanding of children aged 7–8. *Phronesis* signifies practical wisdom or practical reasoning in ethics: A person who has *phronesis* is able to make sound moral decisions or act ethically in particular situations. In this way, *phronesis* goes beyond the theoretical understanding of virtue and emphasises the practical implementation of virtuous behaviour. In the context of this thesis, pre-*phronesis*

refers to the period before the development of practical wisdom can occur. In other words, it designates the important phase of moral development when children begin to learn and develop their understanding of virtue language, both conceptually and practically, between the ages of seven and eight. It is in this critical period that the development of moral character in the child's life begins to take shape.

This gap in the literature represents a significant challenge to the effective teaching of virtues in younger children. Having observed the variation in approaches that schools take to support students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, I focused my research on investigating the development of virtue literacy in two primary schools in the UK. One school is a virtue-led school, and the other is not. This contrast compelled me to explore whether the children's conceptualisations of virtue literacy would differ and the potential role of the school in this. The originality of this thesis, then, lies in its approach to character education among 7–8 year-olds from two contrasting schools. Through its purposeful and structured approach, the intervention design utilised a variety of relatable, inclusive and diverse narrative-based stories, qualitative methods and an innovative and original 4R pedagogical model (Read-Review-Reflect-Recall) – all of which were adapted to the learning and cognitive needs of 7–8 year-olds. More critically, the study offers a revised definition of the concept 'virtue literacy' (based on the Jubilee Centre's definition, 2022, p. 10), which has gained attention and use in educational circles. By bringing these components together, this PhD thesis establishes and offers original insights for effectively developing character in children and the field of character education more broadly, while also suggesting areas for improvement and future research.

1.3 Research Questions

This research aims to address three research questions:

RQ1: What role does an explicit virtue-focused intervention have in supporting the development of virtue literacy among 7–8-year-old children?

RQ2: How do children's conceptualisations of moral virtues differ between two different school contexts, one with a virtue-focused ethos and one without?

RQ3: To what extent do different pedagogical methods enhance children's development of virtue literacy?

1.4 Research Aims

To answer the research questions, five overarching aims are explored within this research that are deemed to be the most important:

1. ***To better understand how diverse narrative stories and qualitative approaches can shed light on how young children develop virtue literacy.***
2. ***To understand which virtues children are more susceptible to learning explicitly, and which virtues children find more challenging to grasp.***
3. ***To examine whether an innovative 4R pedagogical model (Read, Reflect, Review, Recall) is effective in teaching the virtues.***
4. ***To develop and refine the current definition of virtue literacy proposed by the Jubilee Centre, which is reflective of the cognitive abilities of 7–8 year-olds.***
5. ***To evaluate the differences in virtue literacy development between children at a virtue-focused school and a non-virtue-focused school.***

The proposed research questions and aims can inform broader ways that character education can and should foster children's moral development, as well as providing useful pedagogical insight into how and why to teach CE more effectively. Overall, this study will contribute to

the growing body of character education research in the UK, while hopefully advancing insights into best pedagogical practices for teaching CE to children. Its findings will be of interest to educators and policymakers, but they may also lay the foundations for important future research on the moral development of young children, particularly during the pre-*phronesis* stage.

1.5 Thesis Overview

The thesis is organised into six chapters. In Chapter 1, I introduce the research problem, the research questions, and the contribution that this study makes to the field of character education. In Chapter 2, I provide a literature review on key concepts and theories related to character education, virtue literacy and moral development, together with an overview of previous research on character education in the UK. In Chapter 3, I outline a detailed description of the research methodology used in my research, including the sample, data collection method and data analysis procedures. In Chapter 4, I present and explore the findings regarding the ways in which the intervention helped the 7–8 year-old children develop virtue literacy. This exploration further includes the contribution of explicit virtue teaching to the knowledge and understanding of virtue terms, and different patterns that emerged among children across two different primary school settings. In Chapter 5, I evaluate and discuss how my findings align with, differ from, and add to existing research in the field of character education and moral virtues more specifically. Lastly, in Chapter 6, I conclude with the limitations of the study, the contributions made to the field of character education, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Background Literature

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the relevant literature as background for the subsequent discussion of how a virtue literacy intervention may stimulate the development of character in children aged 7–8. I begin by reviewing the three dominant normative moral theories: deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics (VE). I then focus in more detail on Aristotelian virtue ethics to justify the theoretical framework used in this thesis. Additionally, I respond to some critiques of virtue ethics and defend the use of a neo-Aristotelian approach to education. The final section discusses the contemporary understanding of 'character'*, 'arete', 'phronesis'* and *'eudamonia'* and explores their significance in character education.

The final part of the chapter focuses on psychological research that underpins the development of character traits – starting from childhood – to shed light on why a revised definition of virtue literacy is needed for the age group in question. I regard this change not only as an important consideration for the empirical part of the study, but as a fundamental aspect to situate the study and its findings within the academic and pedagogical context of character education more broadly. Accordingly, I present a revised definition of virtue literacy that takes into account the developmental stage concerned – that of 7- to 8-year-olds. This revised definition is based on feedback received from experts in the field of character education, as well as a review of the corresponding literature and research in educational, philosophical, and psychological sciences. By adopting this revision for this study, I strive

not only to provide a more accurate account of the development of virtue literacy in 7- to 8-year-olds, but also to contribute to the development of the broader field of CE.

2.2 Moral Theories

The question of how to best lead an ethical life and how morality is defined has played a central role in philosophical thought. Over the course of history, philosophers have formulated theories about how people can make the right decision or enact the good. Influential philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Mill have sought to define morality, differentiating between 'right' and 'wrong' and 'good' and 'bad' with a view to avoiding moral relativism (Blackburn, 2002). As such, a range of moral theories have been established, such as relativism, divine command theory and egoism. However, the two theories that will be briefly critically examined here are utilitarianism and deontology, before shifting attention to the revival of virtue ethics. Deontology and utilitarianism are two of the most prominent normative theories because they both allow for moral judgments to be made, while presuming moral realism and thus aiming to arrive at objective, universal conclusions. This approach is implicitly against moral relativism and seeks to determine what is objectively right and wrong, good and bad.

2.2.1 Deontology

Deontologists argue that the morality of an action is determined by the agent's adherence to a set of universal moral principles or duties. Unlike consequentialist theories like utilitarianism, which focus on the outcomes of actions, deontology emphasises the intention behind the action and whether it aligns with these moral rules. The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is closely associated with deontology. According to Kant, we should identify the

maxim or intention behind a particular action. Introduced in Kant's (1785) 'Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals' was the critical formulation of 'categorical imperatives', which is central to evaluating motivations for action. The first principle includes 'universalisability', whereby one should 'act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law' (Johnson & Cureton, 2004, p. 4). In other words, if the act can be universally applied, then the act is deemed good and worthy of becoming a moral law for everyone to follow. The second principle concerns the moral 'autonomy' of an individual and rests on the individual's capacity to govern independently in accordance with rational principles. In Kant's (1785) formulation of his ethical theory, he starts his analysis of ethics with the will: 'It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will' (Kant, 1785: 393; Gregor, 1997). According to Kant (1785), the 'will' is the capacity to act based on principles that one has chosen autonomously, thereby ensuring that actions are morally good only when they arise from a sense of duty dictated by reason.

Similarities can be drawn between Kant's deontological ideas on justice and rationality and Lawrence Kohlberg's development of moral reasoning. Kohlberg's theory of moral cognitive development is one of the most influential theories in Western moral development psychology and has infiltrated educational spheres worldwide. He defined morality as an individual's ability to navigate situations and dilemmas that require an element of moral judgment or choice (Kohlberg, 1973). According to Kohlberg's position on moral development, a person can be considered moral if their choices are guided by universal ethical principles that are internalised and go beyond the specific rules or norms of their society or community. He further attempts to correlate moral education with developmental

stages that illuminate ‘universal patterns or principles of moral thinking that progress through an invariant order’ (p. 8). Kohlberg’s theory suggests that if children are provided with opportunities to practice ‘general skills of rational reasoning, including deductive logic and the ability to distance oneself from what is personal, ego-centred or consensus-based’, moral development will most probably occur (Baek, 1999, p. 20). Critics, however, have pointed out that Kohlberg’s theory fails to observe the role of gender in moral decision-making and overlooks the moral value of what Gilligan calls the ‘ethics of care’ (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988).

Nonetheless, the strengths of deontology include its emphasis on individual rights (e.g., not harming or hurting people), which has led to the development of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). It also places emphasis on individual autonomy (e.g., respecting people’s freedom to make choices about their own lives) and on respect for the inherent value of a human being. The weaknesses of deontology as a moral theory include the possible rigidity of holding to universal moral rules, which may mean that it is not always adequate in specific cases (Rachels, 1986). Deontologists can also resort to moral absolutism, where the value of moral rules supersede the action; this can result in a lack of consideration for the consequences of the moral action.

2.2.2 Utilitarianism

Unlike deontology, which focuses on whether an action is inherently right or wrong, utilitarianism argues that the rightness of an action is based on how much happiness it brings to greatest number of people. Classical utilitarian’s Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) associated the morally good action with hedonistic value, claiming

that our actions should bring about 'the greatest amount of good for the greatest number', also known as the principle of utility (Driver, 2009, p. 1). Bentham encouraged a naturalist approach to morality and believed that humans were directed by two sovereign masters – pleasure and pain – both of which 'govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think' (Bentham, 1994, p.1). The theory aligns with philosophical lineages in ancient Greek thinkers such as Epicurus, who advocated for people to attain happiness (*eudaemonia*), by living a life defined by *ataraxia* (peace and freedom from fear), and *aponia* (the absence of pain).

The main advantage of utilitarianism is its emphasis on determining the actual outcomes of actions to improve wellbeing, rather than relying on abstract principles found in deontology. This emphasis on tangible results makes it a practical approach to ethics, aiming to maximise happiness and minimise suffering in real-world scenarios. For example, a government could implement a vaccination programme to promote the greater good despite possible side effects to others, justifying the programme on the basis that the total good to society is greater than any possible harm. Nevertheless, Bentham's utilitarianism theory has faced several objections (see Smart & Williams, 1973; Scheffler, 1982; Slote, 1984). In response to some of the criticisms, Mill argued in his paper 'On Liberty' for the importance of individuality, where he advocated for people to enjoy personal freedom as long as others are not harmed. However, the most prominent criticisms are the difficulty in predicting outcomes, and therefore difficult to calculate. Take, for example, a situation where a policy is intended to increase overall happiness, such as implementing a new tax to fund public services; it can be difficult to predict the long-term economic and social effects on different groups, making it challenging to determine whether the policy will truly maximise overall happiness.

Deontology is often criticised for being overly rigid when it comes to rule-following without regard for consequences (in some cases, abiding by a rule may result in morally problematic outcomes). Deontology also struggles with the problem of conflicting duties when it comes to what one should or should not do or say. Finally, utilitarianism is often criticised because outcomes are inherently unpredictable, which renders moral calculations highly unreliable. In some cases, utilitarianism may support the case for doing evil if it leads to greater happiness for the many. This brings us back to the important role of VE in terms of how it emphasises the cultivation of character and practical wisdom so that moral decisions can become more nuanced.

2.3 Introduction to Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics (VE) is a branch of moral philosophy concerned with the nature of moral excellence. Developed from ancient Greek philosophy, most notably from Aristotle, VE consists of the belief that moral philosophy is not about the rules and obligations of actions, nor is it about the consequences of actions. Instead, it argues that a good or moral life is achieved through the cultivation and appropriate placement of certain virtues – character traits – as a matter of achieving the good life. In contrast to the moral theories that focus on duties (deontology) or consequences (consequentialism), VE emphasises the virtues or moral character of the agent.

While the founding fathers of virtue ethics are Plato[1] and Aristotle,[2] its principles are mostly located in Aristotle's philosophical works. Although Aristotle followed Socrates and Plato's belief that virtues are central to a well-lived life, he rejected Plato's idea that to be completely virtuous, one must be trained in subjects (maths, science, etc.); only then will one know what goodness is. What Aristotle believed was holistic in nature, that is, in order to live well, one must understand how the different goods (friendships, wealth, health) fit together as a whole. Central to this is the idea of *eudaimonia* (flourishing), which Aristotle viewed as the ultimate aim of human life. One can only thrive and reach full potential by cultivating the moral and intellectual virtues as well as the emotional components that make up a cohesive whole. In this way, the objective of developing well-rounded and thriving people, from an early age, aligns with flourishing serving as the cornerstone of character education. Although Aristotle considered some goods (such as wealth and health) to be a matter of luck, he believed that other goods (such as moral virtues) could be cultivated. To achieve this, acts of virtue must be habitual through upbringing, where one can practice the best course of action (Kraut, 2001). Arguably, and pertinent to the present thesis, educating the moral virtues from a younger age can 'enable a person to act in accordance with sound judgment and fosters the desire to know what is good' in later life (Bohlin, 2005, p. 181).

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[1] Plato an influential philosopher from Athens during Ancient Greece's classical era, is recognised as a central figure in both the history of Ancient Greece and the development of Western philosophy.

[2] Aristotle was also a Greek Philosopher, born in the city of Stagira. He was Plato's student and over his lifetime covered many subjects, such as physics, linguistics, and psychology to name a few, all of which continue to be influential today.

Modern virtue ethics is inspired by Aristotelian conceptions of virtue and character, which mainly consist of three ideas that are derived therefrom. These concepts are discussed in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he describes three main concepts: *arete* (excellence of virtue), *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *eudaimonia* (happiness or flourishing). In the succeeding sections, I attempt to elaborate these concepts individually, in further depth and in relation to one another before considering how they transmit to character education. Although these concepts seem fairly straightforward, the goal is to illuminate for non-neo-Aristotelian readers the core assumptions of the philosophical approach and strategies implemented in this thesis. Building on this foundation, this thesis adapts these core Aristotelian concepts to the developmental needs of 7–8-year-old children, demonstrating how *arete*, *phronesis*, and *eudaimonia* can be practically applied to help promote the moral development of children whilst considering the accessibility for educators. This thesis, for example, examines the practical features of pre-*phronesis*, recognising that, although it is not its primary focus, it is a crucial developmental precursor to *phronesis*. Fundamental abilities including identifying moral salience, practicing early ethical reasoning and reflecting on one's own actions, are all part of pre-*phronesis* skills. These abilities are essential for younger children because they serve as a foundation for the more complex moral thinking needed for *phronesis*.

Rooted in the philosophical foundation of Aristotelian ethics, this thesis establishes the suitability of VE as the moral framework for this study due to its alignment with the developmental stage of 7–8-year-old children at the centre of this study and its pedagogical focus on supporting the teaching of moral character through education. While deontological and utilitarian theories emphasise rules and consequences, VE places the moral agent and

their character at the heart of its moral framework, emphasising the nurturing of virtues as character traits that are gradually developed through practice, reflection and engagement with moral exemplars. This developmental emphasis, then, is especially significant for younger children who are in a critical period for forming the foundational knowledge, habits and reasoning skills that will guide their moral behaviour throughout life. Recent scholarship reinforces the relevance of VE for younger children, arguing that virtues are best inculcated early in life when children's cognitive and emotional capacities are still in their formative stage, which allows them to internalise virtuous habits before they get rigidly tied to external motivations or societal pressures (Carr, 2021; Kristjánsson, 2022).

In addition, the focus on *phronesis* in VE is also especially relevant to this thesis since it explores how introducing pre-*phronesis*-related skills through discussions and guided questions that are age-appropriate may be able to assist children in making the connection between the virtue they are learning in the classroom and the difficulties they face on a daily basis. Such skills not only aid the development of forming virtuous habits but also encourage the children to apply such learning proactively in real-world situations with others, promoting a longer-term capacity for moral reflection and decision-making - in a way that is appropriate for their developmental and cognitive stage.

Lastly, VE's focus on *eudaimonia* (flourishing) resonates with the goals of character education, which seeks to promote children's overall well-being alongside their intellectual and moral growth. This holistic perspective aligns with findings by Lavy (2020) and Carr (2021), who emphasise that character strengths are not only essential for personal well-being but also for developing pro-social behaviours that contribute to societal harmony. By situating children's moral development within the broader aim of flourishing, VE provides a

framework that is both aspirational and pragmatic, bridging the gap between theoretical ideals and practical pedagogical strategies.

In summary, VE strongly aligns with the goals of character education by emphasising *eudaimonia* (flourishing) as its ultimate aim and *phronesis* (practical wisdom) as a guiding principle for moral reasoning. This means that developing virtue related habits and literacy in childhood can ensure that moral development becomes a part of their education - helping them learn the moral knowledge required to understand personal flourishing. The aforementioned reasons I have alluded to in this section make virtue ethics relevant, if not essential, for this present study which aims to explore how a virtue-focused intervention can help children develop virtue literacy.

2.3.1 The Nature of Virtue

The essence of virtue or *arete*[3] refers to 'acts of excellence or virtue', often the key to Aristotle's understanding of a *eudaimonic* life. A person of *arete* is one of the highest moral effectiveness and is in possession of all the virtues. Aristotle emphasised that virtue by nature is habitual; it can be acquired through experience and learned through practice. According to his view, each soul comprises three things: passions, faculties, and state of character. Aristotle describes this triumvirate as follows:

> We must consider what virtue is. Since things found in the soul are three kinds – passions, faculties, states of character – virtue must be one of these. By passions I

[3] *Arete* is a concept in ancient Greek that refers to excellence of any kind, particularly when a person fulfils their potential or inherent function. The term may also refer to excellence in terms of moral virtue.

> mean appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, friendly feeling, hatred, longing, emulation, pity and in general the feelings that are accompanied by pleasure or pain; by faculties the things in virtue of which we are said to be capable of feeling these, e.g., of becoming angry or being pained or feeling pity; by states of character the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly if we feel it violently or too weakly, and well if we feel it moderately.
>
> (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E, p. 245)

Here, Aristotle rejects the notion that virtues are passions or faculties and posits that the determining factor as to whether people are good or bad boils down to their virtues and vices (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). Furthermore, Aristotle argued that virtue is a state of character and explained the intricate details of this state. Similar to how excess food and drink can be unhealthy, so can too little. He alludes to both excess and deficiency of appetite, passion or desire as morally detrimental, and how virtue is found somewhere in the middle. This highly important concept is described as 'the doctrine of the mean'. The idea here (and that which is central to the doctrine) is that 'virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate' (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E., p. 245):

> It is possible, for example, to feel fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and pleasure and pain generally, too much or too little; and both of them are wrong. But to have these feelings at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way is to feel them to an intermediate, there is to the best, degree; and this is the mark of virtue.
>
> (Aristotle, 1976, p. 101)

Aristotle does not ignore vices (that is, excesses or deficiencies); rather, he describes that where the mean is found is situation-dependent. He gives the example of the virtue of courage, whereby 'a man becomes a coward if he cannot stand his ground when necessary but can also become a fool' if he marches up to danger imprudently (Küçükuysal & Beyhan,

2011). For instance, a person may exercise courage by confronting a dangerous situation, but if they do so without considering the actual threat or consequences, their action could easily turn into recklessness rather than genuine courage. For this reason, it can be difficult to consistently exhibit virtues that achieve the ideal balance. Hence, as Robinson (1995, p. 64) argues, Aristotle refrains from setting out particular rules for one to become virtuous, as 'rules look too absolute, too exceptionless'.

In *Nicomachaen Ethics*, the descriptions of virtues of character are states that include choice and perception, encompassing practical wisdom (David, 2021). From here, the taxonomy of virtue is split into two parts: character (*ēthikēs*) and intellect (*dianoētikēs*). Aristotle concludes that virtue 'is a character state concerned with choice, lying in the mean relative to us, being determined by reason and the way the person of practical wisdom would determine it' (Aristotle, 2009, NE1107a1). This interpretation clarifies that it is 'not possible to be fully good without having practical wisdom nor is one able to be practically wise without having excellence of character' (Aristotle, 2009, NE1144b31, p. 2).

Aristotle distinguishes between two types of virtues essential for human flourishing: intellectual (related to thinking) and moral (related to actions; NE 1103a5). However, these principles also play a larger, political role when he extends them to civic virtues (i.e., forms of good character that we must have in our political lives for us to get along with one another), such as courage, justice and honesty. These sorts of civic virtues are often seen as tied to the public sphere in ways that the development of character often is not. However, it would be a mistake to think that Aristotle invented civic virtues solely for his political ethics: he sees them as a natural progression from the structure of his virtue ethics more generally. Virtues grow stronger through feelings and actions that support them, and they weaken when

faced with conflicting feelings and actions (Annas, 2011). For example, the virtue of kindness grows through acts of generosity but is weakened by acts of cruelty.

Both emotional habits and action habits are essential for developing virtues, indicating that there may be a behavioural aspect to emotions (Sanderse, 2012). For instance, when confronted with a fearful situation, the courageous person does not act by repressing or disregarding their fear; they respond in ways that are consistent with the virtue of courage – for instance, by proceeding with a course of action despite their fears, or by acting wisely in a dangerous situation. This means that if a person consistently acts, thinks, and feels in a certain way, this behaviour can turn into a habit. In this way, Aristotle claims that 'one swallow does not make a summer' (Aristotle, 2009, 1098a15, p. 23) – means that one isolated act is not enough to make a virtue, however – it has to become habitual, ingrained. When that happens, the virtue becomes fixed and lasting: a pattern of being, a part of the person's character (Annas, 2011, p. 9). A virtue, then, is a dependable habit or traits: if someone has developed the virtue of honesty, it means they can consistently be trusted to tell the truth. The person also strives to associate with honest people, to encourage honesty in their children, and to react negatively to dishonesty in all its forms. In this way, honesty is reflected in their entire outlook on life.

2.3.2 Virtue Ethics and Character Education

Virtue ethics is a normative moral theory that claims that the good life requires some degree of virtue, such as honesty, kindness or fairness, whereas character education is the pedagogical method of teaching children to cultivate these virtues. It has been argued that for character education to have a positive impact on children's lives, it needs to be informed by

virtue ethics, as it needs a philosophical ground from which to develop its interventions (Watts et al., 2022).

Defining Character Education

CE can be broadly understood as the process of cultivating one or more moral qualities or virtues in a person, particularly a child. All schools and other forms of educational provision have an impact, conscious or unconscious, on the qualities and dispositions of children and young people, and the kinds of people they become (Watts et al., 2022). More specifically, character education is the process of cultivating good dispositions, often called character virtues or character strengths. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2022) defines CE as 'all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people to develop positive personal strengths called virtues' (p. 7). This definition highlights that educators must intentionally create the climate and the experiences that will help children understand and develop such desirable virtues. From this view, therefore, the definition also implies something about the mission of education, stipulating that CE is a key component of education and schools, and is thus critically important to the moral development of children.

2.4 The *Telos* of Character Education – *Eudaimonia*

When arguing for the advancement of character education, it is important to establish its underlying *telos*, or purpose – not to instrumentalise it but to conceptualise its aims before making steps to achieve them. This is essential to facilitate the creation of appropriate advancements that are in line with the desired outcome of CE. With the recent resurgence of Aristotelian-inspired virtue ethics in moral philosophy and positive psychology, the idea of *eudaimonia* – often translated as 'happiness' or 'flourishing' – has remerged as a highly

valued ideal of the noble and good life within the educational paradigm (Kristjánsson, 2015). The goal of character education, then, is to develop individuals' character through the habituation of virtue, leading to personal growth and unlocking the good life. This is the final and comprehensive end, achievable through recognising the Aristotelian '*ergon* or function of a human being' (Aristotle, 1999, 1097b24). Aristotle justifies his understanding by declaring that 'for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the well is thought to reside in the function' (Aristotle, 1999, 1097b26, p. 27). Aristotle's function argument proposes that what distinguishes humans from animals is their ability to live rationally, which he ties closely to the function of the soul. The human good is 'the activity of the rational part of the soul performed well' in harmony with virtue (Aristotle, 1999, 1098a15, p. 17). To reason well is to live well and flourish, utilising the rational intellectual virtue – the practical wisdom or *phronesis* with which they are integrated. The question that subsequently occupies modern philosophers is: What does the highest human good or *eudaimonia* consist of? (Aristotle, 1999, 1095a17, p. 22). A consideration of how one can acquire virtue and whether virtue can be taught was central to Aristotle's philosophy. To better understand the nature of *eudaimonia*, understanding the nature of *arete* (virtue) and *phronesis* is fundamental and will be discussed in the succeeding sections.

First, it is impossible to attain a flourishing life without actualising moral virtues, that is, by doing morally good actions (Kristjánsson, 2015). Being virtuous involves more than merely displaying the appropriate behaviours. The agent 'must also be in the right state when he does them' (Aristotle, 1999, 1105a, p. 22) and, to be in the right state, the individual must understand the virtuous nature of the action. In addition to exhibiting the correct behaviour, one must be able to incorporate reasoning and sound judgment in order to make virtuous

decisions. This highlights the fact that virtuousness encompasses more than just being prosocial, as the latter primarily focuses on actions and behaviour. In other words, being virtuous goes beyond simply exhibiting desirable behaviours and extends to encompass the thought processes and decision-making skills involved in ethical decision-making. On the other hand, some philosophers argue that Aristotle's distinction between feelings and capacities oversimplifies the complex nature of emotions. They argue that emotions are not simply feelings or capacities, but a combination of both, and that this complexity is not accounted for in Aristotle's framework (Annas, 1993; Nussbaum, 1993).

2.5 Contemporary Character Education in the Context of Virtue Ethics

Contemporary CE (CCE) has been defined as 'any school-directed program designed to shape directly and systematically the behaviour of young people by teaching nonrelativistic values believed to directly bring about good behaviour' (Lockwood, 1997, p. 179). According to Lockwood, this type of education seeks to transform young people through developing character traits, whereby teachers play a crucial role and serve as 'significant value transmitters within the classroom' (Lasley & Biddle, 1996, p. 158). This means that the moral standards of teachers have a significant impact on their professional conduct and the teaching opportunities they provide. In addition, moral relativism and value neutrality are addressed through inspiration from Aristotle's moral philosophy: Pupils are taught moral values through education in virtues and character, as schools become moral gateways for the encouragement and promotion of character. However, CCE has been criticised for principally leaning towards the content of moral education, arguably reducing the attention given to virtue meaning or development. This has resulted in an approach that is considered overly simplistic both philosophically and psychologically (Carr & Steutel, 1999; Lockwood, 2009).

Recent years have seen an explosion of research into character strengths, driven by the positive psychology movement, which aims to understand and cultivate wellbeing and flourishing. It was largely to help identify the cross-culturally universal positive traits that form the foundation of good character and the good life that the virtue classification was developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004). The virtue classification is now one of the central building blocks of positive psychology. The classification was developed by 55 scientists who conducted empirical work on universally valued positive traits in order to conceptualise 'the psychological ingredients and processes that define the virtues', to use Peterson and Seligman's words (2004, p. 13). It may be appropriate that Peterson and Seligman's taxonomy is used in the empirical components of research when trying to decide on which trait to measure. However, their classification has its own limitations, especially concerning the exclusion of *phronesis* from the list of surveyed traits, often seen as a 'meta-virtue' that encompasses and guides the development of other virtues (Kristjánsson, 2023; Fowers, 2024). Moreover, although wisdom is one of the six virtues that appears in the 'Values in Action' (VIA) classification, the wisdom that the VIA has in mind is not the Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian conception of *phronesis* or practical wisdom, which is to be discussed later (see section 2.4).

Modern virtue theories maintain that the virtues are goods for their possessors and necessary for *eudaimonia* or living well as a human being (Hursthouse, 2007). If this is indeed the case, then virtuous dispositions are central to achieving *eudaimonia*. Thus, we can view moral education that aims at the development (and cultivation) of virtuous character dispositions by facilitating good behaviour as forming a crucial part of student flourishing. In more contemporary eras, however, happiness has been viewed more subjectively and as being the

satisfaction of one's desires (Annas, 1993) – this is in stark contrast to the Aristotelian view of happiness, where happiness is understood as being shaped by the cultivation of virtue. As Julia Annas (2011) has argued, it is entirely coherent and natural to think of wellbeing in *eudaimonist* terms. This is because we are all, explicitly or implicitly, trying to make life go well, in terms of some ends that we see as valuable and desirable, and which guide our actions, thoughts and reflections. To reflect ethically on one's life, it is necessary to engage in self-reflection; such reflection reveals both short-term and long-term goals. Although the ultimate purpose of life is left open by the very nature of ethical reflection and deliberation, it can be refined into something more determinate. From this view, a flourishing life is largely determined by one's character; since the virtues shape our character, the way in which they develop and manifest will impact our wellbeing and overall life satisfaction and fulfilment.

2.5.1 Neo-Aristotelian Character Education

The previous section situated character education within its contemporary context while exploring the common objections to it. The following section explores how neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics can lend both philosophical and psychological support to character-focused education initiatives, while illuminating the importance of *phronesis*. Once developed, a further discussion on a recent development coined by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues – 'virtue literacy' – is explored and revised for the purpose of this thesis, but also for educating younger children more generally.

2.5.2 Character Education as a Practical Application of Virtue Ethics

Before turning to the question of the connection between virtue ethics and education, we should first note that, in aiming to change the character of children and assist them in their

development as moral beings, education and schooling are trying to achieve an ultimate goal or end – and that is the object of character education. In fact, one can think of CE as an application of VE. In the following section, I propose some character education strategies based on moral psychology and, at the same time, provide a review of the pertinent empirical evidence to illustrate the significance of virtue ethics to education.

Here, it is worth pointing out that CE also aims at more than cultivating virtue. Flourishing – the development of a person, their full potential and overall wellbeing – is also an aim of CE. Indeed, for some proponents of virtue ethics, the cultivation of the virtues is instrumental to flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2021; Seligman et al., 2009). Flourishing demands virtuous habits and reasonableness, and education is important for how we guide children to adopt those traits.

However, not all education theories agree with the idea of flourishing as an aim. Some theories are more orientated towards knowledge and skill acquisition, and/or the preparation of human beings for the role they will play in society: for example, the skills needed for secondary education or the workforce. Michael Hand (2023) argues that the idea of human flourishing, which is the aim of education, cannot be fully learned or acquired through education alone. While some aspects of flourishing, such as moral, intellectual and executive virtues, can be taught and learned, many other conditions are necessary for flourishing that cannot be acquired through education. These conditions include genetic factors, environmental factors, social factors and political factors that cannot be controlled or changed through education alone. This aligns with Fernández et al. (2024), who consider the current challenges and opportunities within character education in Europe and how different countries (e.g., Austria – Bernhard, Latvia – Joaquin & Gonzalez) face different challenges

depending on their cultural and societal context. The authors highlight the growing importance of character-focused approaches in education, as well as the theoretical and empirical challenges involved.

While it is true that some aspects of flourishing – for example, having good health, growing up in a supportive family, or access to resources – are partly dependent upon genetic, environmental, social or political factors over which individuals have little to no control, it does not necessarily follow that education is futile in promoting flourishing. Many virtue ethicists, for instance, see the cultivation of the virtues as a means to flourishing (Kristjánsson 2021; Seligman et al., 2009). Even if some luck is required in living the good life (Hartman, 2019), education can help students to develop the necessary cognitive and social skills to cope with and adapt to their circumstances, and to cultivate the dispositions of character and the sense of virtue and values that promote flourishing. Hand's (2023) argument overlooks the reciprocal and philosophically subtle two-way relationship between schooling and flourishing, which is less a one-way street and more a circular process of mutual exchange and influence. In this way, schooling can have a positive effect on flourishing in individuals, but flourishing can also have an effect on schooling, which can be inspirational through motivating more learning, innovation and social change through the development of responses to human experience. Therefore, the unlearnability objection can underestimate the contemporary and emergent role of education in promoting flourishing in many different ways, as well as its transformative role on education through the very engagement with and experience of flourishing on the part of students. In short, and despite some current debate, the idea of flourishing is making meaningful progress in educational discourse, and many educators are coming to recognise the importance of this issue. It is hard, therefore, to make

any ultimate conclusive judgments about the relationship between virtue ethics and education, at least while competing and overlapping ends in education remain contested.

Recently, virtue ethics has gained renewed interest in the field of psychology, especially as a way of empirically validating the practical usefulness of virtues in everyday life. Fowers et al. (2024) claim that character traits enable human beings to pursue certain worthwhile ends in a manner that allows them to lead happier and fuller lives. Contemporary empirical research on virtues such as kindness and gratitude has shown many important benefits to wellbeing; however, a unifying framework is still necessary (Fowers et al., 2024). That said, Fowers et al. (2024) have forged a connection between virtue theory – ideas about what it would take to have a flourishing and good character – and real-world empirical research. Their model distinguishes 'virtue theory' as a normative theory of human flourishing from 'virtue ethics', a branch of moral philosophy, and from 'character education', the teaching of good habits. Virtue theory, then, paves the way to take virtue ethics and approaches to building good character into schools and other learning communities by providing a coherent framework for clarifying and promoting moral development in everyday life. In the model, the virtues are seen as clusters of character strengths that are empirically measurable and yield objective wellbeing outcomes. This approach makes it possible for researchers to develop and test interventions aimed at cultivating the virtues and wellbeing in contexts such as schools and various workplaces. By setting virtue ethics on an empirical research basis, this model offers a key step towards making virtue theory accessible for everyday life by providing a more practical and pragmatic framework for putting virtue ethics into practice, while still maintaining its philosophical and ethical roots.

In short, CE promotes the acquisition of positive character attributes and the ability to use them to support decision-making, actions, and subsequent equanimity. Rather than being focused on context, utility or consequence, virtue ethics links to concepts such as excellence (in the sense of a character trait held as being positive, such as honesty), being practical and able to apply virtues to real-world situations, and being content as a result (Hursthouse, 2016; Driver, 2006).

2.5.3 Objections to Character Education

The aspiration of cultivating moral character through virtue education has its critics (see, for example, Evans, 2012). One criticism is that definitions of character and the necessity of it being taught in schools may be indoctrinating (Pritchard, 1988). This is mainly due to the hidden and wider curricular influences on character education, and on the relationships between character education and dominant political and faith-based interests and discourse. For instance, critics claim that when CE focuses on strengths such as obedience, respect for authority and patriotism, it tends to equate goodness with supporting mainstream political or religious traditions (Peterson, 2020).

However, although it is indeed true that teaching beliefs and standards that are relative to a moral (or ethical) standpoint renders such teaching susceptible to indoctrination, it is important to note that this vulnerability is not unique to moral education. For instance, history teaching can also omit important topics or shape pupils' beliefs for particular purposes. To avoid indoctrination in CE, therefore, allowing room for rational reflection can help promote the kind of pluralism that encourages children to examine different perspectives and evidence-based approaches, rather than the endorsement of an ideological framework as the

only defensible option. In saying this, one goal of moral education ought to be measurement of the success of moral education in terms of open-mindedness and critical reasoning, not by the instilling of a set of dogmas or the fixation of simplistic moral codes. Possible ways to accomplish this are to encourage students to question certain assumptions, demand more evidence in support of claims, and consider alternative hypotheses. Teachers can also create activities that allow students to consider pluralistic models of ethical dilemmas: by discussing ethical cases that show that weighing costs and benefits, and considering different ethical frameworks, can prompt difficult questions, require careful deliberation, and lead to wise decisions.

Moral and religious education in particular are open to more vulnerabilities given the controversies that surround ethical matters. Hand argues that 'religious beliefs, since they are not known to be true, cannot be imparted by the presentation of decisive evidence; but to use a form of leverage other than the force of evidence seems to be necessarily indoctrinatory' (2002, p. 639). Similar to Hand, other theorists agree that faith schools are inherently indoctrinatory as they teach belief in religious propositions. Thus, it is widely agreed that all attempts to inculcate moral views or behaviour in the classroom through exhortation are indoctrinative (MacIntyre, 1982). However, by focusing on the values of independent moral reasoning, character education aims to bypass these dangers while avoiding an indoctrinatory approach to moral character. This can be achieved by cultivating key virtues, such as intellectual open-mindedness and epistemic curiosity. These traits are integral to encouraging a well-rounded moral character, enabling individuals to make thoughtful ethical decisions without being swayed by external ideological pressures. This method ensures a balanced development of moral character, free from the influence of political or religious

indoctrination. However, the danger of indoctrination remains, particularly when CE can be linked to dominant political or religious ideologies. It is in the way that governments and schools design CE curricula that the dangers of indoctrination may be mitigated – by encouraging reflective thinking and by being inclusive of diverse thinkers.

Adding more recently to the critical discussion are Jerome and Kisby (2019), who endeavour to demonstrate that character education in the UK context is not problematic; rather, the real challenge is the current emphasis on virtue ethics and individualism, along with their moral, political and educational consequences. From here, they unpack the Jubilee Centre's teaching resources, with a particular focus on how the resources do not respond to the common misconceptions around CE (such as character education being solely about indoctrination or promoting elitist values) that Kristjánsson illuminates in his commentary (see Kristjánsson, 2013, Kristjánsson et al., 2024). Jerome and Kisby (2019) stress that CE should focus on more than just the individual, and that the issues in society cannot be solved with an individualistic approach. Peterson (2020, p. 4) discusses the critique that CE 'fails to engage with the political', acknowledging this concern while arguing that it should aim to engage active citizenship to ensure a more democratic and economically managed future (Jerome & Kisby, 2019). These arguments are particularly salient in the academic discourse given the recent shifts in educational policy and practice in the UK (e.g., British Values Curriculum (2014), Character Education Framework (2019), Prevent Duty (2023). Such developments in education policy highlight the need for a broader societal focus in CE. In contrast, Suissa (2015) criticises CE for its focus on the development of personal character traits, which can overshadow the political dimension essential for active citizenship.

In response to such objections, character education theorists posit that while these complaints are legitimate, the current form of CE has moved beyond such depictions. For example, Kristjánsson (2020) notes that contemporary CE increasingly stresses the significance of intersubjective relations as the source of moral action. In addition, building on Aristotelian ethics, one can point to the intellectual meta-virtue of *phronesis* (practical wisdom). This intellectual virtue is necessary to integrate and synthesise various moral and civic virtues. This not only responds to the concern that CE is individualistic but also situates it amid the current developments in moral psychology as it aims to reinvigorate CE as a socially and politically more informed endeavour (see e.g., Darnell, Gulliford & Kristjánsson, 2019; Darnell, Fowers & Kristjánsson, 2021; Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024).

In considering the arguments presented here, it is important to keep in mind the theoretical foundations of different approaches to character education, and also to consider whether these approaches are appropriate and ethical (Watts et al., 2021). A different argument against moral education in children could consider the issue in a much broader context, bearing in mind the social, cultural or psychological factors that promote moral development in children. This broadens the debate and gives more attention to the environment in which children are raised. Here, there would be scope not just to encourage moral reasoning skills in children, but to think about what children need to develop moral character: healthy role models, opportunities for social and emotional learning, a sense of community and belonging, and so on.

2.5.4 *Phronesis* in Ethics

The question of whether Aristotelian character education (ACE) should be adopted in schools should be implemented in schools depends on how we can develop and teach the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* along with related virtues. Given that this thesis examines children (7–8 years), an age group that cannot yet acquire *phronesis*, this section explores the role of *phronesis* before moving on to defining pre-*phronesis* for use in the present thesis. The research aims to increase children's understanding of moral virtues, which can influence their future thoughts and actions. This understanding of moral virtues is a necessary building block for developing practical wisdom in adulthood. As Aristotle notes, the foundation for this understanding starts in childhood.

First, ACE is one of many approaches to character education. Specifically, ACE is a particular kind of character education that is different from other value-based models in several important ways. ACE is about the cultivation of virtues and practical wisdom in contrast with values or morals, and it is Aristotelian in the sense that it is aimed at cultivating habits of virtuous action through repeated practice (habituation) and cultivating good moral habits (Sanderse, 2020). This differs from other approaches to CE that emphasise the transmission of more abstract principles or rules. Second, ACE places greater emphasis on the importance of community in character development. Character development, for the Aristotelian thinker, is a social process, whereby one learns from and is changed by the example of others in one's community (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005). This differs from certain other approaches to CE that emphasise more individualistic approaches to moral development. Third, ACE differs from certain other CE approaches by placing greater

emphasis on the role of what the Aristotelians called practical wisdom or *phronesis*, which is elaborated on below.

Aristotle's theory of ethics also contains his account of *phronesis*, which has attracted considerable academic attention over the past two decades in specific sub-fields of psychology, philosophy, professional ethics, and education (Kristjánsson et al., 2021). The concept of *phronesis* has been translated in a wide variety of ways: as practical wisdom, practical reasoning, and moral discernment, to name a few (Noel, 1999). Aristotle himself defines *phronesis* as a form of practical rationality or cognitive processing that involves the applied and contextually sensitive skill of knowing how to put both moral and intellectual virtues into practice. It is the ability to discern what the right thing to do is, when to do it, and how to do it in a given situation. Therefore, while some may consider *phronesis* an intellectual virtue, it is more accurate to view it as a skill that transcends individual virtues and enables one to act wisely in the world. Aristotle also believed that one's state of character reflects 'the state of the human soul such that the person in this state chooses the correct actions, at the correct times, for the correct reasons' (Kraut, 2001, p. 14). Some believe that Aristotle means 'mind' here when referring to 'soul', as the latter tends to contain religious connotations. Therefore, some scholars suggest that Aristotle's concept of virtuous character is about cultivating a healthy and well-functioning mind capable of making wise choices, rather than about spiritual or religious beliefs.

As previously discussed, virtues require the ability to act in accordance with excellence, which involves the process of getting things right. For Aristotle, making the right choices stems from acquiring the right judgment, which is where moral or practical wisdom is essential. Yet, this does not prevent one from being aware of the appropriate way to act but

still choosing not to – also known as the 'gappiness problem' (Ellett, 2012; Kristjánsson et al., 2020). *Phronesis*, therefore, is defined by its two leading roles. The first role is guiding moral agents towards the 'golden mean' (Cunningham, 1999, p. 8). Aristotle outlines virtuous action as the equilibrium (mean) between vices of excess and deficiency; humility, for example, involves being neither vain nor prideful. The second considers *phronesis* as the virtue that offers a way to navigate the practice of virtues in different situations and allows one to deliberate between clashing virtues – for instance, when honesty clashes with considerateness (Aristotle, 340 B.C.E., 6:5). Such conflicts require *phronesis* for arbitration.

The nature of virtue is complex and multifaceted, and some suggestions reject their confinement to a single domain, instead positing that virtues cross over into multiple contexts of life. In other words, virtues require one another – also positioned by Aristotle as 'the reciprocity of the virtues', that is, if you have one of the virtues, you will most likely have all the others (Annas, 2011). However, can an individual be honest yet still lack the virtue of gratitude, or other virtues such as courage? Surely, not all virtues are relevant in all situations, but rather a certain level of intellectual and affective sensitivity to the other virtues is required (McDowell, 1979). Thus, having one virtue could invariably lead to the possession of this connected cluster of virtues. For these reasons, I accept the idea that virtues are interrelated and that having one virtue could lead to the possession of others: being kind and compassionate to others can also lead to one becoming more patient. Furthermore, to be aware of various virtues and their relationships to one another also enables a person to cultivate a more complete character and to address sophisticated situations in a way that is morally correct and genuinely wise.

However, it is important to note that not all virtues are relevant in all situations and that possessing one virtue does not necessarily mean that an individual possesses all virtues.

> The possession of the virtue of generosity will often require that one is able to recognise what justice, kindness and other virtues demand, since these virtues can be simultaneously relevant in a whole variety of situations, but it is a leap from there to the conclusion that to possess the virtue of generosity, one must unfailingly have the proper understanding regarding justice, kindness, and so on, in any situation.
>
> (Bailey, 2010, p. 3)

Aristotle's claim in contemporary discussions is referred to as the 'unity of virtue'. This concept becomes rather nuanced when considering the nature of character as a matter of natural capability; some are naturally inclined to act bravely or patiently without having to force themselves to think about it or teach themselves to do so. For Aristotle, these natural traits can have negative implications if not guided by the intellect or *phronesis*. In short, Annas (2011) harmonises that:

> Our natural practical traits need to be formed and educated in an intelligent way for them to develop as virtues; a natural trait may just proceed blindly on where virtue would respond selectively and, in a way, open to novel information and contexts.
>
> (Annas, 2011, p. 86).

With this perspective in mind, I believe that relying solely on our natural tendencies may result in blind action. Instead, cultivating virtuous responses requires being selective and open to novel information and contexts. This idea is in alignment with the concept of deliberate practice and continuous learning to develop positive traits and behaviours. To achieve this, we need to be intentional about our actions and strive for self-improvement.

2.5.5 Defining Pre-*Phronesis*: Understanding its Significance in Moral Development

After elaborating the definition of *phronesis* in ethics and the central position it occupies in moral development, I now shift to outlining the concept and the development of *phronesis* from a pre-*phronetic* stage – that is, the critical period of moral development between seven and eight years old that lays the foundations for understanding moral concepts and character formation.

There has been a wealth of empirical research conducted within the field of character development among children by philosophers, educationists, and psychologists. However, much of this research has focused on children aged 9 and above (Birhan et al., 2020: Eisenburg et al., 2016: Pike et al., 2021: Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024) including that of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (Arthur et al., 2014: Harrison et al., 2020). It is clear in the literature, that not all neo-Aristotelian scholars fully agree on the timing of cultivating *phronesis* (Huo et al., 2023). Julia Annas (2011) in her 'skills analogy' of virtue proposes that, like practising to play an instrument, a child can begin early on with the development of *phronesis* – in other words, the earlier, the more beneficial. For Annas, *phronesis* should be cultivated in primary school children or earlier, since, the nature of virtue is a developmental process, which is often overlooked in contemporary discussions of virtue ethics (Huo et al., 2023). This is further supported by Tomasello (2019)'s work and the cognitive-development approach (Lind, 2023), which together emphasise that moral understanding is built through social interaction and cultural engagement from an early age.

The increase in recognition of the importance of early moral education has led to a development of models that explore both when and how *phronesis* can begin to develop

within diverse contexts. The Arthur et al., (2017) and Jubilee Centre (2017, 2022) models recognise that children of any age can develop components of *phronesis*, such as moral reasoning, decision-making and knowledge of virtues. However, they lack clarity on how these components develop, interrelate and interact with context. To address some of these gaps, 'The Spiral Model of *Phronesis* Development' proposed by Hatchimonji et al., (2020) emphasises the context-dependent and explicit development of *phronetic* capacities. That is, while children may not achieve full *phronesis*, they can employ its components for virtuous action which are significantly shaped by their life circumstances and environmental factors. In essence, the model highlights that *phronesis* development is not universal but must consider unique environmental and cultural contexts for effectiveness (Hatchimonji et al., 2020).

The practical aspect of *phronesis* development, that is, how to teach *phronesis* to children in classrooms, has been the subject of recent research. The study by Huo et al. (2023), focused on how teachers utilise moral dilemmas to help Chinese primary school students develop their critical thinking abilities. In essence, they argued that engaging children in conversations that stimulated critical thought are a primary reason why moral education at an early age is crucial to laying the groundwork for *phronesis* to develop later in life. Although Huo et al., (2023) focus on eliciting *phronesis* through moral dilemmas, their study does not particularly address the initial stages of virtue literacy. Thus, it overlooks the ways in which children (before reaching a *phronetic* level), learn to understand, perceive, reason, and reflect on moral virtues – before they can engage in more complex moral reasoning. Filling this gap directly with children (as opposed to teacher's perspectives) could provide a complementary

route for understanding virtue literacy development and laying the groundwork for promoting *phronesis* in younger children.

Moreover, researchers emphasise different age groups depending on their focus. For instance, researchers who study cognitive development, such as Piaget (1932), tend to emphasise early and middle childhood because developmental milestones occur during these years as children begin to think in concrete and then abstract terms and come to understand and follow rules. Those who study adolescence, such as Kohlberg (1958), tend to emphasise thinking that occurs during this period, where individuals are refining their moral reasoning and beginning to move towards abstract ethical principles. Researchers like Gilligan (1982) who emphasise the role of emotion and care in moral development point to the importance of the very early period of social interaction and the development of empathy. In addition, research has explored how to promote moral integrity (6-7 years) (Betawi, 2020), or the speed in which moral reasoning develops (6 to 13 years) (Walker, 1991). Each of these perspectives highlights a different aspect of morality, but together they show that different ages and skills - matter for different reasons; different age stages contribute in different ways to moral development overall.

More recently, there is growing support in the literature for the role of moral education in primary aged children (Birhan et al., 2021). Perhaps this is due to a growing recognition that early childhood is a formative period for developing the foundational skills that will shape future character. At this stage, children are particularly receptive to social and environmental influences, which aligns with Tomasello's primal understanding of human culture (Tomasello, 2010), childhood motivation (Hepach et al., 2023), and most crucially - morality (Tomasello, 2018). Each of which place emphasis on the importance of social interaction and

cooperation in moral development, particularly during the pre-*phronesis* stage. Research shows that while moral development during this period is crucial, it is also complex and difficult to capture comprehensively (Nucci & Turiel, 2009). Nonetheless, by focusing moral education efforts on this early developmental phase, educators can provide the social context and cooperative experiences that help establish the cognitive foundations for *phronesis* to emerge as children grow.

Pre-*phronesis* in the context of this thesis, then, refers to the capacity for children to develop the building blocks to achieve *phronesis* in later life. This period is also pivotal with respect to virtue literacy – or the capability of children to develop the lexicon, understanding, perception, reasoning and reflective skills to read and interpret character traits that children are being socialised to observe and adopt in their environments. By focusing on this developmental stage, this study hopes to guide effective pedagogical approaches to teaching character education that can have a positive influence on children's future character formation and wellbeing. Furthermore, pre-*phronesis* can be understood through the virtue ethics tradition, which stresses the value of human flourishing. Aristotle introduced the concept of practical wisdom or *phronesis* as the highest form of wisdom but argued that such wisdom cannot be taught but must be cultivated through experience and practice. Before the application of practical wisdom, however, comes the formative stages of making moral judgments in children that helps explain how their long-term character development is founded. Therefore, understanding and characterising this period and how we can harness its potential is what lies at the core of good approaches to CE that can build virtue literacy in children. Overall, virtue literacy acquired at this pre-*phronesis* period likely shapes long-term

moral development, which ultimately lays the groundwork for later character (Kristjánsson, 2015; 2020, Kristjánsson et al, 2024).

2.5.6 *Phronesis* in Education

As previously discussed, the two central concepts within Aristotle's virtue theory are concerned with the connection between 'virtue' and courses of action with respect to 'human flourishing' (*eudaimonia*). Despite its rigorous exploration in philosophy over the past 30 years, a disconnect persists between the level of significance given to the exploration of *phronesis* and the depth of endeavours to evaluate it in practice, specifically in the context of primary and secondary education (Kristjánsson et al., 2024). The lack of empirical research and written reports on *phronesis* in education, even by Aristotelian-inspired educationalists, is rather underdeveloped. Given that *phronesis* serves as the crucial link between the cultivation of individual traits and the promotion of human flourishing, it is essential that its development is fully supported.

In short, *phronesis* serves as the foundation for Aristotelian character education. Kristjánsson (2019) explains that much of the research on this topic focuses on instilling good habits in young learners, rather than developing *phronesis*, which typically occurs in early or late adulthood. This paradox seems to be reinforced by the fact that habituation is considered fundamental to the very notion of developing uncritical habits, while *phronesis* is thought to involve a unique kind of practical wisdom that relies on normative, critical reflection or judgment. Burnyeat's seminal paper (1980) attempts to resolve this paradox by arguing that habituation in childhood (which is instrumental for *phronesis* due to its role as the precursor to *phronesis*) is necessary for the development of *phronesis* because it produces the very

habits and dispositions that enable each of us to respond in the right way to the diverse situations we encounter. Yet, this paradox exposes an obvious tension in the characterisation of *phronesis* and the role of habituation for some authors: On the one hand, habituation typically denotes the development of uncritical, passive habits without rational reflection, whereas, on the other hand, *phronesis* requires reasoning about one's habits and action (Burnyeat, 1980; Kristjánsson, 2019). This conflict between habituation and the development of *phronesis* reflects the more complex picture of how the two are related in the development of character, as well as the need for greater nuance in our conception of habituation and practice to accommodate their dynamic interaction.

Another reason for the lack of *phronesis* development in education is the tendency to rely on role modelling rather than critical thinking skills in school interventions (Kristjánsson, 2019). In essence, the emphasis on single virtues in schools rather than complex ethical scenarios that involve multiple virtues has been backed by those who believe that Aristotle viewed *phronesis* as a development that occurs during early to late adulthood (Massingham, 2019). This belief stems from Aristotle's idea that wisdom grows with experience, making it impossible to be present in the 'young'. However, Aristotle failed to specify the exact age range of the 'young' and provided only vague descriptions of when and how *phronesis* can be developed, such as through first-hand experiences and education that involves critical thinking and teaching (Kristjánsson, 2024). To address this gap, Hatchimonji et al. (2020) developed the 'spiral model of *phronesis* development as part of their study on promoting social-emotional and character education in low-resourced urban schools with students aged 11 to 14. Their model helps depict the various components of *phronesis* and highlights some of the successes (challenges) that enable (obstruct) students in reaching the goal of *phronesis*.

Based on a neo-Aristotelian view of virtuous character, the model suggests that positive purpose plays a crucial role in cultivating *phronesis*.

Additionally, Huo et al., (2023) created a structure for discussions on moral dilemmas in Chinese primary schools that focused on applications to real-life situations to help students develop critical thinking and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Their study indicated that a moral dilemma can trigger affective moral reasoning and judgment and serves as a precursor to the growth of *phronesis* in children. Such developments are important because they offer useful directions and approaches to applying the concept of *phronesis* in educational contexts, both in terms of positive purpose and through moral dilemmas. Furthermore, intergenerational factors, such as environmental and interpersonal stressors, can have a clear negative impact on moral development. These stressors may include violence, poverty or trauma, and they can make it difficult for students to contribute to their community or society (Osher et al., 2018). Therefore, the concept of 'positive purpose' is crucial in providing students with a commitment to individualised goals and beliefs, especially when facing challenging life circumstances (Hatchimonji et al., 2020, p. 134). Positive purpose is defined as a stable and generalised intention to achieve something that is both meaningful to oneself and significant to the world beyond oneself. Without such positive purpose - that extends beyond personal desires or immediate goals, aiming for something more meaningful that benefits the broader community or humanity: the desire to act virtuously or wisely can be hindered. If *phronesis* is stripped of its link to moral virtues, it may deteriorate into mere cunning or 'cleverness'. Therefore, promoting positive purpose is essential in preventing *phronesis* from devolving into mere performance and directing it towards moral growth that benefits individuals, schools and society (Arthur et al., 2017).

However, many models that advocate for the advancement of the moral self, fail to offer clear guidance for how the different components interact with context, relate to each other, or simply develop. An example is Arthur et al.'s (2017) model, which provides an outline for the stages of virtue development but does not articulate or clearly advance how an individual progresses from one stage to the next, or how another contextual factor are likely to influence *phronesis* development. Attempting to address these concerns is a developmental-contextual framework proposed by Hatchimonji et al. (2020) for *phronesis* development, who argue that 'the development of *phronesis* components must be explicit and assert that this process is context dependent' (p. 140). The notion that *phronesis* may not be achievable for children is not dismissed, but rather through the acknowledgement of context-dependent factors, components of *phronesis* leading to virtuous acts can be developed. Thus, the process of virtue enhancement can be operationalised in a more meaningful fashion. Furthermore, *phronetic* capacities are developed through life circumstances set in differing contexts: The suggested spiral model of *phronesis* development was designed in the context of low-resourced schools to account for the role that context plays in an individual's ability to act virtuously. Although Hatchimonji et al. (2020) hypothesise the significant role context plays, they do not conclude the generalisability of *phronesis* across all contexts; rather, they indicate that environmental factors must be taken into account across each context to develop a robust understanding of *phronesis* development.

Although an Aristotelian formulation of *phronesis* has the potential to fill in some gaps in moral psychology and may even offer a useful vocabulary for theorists, it lacks any sort of concrete methods for fostering its emergence in contemporary educational practice. Most approaches to moral education emphasise the importance of habituation in early life and

consider the elaboration of *phronesis* to be of secondary importance. To help promote the development of *phronesis* in schools, both teachers and children require 'clear frameworks for making virtuous decisions, particularly in the context of schools made up of students who do not subscribe to dominant culture—these frameworks cannot be strictly prescribed' (Hatchimonji et al., 2020, p. 130). Despite the described models being an important step towards understanding the development of *phronesis*, I believe that they need to be flexible rather than prescriptive, specifically in school settings. This is mainly because real-world classrooms need a more flexible approach.

Having explored the concept of *phronesis* and its centrality within both ethics and education, I now shift my attention to revising a definition for the Jubilee Centre's virtue literacy framework, which defines a more accurate role that each of its three components plays in cultivating virtuous development. Using contemporary research from moral psychology, I support the view that a revised definition for virtue literacy is needed. By refining the concept, my hope is that I can make progress with how to frame a holistic approach to character education – one that suits the educational and cognitive needs of children.

2.6 Development of Virtues

In the following section, I discuss the components of virtue as articulated by the Jubilee Centre, specifically the building blocks of character and virtues. Next, I disambiguate the components of virtue literacy, which is an introductory constituent of character education. I then proceed to offer a revised definition of virtue literacy, based on the work of the Jubilee Centre and recent research on CE. This aims to provide a better understanding of why virtue literacy is essential in developing virtuous individuals who later go on to unlock *phronesis*.

2.6.1 The Building Blocks of Character: Components of Virtue

If the definition of character education and its relation to virtue and *phronesis* needs to be taken further, then the question must be asked as to which virtues, precisely, are to be encouraged and cultivated in the context of education. On this front, the University of Birmingham-based Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues is a pioneer in ACE.

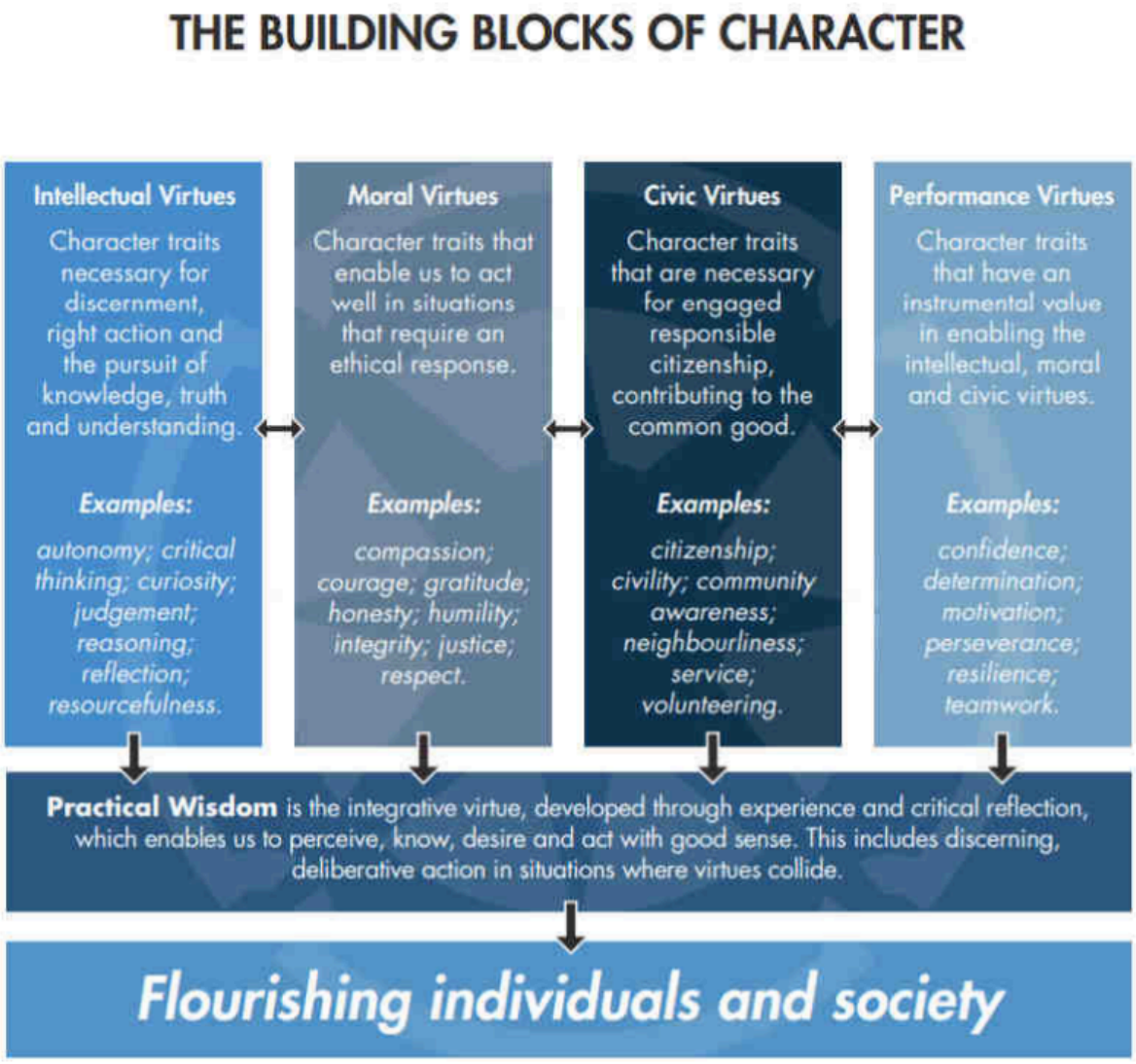


Figure 1. The Building Blocks of Character (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022)

The framework of Aristotelian character education provides a roadmap for the lifelong cultivation of a person (i.e., their development of character) by dividing their growth into four building blocks of character, referring to *intellectual*, *moral*, *civic* and *performance virtues*, and seven components of virtue: *virtue perception*, *virtue knowledge and understanding*, *virtue emotion*, *virtue identity*, *virtue motivation*, *virtue reasoning*, and *virtue action and practice*. From here, the development of practical wisdom or *phronesis* becomes the integrative virtue – the ultimate requirement for flourishing individuals and society.



Figure 2. Components of Virtue (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022)

In practical terms, to operationalise the neo-Aristotelian approach to CE, it is important to adopt some core aspects of Aristotle's ethics (Arthur et al., 2014), where the growth of character is focused around the cultivation of virtue. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues has done valuable work in creating various models for character education that

identify some of the elements of virtue growth. Their model is based on a virtue-based understanding of character and introduces the concept of virtue literacy, which is grounded in the neo-Aristotelian principles necessary for achieving virtue and attaining *eudaemonia* (Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues, 2022). By incorporating these principles into character education programmes, students can gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be virtuous and can better apply these concepts to their own lives, ultimately leading to a more fulfilling and flourishing existence.

The framework includes three[4] inter-related components that form the foundation for acting virtuously. The first is being able to understand what is meant by the virtues (virtue knowledge and understanding); the second is having the capacity to recognise when a situation requires virtue (virtue perception); and the third requires reflecting on the exhibition of an appropriate level of virtue (virtue reasoning; Jubilee Centre, 2022). A focus on virtue literacy helps outline the formation of a virtuous character and is 'essentially developmental', mainly because the emphasis is on how virtue is acquired (Broadie, 1993: Burnyeat, 1980: Annas, 2011). Although the Arthur et al. (2017) and Jubilee Centre (2022) models present stages of virtue development, they fail to deeply articulate or refine how an individual progresses through the stages, or how environmental factors may hinder or promote the growth of virtue and eventually *phronesis.* A development-contextual framework for

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[4] The original features of the model contain seven inter-related components: virtue perception, virtue knowledge and understanding, virtue emotion, virtue identity, virtue motivation, virtue reasoning, and virtue practice.

See Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2017) for a more detailed account of what each component consists of and how different approaches to character interventions will need to adopt different strands of the virtue literacy components.

phronesis proposed by Hatchimonji et al. (2020) set out to tackle these concerns 'by considering how each component of *phronesis* is developed, relates to other aspects of virtue development, and is influenced by (or influences) context' (p. 130).

According to the Aristotelian principles of CE adopted by the Jubilee Centre, virtue literacy is one of the primary goals of the educating for character and accordingly captures components A, B and F from Figure 2. Component F (virtue reasoning) of the virtue literacy framework is composed of two functions: the integrative function and the constitutive function. The integrative function of virtue reasoning is about weighing different ethical concerns or values, such as honesty and compassion, and finding a way to balance them when they conflict. In other words, one virtue may need to take priority over another. On the other hand, the constitutive function of virtue reasoning is about developing one's moral identity or character. It includes an ongoing attitude of self-reliance and the ability to reflect on and continuously evaluate one's own progress towards improving one's virtuous self.

Both aspects work in conjunction to develop a good moral character and lead a *eudaimonic* life. (Darnell, Gulliford & Kristjánsson, 2019, 2022), However, when applying this framework to the children targeted in my intervention (aged 7–8) and taking into account developmental psychology research, a revised framework that removes one of the two functions of component F – the integrative function in virtue reasoning – is a more suitable adaptation (see section 2.7.5 for further discussion). Moreover, while the model emphasises the emotional component of emotions, I propose that the cognitive aspect of virtue emotions is also critical to the cultivation of virtue in children because younger children's emotional competence is often neglected or misinterpreted (Thompson, 2011). However, questions remain concerning the nature of measuring emotions (Curren & Kotzee, 2014). Therefore, I

seek to ensure that the three components – A, B and one of the functions in F – are the most practical and straightforward to explore.

To respond to the question of whether virtue literacy is required to deliver this neo-Aristotelian account of character education, I first need to adequately justify why such an approach is appropriate for 7–8 year-old children. In what follows, I present three interconnected arguments in to support the philosophical, practical and developmental rationale behind integrating virtue literacy at this developmental stage. The philosophical rationale (the why), which ties early virtue literacy to the later development of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), is the main focus of the first argument. Rooted in Aristotle's virtue ethics, this argument focuses on the early exposure to moral language and concepts in childhood. In this way, virtue literacy serves as the foundational step that enables the development of *phronesis* over time. When children are introduced to virtues through understanding what virtues mean (K&U), when they are required (perception), why and how to show them (reasoning) and how their actions contribute to who they are (reflection) - the cognitive and emotional groundwork necessary for them to recognise and apply these virtues in everyday situations begins to take shape. This early engagement with moral concepts mirrors the process described in Darnell, Fowers and Kristjánsson (2022) *phronesis* model, where reasoning, affect, and actions are integrated to form wise decision-making over time. Lastly, this aligns with Aristotle's view of how virtues are not innate – but rather, habits that are intentionally nurtured.

However, virtue literacy can go beyond mere theoretical comprehension, which leads us to the second argument that addresses the practical justification (the how). This is where teaching virtue literacy through structured and age-appropriate approaches encourages

children to develop the skills to practically share their understanding of virtues with peers and teachers – developing other related skills such as ToM (theory of mind) and perspective taking – essential for children to develop moral awareness early in life. When children are taught virtues in a scaffolded way, for example, the meanings are broken down into manageable and age-related concepts – through characters, plots and more accessible language, the children can relate to the virtues more concretely. Using pedagogical methods such as stories, where characters display virtues such as honesty, kindness and so forth, provides children with examples of how a virtue can be enacted, including the consequences of such actions. In this way, teachers and pedagogy work in harmony to provide the learning opportunities for children to digest the theory and translate that connection into the practical aspects of applying such knowledge to their own behaviour. Take for example, when children are taught to recognise virtues like honesty, kindness, and gratitude they begin to understand how these virtues show up in their everyday actions and interactions (knowledge & understanding). This then, allows them to perceive situations more clearly, making them better equipped to identify opportunities to act virtuously (perception). This understanding of virtues directly links to a child's reasoning around individual virtues. Once children can understand what virtues mean, how virtues like honesty or kindness appear in their daily lives, they begin to reason on how and why they should apply specific virtues in different situations (reasoning). For instance, they can reason how honesty builds trust in relationships and why it is important to be truthful even when it's difficult. Lastly, each component requires children to consistently reflect on their actions, thoughts, and feelings in relation to the virtues they are learning, experiencing and actioning (reflection). This ongoing reflection helps them understand the effects of their behaviour, allowing them to adjust and improve

their decision-making processes in future situations. As children reflect on their actions, thoughts and feelings in relation to the virtues they're learning, they develop the habit of continuous self-reflection.

The third and most important is the developmental argument (the when and how) at the pre-*phronesis* stage, where virtue literacy supports children's moral and cognitive development – allowing them to engage with moral concepts meaningfully and in an age-appropriate manner. Virtue literacy, then, helps provide the foundation for what Darnell, Fowers and Kristjánsson (2022) describe as the *blueprint function*, a guiding framework for living a flourishing life. This developmental process is also enhanced further by the inclusion of virtue reflection (the component I added for the thesis) - the underlying skill of evaluating the effects of one's behaviour, adjusting it accordingly to make better decisions in the future and becoming more intentional about the type of moral agent one wants to be. This continuous self-reflection helps to develop a sense of moral agency, helping children transition from learning virtues to embodying them as part of their character.

In summary, while the philosophical argument focuses on the foundational importance of virtue literacy in developing *phronesis* and moral agency over time, the practical argument emphasises how virtue literacy provides accessible tools for teaching virtues in real-world contexts (for both educators and students). In contrast, the developmental argument highlights how virtue literacy aligns with children's cognitive and moral growth, ensuring that early moral education supports their long-term ability to navigate real-world moral situations and improve their overall character development. Together, these arguments present a holistic rationale for integrating virtue literacy at this developmental stage, each addressing complementary dimensions of its value. Before outlining the components of virtue

literacy, I provide an account of the six moral virtues chosen for the empirical component of the thesis.

2.6.2 The Six Moral Virtues

This section addresses the selection of six virtues chosen for teaching, and why they were chosen as the focus of the intervention described in this thesis, namely gratitude, kindness, honesty, loyalty, courage and humility. In contemporary discourse, moral development remains a core concern in CE, with a related and growing emphasis on the identification of particular virtues to promote not only ethical decision-making but holistic moral-character development. In light of this, I turn to the background literature on each of the chosen virtues, specifically relating (but not exclusive) to childhood. I then conclude by providing two primary reasons as to why the six were selected.

According to Kotzee and Baehr (2023), many of the virtues that are important for ethically responsible, flourishing human relationships – including honesty, integrity, empathy and compassion – are moral virtues. Yet, intellectual virtues – such as intellectual autonomy, curiosity, open-mindedness and intellectual humility – are no less important, since they enable people to approach information critically, think for themselves, and seek out truth and knowledge in an ethically responsible way. These intellectual virtues enable individuals to engage critically with information, think independently, and pursue truth and knowledge with integrity. Although education that neglects either moral or intellectual virtues is incomplete, I consider the teaching of moral virtues to be of paramount importance in shaping individuals and societies, surpassing the importance of intellectual virtues. While intellectual virtues are necessary components of individual and social development, it is the moral virtues that set

the foundation for ethical behaviour, social cohesion and human flourishing and essentially form the backbone in our behaviour towards other people, thereby enabling trust, sympathy and respect to take root and develop within communities and relationships.

Without moral virtues, individuals cannot navigate complex ethical dilemmas or make reasoning decisions from deeply principled perspectives that prioritise communal and altruistic ends over self-interests. Unlike the intellectual virtues, which primarily contribute to cognitive skills, the moral virtues cultivate character qualities essential to building a just, compassionate and harmonious society and personal relationships. Indeed, without moral virtues, intellectual pursuits can become exploitative and devoid of ethical sensitivities, with potentially harmful and unethical outcomes. In this respect, although intellectual virtues are certainly desirable, it is developing moral virtues that shapes the character of individual agents and social collectives in ethically significant ways in order to enable human flourishing and social wellbeing. Thus, while I agree with the merits of intellectual virtues, it is a person or society's composition and strength of moral virtues that determine to a large extent the ethical quality of their goals and outcomes as virtuous or other forms. This is what makes them essential for promoting true human flourishing and enhancing the well-being of society as a whole. For these primary reasons, the six moral virtues identified for this study – namely, the dispositions of gratitude, kindness, honesty, loyalty, courage, and humility – constitute a set of character qualities considered paramount for nurturing morally virtuous behaviour and character formation in children. This decision to focus on moral (rather than intellectual, performance or civic) virtues for the intervention stems from an emphasis on identifying the developmental needs and learning goals linked to the specific target

attainment that the intervention is designed to evaluate, which is the effectiveness of the explicit teaching of moral virtues on the development of the children's virtue literacy.

Gratitude

Gratitude is ubiquitous across cultures as a moral virtue and has recently seen increasing empirical research interest (Gulliford & Morgan, 2016; Morgan & Gulliford, 2018). Gratitude has been identified as one of the personality characteristics most strongly associated with well-being, highlighting how powerful gratitude can be in helping people thrive both emotionally and mentally (Woods et al., 2007). As a virtue, gratitude consists of appreciation, recognition and reciprocity (Fagley, 2016; Kristjánsson et al., 2015; Roberts, 2004; Tudge et al., 2015). More recent studies have examined the significance that gratitude has in both philosophy and psychology (Gulliford & Morgan, 2021).

Early research by Baumgarten-Tramer (1938) identified different types of gratitude in children, reflecting a developmental shift from egocentric to allocentric perspectives. This maturation is supported by contemporary research linking gratitude with perspective-taking and theory of mind (ToM). More specifically, perspective-taking (the ability to think about others' mental states) is considered an important prerequisite for the highest identified level of gratitude expression (Poelker et al., 2019). Some key developmental precursors to children's early understanding of gratitude, as shown in the literature, include Shoshani et al.'s (2020) argument that ToM (i.e., children's knowledge about the mental states of others) plays a substantial role in the development of gratitude. In their longitudinal diary study on how various developmental precursors predict children's gratitude trajectory over time, Nelson et al. (2012) highlight that to differentiate gratitude from joy requires a consideration of both mentalising (i.e., What is your benefactor thinking?) and reward processing (i.e., How

might this benefit you – what will you receive?). This aligns with Poelker and Kuebli's (2014) research, which suggests that the giver's intentions and thoughts may be considered by school-aged children as they begin to form feelings of gratitude.

Adults who experience gratitude are more often happier, less depressed, less stressed and more helpful. Evidence also suggests that children and adolescents benefit from gratitude (Froh & Bono, 2008; Froh et al., 2010; Froh et al., 2014), although its development during childhood is less understood. Research on gratitude during childhood largely indicates that gratitude development varies and becomes more sophisticated with age (Freitas et al., 2017). Most young children, for example, display simple, concrete gratitude, whereas older youth tend to express more complex, connective gratitude (Palhares et al., 2017; Freitas et al., 2011). The positive relationship between gratitude and wellbeing and prosocial behaviour, along with developmental plasticity among children (i.e., greater neural plasticity within childhood), suggests that this period is particularly crucial for gratitude development. Indeed, some research indicates that children as young as four years old have an initial understanding of gratitude (Gordon et al., 2004; Graham & Barker, 1990; Russell & Paris, 1994).

Nevertheless, a distinction has been drawn between polite behaviour and genuine gratitude (Freitas et al., 2011). The development of gratitude entails cognitive, emotional and behavioural components (Wang et al., 2015) and, as such, the tendency to feel gratitude is influenced by one's emotional knowledge and ability to represent others' minds (Freitas et al., 2022). Gratitude continues to develop through middle childhood and depends on cultural and socialisation contexts (Freitas et al., 2022). The abilities to represent others' intentions and to appreciate their contributions mature in middle childhood (Shoshani et al., 2021). As a final note, the dangers of focusing and promoting the positive aspects of gratitude have been

argued against, specifically in educational contexts (Morgan, Gulliford and Kristjánsson, 2015; Carr, Morgan & Gulliford, 2015). The need for caution and sensitivity when teaching gratitude to children, whether in classrooms or at home, stems from the understanding that gratitude practices can have varied emotional effects (Guilford, 2018). Guilford (2018) explains that while reflecting on blessings may uplift some children, it could evoke feelings of sadness, guilt or indebtedness in others, especially in group settings where social comparison is common.

Honesty

As an ethical virtue, honesty is often regarded as a fundamental pillar of all moral behaviour. Consequently, in most societies, honesty is more admired and preferred over dishonesty (Bok, 1978). Miller (2021) proposes a taxonomy for the virtue honesty which includes: *truthfulness, forthrightness, being respectful of property, proper compliance, fidelity to promises* (see pp. 22-23 for a fuller description). However. the psychological development of honesty in children has distinct stages. During infancy, a child develops trusting behaviour towards their primary caregivers, which develops into cognitive-based trust principles for honesty and reliability by early childhood (Rotenberg et al., 2015). By the time children move into middle childhood, honesty, reliability and emotional trust become distinct in peer relationships, emphasising honesty's social nature (Rotenberg et al., 2015). While cultures vary in their expectations for when and how people are supposed to be truthful, the widespread social expectation is for people to be honest (Evans & Lee, 2013). Paradoxically, then, despite these norms for honest interaction, lying in typical, everyday interactions – to friends, family, teachers, and romantic interests – occurs frequently (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Serota et al., 2010). In addition to being exposed to such dishonesty, children are sent mixed

messages about the importance of honesty from parents (Lavoie et al., 2017), who strongly discourage lying while also, at times, lying to them (Heyman et al., 2009, 2013).

Signs of early dishonest behaviour observed in children indicate the need to promote and teach honesty in early childhood (Hendarwati et al., 2019). Research has shown that schools can teach honesty to children with the aid of interactive media such as snakes and ladders as a gaming strategy (Hendarwati et al., 2019). More importantly, parents and teachers play a role in children developing honesty, reflecting children's need for adult role-modelling of honest behaviour to shape their understanding. In this way, the socialisation process plays a crucial role in how children understand and behave honestly (Tong & Talwar, 2021). For example, Tong and Talwar (2021) argue that when viewed through the lens of the domains-of-socialisation approach, the development of honesty in children is seen as embedded in children's socialisation experience. In other words, children's emerging understanding of honesty takes place within a range of important social contexts: with parents and other relatives in the home, with teachers and peers, in school and in the playground, among others. Children then learn from their socialisation experiences and cultural norms what constitutes honesty and potential consequences of dishonesty within these different arenas.

Kindness

Kindness is one of the most basic of human virtues. It is also the one with the most direct relevance to the upbringing of children, for it is arguably the virtue that will underpin their social interactions in the future. Western and Eastern philosophical traditions as discussed by philosophers like Aristotle and Confucius consider kindness to be an important virtue (Aristotle, n.d./1959; Confucius, n.d./1855). Although scholars debate important

terminological overlaps with, for example, compassion, altruism and caring, kindness is universally recognised as a virtue reflecting concern for others (Schopenhauer, 1840/2006). In addition, the literature identifies two categories of kindness: active and passive. Active forms of kindness include love, whereas passive forms of kindness include patience and tolerance (Germer, 2009; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Lee, 1988; Neff, 2011).

According to research on the psychology and philosophy surrounding kindness, acts of kindness have been found to offer several types of benefits. Malti and Keller (2010) and Jones et al. (2020) refer to kindness as an affective state of empathy, connectedness and flourishing that improves both personal and public wellbeing. It is also thought that helping others is a way to increase one's own self-esteem, peace of mind and wellbeing (Post & Neimark, 2007). Two recent studies on adolescents show that a number of teens report practising kindness through actions such as providing emotional support, helping with chores and including others in activities (Binfet, 2020; Cotney & Banerjee, 2019). This individual capacity to develop kindness could even lead to growing empathic sensitivity and related ethical awareness for humanity more generally (Rifkin 2009). As such, kindness-based interventions have been shown to aid children in developing their prosocial skills (Smith et al., 2018). More recently, Perkins et al. (2022) have investigated the way in which kindness emerges and is experienced in children, thus shedding light on the process of pro-sociality development that can ultimately help educators inform the design of interventions aimed at developing kindness.

Loyalty

Loyalty is an important component of moral development, but it is challenging to pin down and assess empirically, especially in young children (Misch et al., 2016). Most research on loyalty has primarily focused on loyalty within the context of friendships and family influences (Talwar & Crossman, 2012). That said, Misch et al. (2016) have investigated the topic of loyalty in childhood by exploring whether children as young as four would be able to keep group secrets or, conversely, if they would betray the group for material advantages. As a result, this study illustrated children's loyalty towards a group by showing that, even at this early age, the children kept group secrets while being able to act against their own material advantages. These findings suggest that children are willing to pay a cost to uphold loyalty to their group, highlighting the early emergence of loyalty-related behaviours in childhood. In sum, this study is one of the few to explore loyalty in childhood, to provide insights on the developmental aspects of loyalty, and to emphasise the role of group loyalty in children's social behaviours and interactions.

However, it is noted that as children develop, their social environments become more complex, resulting in virtues colliding with each other (e.g., loyalty and honesty). In their study, Loke et al. (2011) asked children whether they would report a friend who had engaged in a transgression (be it a trivial one, like cheating on a test) or a serious one, like breaking a shop window: The older children judged reporting a friend's minor transgression more harshly than the younger children, suggesting that the younger children viewed sacrificing honesty to protect friends as morally appropriate. In another example, Fu et al. (2008) reported that older Chinese children rated lies to conceal the ingroup's moral transgressions more positively than younger children. Similarly, Misch et al. (2018) found that five-year-old

German children were more inclined to defend an ingroup puppet's severe transgression than an outgroup puppet, suggesting that early group affiliation contributed to an early tendency to exclude the outgroup.

Courage

Courage is celebrated in all cultures and throughout history, which is precisely why it plays such a central role in moral formation. As one of the vehicle virtues (a virtue that enables or facilitates the practice of other virtues), courage allows people to persevere through difficulties towards what is morally right and good. In addition, courage is a multidimensional virtue that contains important connections to three broader constructs: bravery, resilience and righteous action. The research on courage reflects the multidimensionality of this virtue by examining its moral, psychological, physical and socio-cultural properties. In other words, the literature contains many definitions of courage (Rate et al., 2007; Rate, 2010). For instance, Woodard (2004) defines courage as 'the ability to act for a meaningful (noble, good, or practical) cause, despite experiencing the fear associated with perceived threat exceeding the available resources' (p. 174). Alternatively, Norton and Weiss (2009) define courage as persistence or perseverance despite having fears (Santilli et al., 2020). Finally, Miller (2005) provides a more detailed account of moral courage, highlighting five components: moral situation, moral choice, behaviour, individuality and fear (see Miller's account for a full definition, p. 13).

Research on the development of courage in childhood has revealed that children's conceptions of this complex virtue undergo a developmental change. Specifically, Szagun (1992) discovered that younger children aged 5–6 defined courage as an absence of fear and

engaging in risky behaviour, while children aged 8–9 defined courage as overcoming fear and engaging in different sorts of subjective risk. A further study by Szagun and Schäuble (1997) observed that six-year-olds described courage as feeling strong or thinking about risks, but that nine-year-olds had a more sophisticated picture of the virtue by separating the feeling of fear from the action itself. This change aligns with the theory of mind development, showing that older children see courage as a complex emotional experience.

Finally, children aged 11–12 begin to understand that courage involves full knowledge of risk, suggesting that older children are more capable of taking a mentalistic orientation towards courage than their younger counterparts. This developmental shift was further supported by Muris (2009) and Muris et al., (2010), who showed that children between the ages of 9 and 13 years could comprehend the concept of courage and act in a courageous manner but maintained that the ability to act in the presence of fear continues to evolve throughout childhood.

Humility

Humility, the 'quiet virtue', is an often overlooked yet essential ingredient in moral and character development. It involves a realistic sense of one's own abilities, modest self-presentation, and other-oriented interpersonal orientation (Worthington et al., 2008). Despite its importance, humility remains relatively understudied, specifically in the realm of child development. Based on the definition proposed by Worthington et al. (2008), humility is multi-dimensional and interpersonally as well as intrapersonally orientated. The difficulties associated with researching humility, then, are part and parcel of why we know so little about how it develops in childhood – or, more importantly, how to teach it in educational contexts.

The virtue of humility has not attracted sufficient research in children for several reasons. First, humility has typically been a less frequently studied trait than other moral virtues, such as gratitude, kindness or honesty, and may therefore be of less scholarly interest. Second, since humility is an abstract concept and difficult to define and operationalise both theoretically and practically, this may discourage researchers from studying it with younger children, who may themselves lack the cognitive and socio-emotional capacities to express its multidimensional forms. Furthermore, cultural norms and practices also affect what and how much emphasis is put on humility across communities, which can affect research priorities (Exline & Hill, 2012). Despite these obstacles, humility holds great potential as a character trait to teach children. Its self-awareness, perspective-taking and prosocial nature sets the foundation for ethical and caring citizenship (Exline & Hill, 2012). Given the absence of empirical research on childhood humility, then, a strong need arises for research to explore how we can teach humility, and how to better integrate meaningful humility into curricula and pedagogy.

Summary

I chose to focus the empirical intervention on the six moral virtues described above for two reasons. First, they each play a role in the development of moral character that helps prepare children for navigating social situations and relationships in later life, thus promoting the development of *phronesis*. Second, by addressing both well- and less-researched virtues, the intervention can help shed light on which virtues children can more readily develop, as well as the virtues that are more developmentally challenging to teach – and why. This dual rationale not only supports the ideals of a comprehensive moral education, but also

contributes to the field of childhood moral development in terms of how children can best be taught virtues.

2.7 Virtue Literacy

The aim of the empirical component of the thesis was to improve the virtue literacy of the children – specifically their familiarity with virtue-related terminology, the understanding and correct use of those terms, and the ability to perceive, reason and reflect on them. It is important to note that these components are distinct from the cultivation of virtuous emotions or virtuous behaviour. However, other character theories suggest that increased virtue literacy may lead to the development of the latter over time (Kristjánsson, 2015). Below, a discussion of the current components of virtue literacy – and why a revision is needed – is explored. In addition, the role of character education and the different methods used to cultivate virtue literacy in an educational context are explored in further detail.

2.7.1 Virtue Knowledge and Understanding

While virtue theorists commonly agree that virtues are developed and conditioned through habituation, a virtuous person's actions are not conclusive to their habitual pattern, but rather their virtue language and understanding (Vasalou, 2012). An example of this can be seen in the behaviour of a person who has developed the virtue of honesty through habituation: While they may have developed habitual patterns of honesty in their actions, such as telling the truth in everyday situations, it is their underlying understanding and language of honesty that ultimately guides their virtuous behaviour. For example, this person may be faced with a situation where telling the truth could result in negative consequences, such as hurting someone's feelings. In this case, their habitual pattern of honesty may conflict with their

desire to avoid causing harm, leading them to reflect on their understanding of honesty and how it applies to the situation at hand. By using their understanding and language of honesty to guide their actions, rather than simply relying on habitual patterns, they are able to act in a virtuous manner that takes into account the complex and nuanced nature of ethical decision-making.

Vasalou (2012) contends that the mastery of virtue language is a necessary component of virtuous behaviour. In her view, 'part of the habits of the moral learner must acquire are then to be understood as linguistic ones, and demand learning to engage with actions and circumstances through fresh linguistic sieves that bring the concepts of the virtues to bear on them' (p. 80). Rather than moral language being static or relative to a particular state of mind, similar to other languages it signifies a continuum of creativity, flexibility and linguistic evolution. The values of language therefore lie in understanding the knowledge required to incentivise action (virtue knowledge and understanding; Tiwari, 2015). In this light, one must ask oneself in any given situation: Which virtue is being called upon for me to exercise? It is this very question that allows every unfolding moral circumstance to become a practice of linguistic encounters, involving the acquisition of new patterns of naming and perceiving to revolve around the index of virtues. While it seems that not every worldly and physical encounter comprises an opportunity to exercise moral language, Nussbaum alludes to Aristotle's 'sphere of universal experience and choice', where the most important spheres of experience correspond with a core virtue (Nassbaum, 1988, p. 37).

Take, for example, an experience that enters the sphere of bodily appetites and their pleasures, where the practice of moderation would typically be encouraged. However, despite moral discourse being an important component for a moral agent, the extent to which it is

deemed ‘enough’ to produce moral decisions is questionable. This is due – similar to Aristotle’s line of thought – to a need for other factors such as moral perception, moral emotion and moral judgment, all of which will be explored further in Sections 3.2 and 3.3: Echoing the notion that children should not be left to their own devices when developing morals, Aristotle believed that morality was something that should be fostered and developed by society, arguing that the early childhood years were an important time for a person’s socio-emotional and cognitive growth (Arthur, 2019). He argued that the purpose of schooling was to instil positive habits and routines in children; in turn, this allowed them to contribute to society in accordance with its values and desired normative behaviours.

However, prior to the development of practical virtue, it is important that the language of virtue is promoted in primary education through the use of virtue terms:

> The character of children cannot simply be put on hold at school until they reach the age where they have become wise enough to decide for themselves.
>
> (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017, p. 7)

Although a child may recognise what desirable virtue is required in certain circumstances, they may still struggle to turn their cognitive knowledge, understanding or reasoning into action. As such, acquiring knowledge of virtuous language can contribute to one’s ability to undertake rational reflection and deliberation, although this is not sufficient alone for virtuous behaviour (Carr & Harrison 2015). Scholars have acknowledged that understanding virtues (virtue literacy) is linked to practicing them (virtue practice). Lickona (1991) suggests that character education initiatives should help students understand the deeper meanings of virtues. Vasalou (2012, p. 4) claims that ‘there is a link between the mastery of language and the mastery of virtue on similar grounds’ – both require similar skills. This is where Rest’s

(1986) model of moral behaviour reinstates the significance of educating virtue knowledge and understanding. At the heart of the model are four components, each of which are believed to contribute to a moral individual: 'moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation and moral character' (p. 45):

> Another important indication of the nature of virtue comes from the point that we can't teach the virtues in isolation, one by one, since they can't be learnt that way. Generosity gives us a good example here. A child doesn't learn to be generous by just giving her things away or sharing things whether they belong to her or not. Generosity involves considerations of fairness and justice.
>
> (Annas, 2011, p. 84)

Annas (2011) echoes Aristotle's view that in the course of moral development, some virtues 'cluster'. A child does not simply learn to be generous by donating all their belongings to another child; generosity involves a degree of justice and fairness. As for Aristotle, generosity requires a genuine concern and compassion for others, taking into account what the recipient needs and wants, while being aware of the best way to give and the right time to do so. It is not possible to be generous if one is not interested in, or concerned about, the lives of other people. To be a virtuous giver, Annas claims that one needs to consider 'how to give but when to give and how much to give whilst avoiding obtrusiveness; otherwise, you risk your giving becoming selfish or showing-off' (p. 85). Therefore, understanding the complexity and nuance of virtue is relevant to realising this aim. This, in turn, shows the importance of the role played by virtue knowledge and understanding in character education, as it provides a deeper understanding of how we learn to be virtuous.

2.7.2 Virtue Perception

Virtue perception refers to our capacity to discern which features of any given situation are morally salient. This is an important precursor to the virtuous use of practical reason. Virtue ethics stands in contrast to theories that privilege rules or outcomes as guides to moral action, by insisting on the importance of this perceptual virtue as a necessary precursor to having the right motivations to act well. Virtue perception can be improved by education, through which individuals are encouraged to become more sensitive to the moral features of their experience through the development of empathy and the capacity for critical moral reflection.

In being attuned to the features of a situation that are morally salient, the person is able to act upon their virtues – the character traits that he or she has successfully developed – and is therefore not simply following the rule for its own sake or for the sake of the greatest good for the greatest number, but making an action intelligible in terms of fulfilling a quality of life that their character traits afford them. Not only does this approach minimise the distance between theory and practice, but it also recognises that real-world moral situations can be contingent and context-dependent, requiring both practical wisdom and character-formation. This is where virtue perception plays a constitutive role in the moral strength of the virtue ethics account over other ethical theories.

As a result, the development of character traits becomes an active endeavour:

> Perception informed by ethical considerations is the product of experience and habituation. Through such an education, the individual comes to recognize and care about the objects of ethical consideration. [...] Ethical sensitivity will thus be in part a matter of appropriately deploying ethical concepts. One might want to argue that possessing the different virtues will include an openness to perceiving as ethically salient previously unnoticed applications of these concepts.
>
> (Sherman, 1989, pp. 31–32)

Here, Sherman alludes to the debate around relativism and 'what an individual in a particular cultural climate can reasonably be expected to respond to give the prevailing values' (p. 32). Essentially, moral character or behaviour can be seen as an individual's ability to act in a way that has been deemed desirable or acceptable by the society in which they live. What makes this concept so challenging is the significant variance with regard to what behaviours different communities perceive to be positive or negative. An example of this could be found in a society that values independence and freedom, which would then perceive moral behaviours to be actions that acknowledge and protect the rights of the individual. Societies that are more collectivist, on the other hand, may deem actions that preserve the integrity of the group as having higher moral value. This diversity of opinions can be found not only at the national level, but also at the community level. In this sense, modern-day educators find themselves working with diverse learners who may each come from different cultural, religious, ethnic or economic backgrounds, each of which may have their own unique perspectives on what can be considered moral or just. Indeed, these recurring issues around the cultural specificity of virtues or good character have circled around philosophical, political and educational discussions since antiquity: Aristotelian virtue ethics allows for a

variety of factors to influence the makeup of virtuous agents, including varying developmental levels and changing societal conditions.

Moreover, while Foot (1997) was concerned, on the one hand, with the limitations under which human beings have to make decisions about virtue, Vasalou (2012, p. 81) argues that the ability to tell which of our inclinations need to be overcome as temptations, and which of our deficiencies need to be counteracted as vices, is key to acquiring the virtues in the first place. For instance, someone who is ungrateful and has not yet acknowledged their ingratitude as a defect, or someone who is lazy and has not yet recognised their idleness as a temptation, will have a much harder time developing virtues than those who can perceive their own flaws. Here, the focus on virtue perception places special emphasis on the importance of the role of a person of virtue's own virtue perception – being able to identify when there is a moral problem and then acting accordingly. As Aristotle observed, 'the decision rests with perception' (Ross, 1925, p. 37), implying that moral action requires an awareness of the need for it. It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that perception is not only necessary for moral action, but also for our understanding of morality in general. For example, witnessing a theft or hearing a lie informs us about what constitutes wrongful behaviour. Nonetheless, since virtue perception requires detecting a moral stimulus, emotional sensitivity is necessary to notice the moral salience of some situations (Little, 1995). Similar to one's sensitivity to light or sound, moral sensitivity is concerned with one's heightened response to moral affairs, hence its association with the 'senses'. The general consensus, then, is that virtue perception is directly linked to one's moral sensitivity (Rest et al., 1999), which stems from the capacity to identify morally significant and problematic aspects of a situation (Harrison et al., 2020).

In sum, this section highlights the importance of virtue perception for virtue literacy. Perception is a crucial aspect of the development of virtue, as it allows individuals to recognise and respond to virtuous behaviour and character traits in themselves and others. This ability to perceive virtue contributes to the formation of one's own virtuous character and helps promote a virtuous community. Thus, developing the capacity for virtue perception is an essential aspect of promoting virtue literacy and character education.

2.7.3 Virtue Reasoning

Virtue reasoning is often used synonymously with moral reasoning and is typically defined as 'conscious, intentional, effortful and controllable mental activity that consists of transforming given information about people in order to reach moral judgment' (Haidt, 2001). Moral reasoning plays an important role in moral judgment and tends to raise a range of disputes, such as whether moral judgments are based on reason or are 'rationally assessable, and under which conditions moral judgments can be true' (Saunders, 2015, p. 1). According to Saunders, both philosophers and psychologists agree that moral judgment boils down to the application of using general reasoning skills to help answer moral questions. In this view, domain-general reasoning is a type of thinking skill that can be applies across multiple domains, whether scientific or moral (Bucciarelli et al., 2008; Hare, 1981; Kant, 1785/1996; Kohlberg et al., 1983; Piaget, 1932/1965). Aristotle[5] discusses a similar view of moral judging derived from the practical syllogism (a logical argument that applies deductive

[5] The practical syllogism is an instance of practical reasoning when two true premises validly imply a conclusion. Aristotle's earliest work leans towards one notion: the deduction (top-down).

reasoning), classically[6] used to determine a conclusion (Smith, 2000). In stark contrast to Aristotle's deductive method of enquiry, Sir Francis Bacon[7] introduced the inductive method of reasoning, which involves the process of making generalisations from repeated observations to establish facts or truths – empiricism as we call it today. Moreover, empirical research is showing that in fact, moral decisions and reasoning are not always based on logic or domain-general reasoning. Instead, research has indicated that when we are called upon to reason morally, we are often 'dumbfounded' – that is, we are unable to elaborate or give reasons for our moral intuitions (Haidt, 2001). Some of our dumbfounding is linked to how we think about hypothetical moral scenarios, where we become highly sensitive to arbitrary variations (Richardson, 2003), or when emotional regulation slows down the processing of a moral stimuli (Greene, 2014). Haidt (2001) has attempted an alternative explanation of the moral dumbfounding phenomenon with his 'social intuitionist' account of moral judgment. Within his theory, he de-emphasises the role of reasoning in reaching moral conclusions and gives rise to the role of intuition. Through the application of moral cases, however, the conception of moral dumbfounding is unhelpful for advancing moral education, as its monistic approach is too limited in its ability to capture the complexity of moral dilemmas (Bezalel, 2020).

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[6] Historically, two rival syllogistic theories existed: Aristotelian and Stoic syllogism (see Michael, 1975).

[7] Bacon was one of the founders of modern science. In his book *Novum Organum* (translated to *New Method*), he introduced the inductive method of reasoning (bottom-up), establishing and popularising scientific inquiry into natural phenomena. Bacon put forward this method to replace Aristotle's *Organon* in an attempt to develop scientific methods.

In summary, virtue reasoning is directly connected to the philosophical approach of virtue ethics. Reasoning about the virtues improves one's ability to do what is necessary to live a life of virtue and, equally as important, to develop the habits of thought and action that enable one to do so. To put it another way, virtue reasoning is a part of the practice of virtue ethics and is a way of constituting and sustaining the virtues. Reflecting on the virtues and the functionality they have in one's life is part of a vicious or virtuous cycle of virtuous living; thinking about the virtues can help one develop them, and vice versa. This sheds light on why any character education aimed at fostering the virtues needs to be grounded in virtue reasoning, and why we should develop virtuous pedagogies aimed at increasing virtue literacy.

2.7.4 Virtue Reflection

Virtue reflection, also called moral reflection, is the evaluating of a person's moral beliefs, values and conduct in terms of what is good, right, virtuous or moral. It is a form of inner moral development that is essential for moral character education, since it allows the individual to evaluate their own conduct and to make constructive changes that would make them better. Given that virtue ethics is a view in philosophical ethics that emphasises character virtues, it follows that virtuous action is not a question of mere rule-following or doing good; rather, it requires habits of reflection – this is ultimately what allows the induvial to develop Darnell et al., (2019, 2022)'s blueprint function.

As previously outlined, Aristotle explained *phronesis* as being intimately linked with action, emphasising its relevance to morally significant situations. This practical wisdom prompts a moral response when applied to real-life events. Ultimately, the virtue of reflection shows

itself in action. Despite its importance, research on children's reflective capacities in relation to moral education has received little consideration and has been primarily concerned with teachers' reflections on moral issues in the classroom (Buzzelli, 2005), or not conducted in the context of virtue or morality (Young et al., 2018). This lack of research and its omission from the Jubilee Centre's definition of virtue literacy (see Section 2.9) arguably indicates that reflection is not viewed as an important component of the building blocks to character – it remains overlooked in both academic discourse and practical application. This oversight is hugely problematic, as I consider virtue reflection as the driving force behind moral growth (through virtue literacy), acting as the "engine" that enables individuals to internalise virtues and apply them in meaningful ways. Without it, the process of character formation is incomplete, leaving a significant gap in how virtues are cultivated and sustained over time.

Adding to this, the experiential knowledge that is deeply embedded in reflective thinking has not been developed in childhood (Buzzeli, 1993). According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), learning is deeply attuned to social and cultural contexts, and it occurs through extended dialogue with more knowledgeable others. Therefore, without this varied experience and support from more knowledgeable others about how to generalise moral rules for real-life situations, children may not be able to employ moral principles to different contexts. Additionally, little research has focused on self-regulation, especially the self-reflection that helps children evaluate their situation and make needed changes to their actions (Lyons & Zelazo, 2011). Similar to how 'regulatory agencies who cannot enforce laws without actually monitoring whether companies are adhering to them, human self-regulatory systems cannot adequately control their behaviour without some degree of awareness of the ongoing operations of the system' (Lyons & Zelazo, 2011, p. 3). This is

important and links to moral reflection, because self-regulation and moral reflection both require awareness and evaluation of one's thoughts and actions. For children to act morally, they need to reflect on their behaviour and understand how it aligns with moral principles. Without self-reflection, children may struggle to apply moral rules to their behaviour and different situations. Furthermore, younger children may not be adept at, say, assessing the different perspectives held by moral actors in a given situation, and/or they may only ever operate from an immediate perspective and thus cannot anticipate the longer-term ramifications of their actions. One reason for this is that children's thinking is often immediate and egocentric (to use Piaget's 1965 terms), characterised by a focus on their own perspectives and short-term outcomes, rather than a long-term (distant future) view and other reputational perspectives (that of their community).

However, John Dewey's philosophy of moral habits stresses the role of habituated reflective practices and experiences that make moral habits second nature and intuitive (Fesmire, 2003). As individuals engage more regularly in reflective practices, their moral habits become automatic processes that guide them in their moral deliberations. At the centre of Dewey's framework is imaginative deliberation, which brings into focus how Dewey conceives the role of reflection in his understanding of moral insight. Through the use of one's imagination, an individual can foresee the possible consequences of various actions. It is this imaginative deliberation that makes moral reflection enhanced and more optimal: By bringing various options to mind and seeing those options in action, the deliberating individual makes more precise and sensitive judgments on morally salient goods and the (in)appropriateness of certain behaviour (Preti, 2018). This leads to a reasonable conclusion that developing moral reflection in children can help them consider different options or outcomes, helping them to

become sensitive, empathic and aware of what others may think and feel. In addition, moral reflection can help children develop an understanding of their own behaviour and values, thereby contributing to their moral development.

Mi and Ryan (2020) also highlight reflectiveness as a master virtue that requires deep and critical reflection on what one is learning about in terms of the virtues that one possesses and how one is behaving ethically. Such reflection seems to involve the kinds of more effortful processes that are associated with reflective reasoning. Here, research has shown that reflective children do better than impulsive ones in relation to the field of moral development. In their study, Schleifer and Douglas (1973) showed that reflection impulsivity (R-I) and moral development correlate with each other, specifically in relation to seven-year-olds. The participants were presented with two types of stories: one depicting a well-meaning action resulting in significant damage, and another depicting a selfish or wicked action with minor negative consequences. The study found that reflective children provided more mature moral judgments, considering the agent's intentions behind their actions rather than merely focusing on the agent's outcomes, thus highlighting an important milestone in moral reasoning. A reflective child, therefore, may have understood that although the action had bad consequences, it was done with good intentions, which appears to represent a higher level of moral reasoning. Similarly, a study by Lopez and Lopez (1998) sought to develop reflectivity as a cognitive approach to enhance moral development. They discovered that emphasising reflective activities was useful in improving the moral judgment of the students involved in the study. Moreover, Buzzelli (2005) suggests that it is important to conceptualise the early childhood classroom as a place of moral reflection, and to see 'classroom discourse as a collaborative activity in which children engage with one another to reach their constructed

moral meanings about classroom events and provide a moral voice for themselves that further facilitates moral reflection' (p. 144).

In sum, this section emphasises the value of virtue reflection as a dimension of virtue literacy to help facilitate the blueprint function of *phronesis*. People engage in virtue reflection when they take an evaluative stance on their own thoughts, feelings and actions with respect to the virtues and values of their lives. Virtue reflection, then, can help children identify areas for improvement in their virtuous behaviour and to see value in the virtues, so that they can care more about the flourishing of their own selves and their communities, families and friends. This form of reflection also fosters the integration of one's inner and outer life. Virtuous people learn to engage in this kind of reflection, meaning that they possess a greater sense of integrity or consistency in their lives.

2.7.5 Virtue Literacy: A Revised Definition for Primary Education

In the previous sections, I argued that (1) character education is essential to a flourishing life, (2) developing virtue and practical wisdom is an essential part of childhood moral development; I also (3) described the components of virtue literacy that will be adopted in this thesis. These components include an adaptation of the reasoning function and the addition of virtue reflection, which I go on to explore in the upcoming section. Each virtue literacy component contributes crucially to the promotion of virtue ethics and the development of virtuous character – offering a more holistic approach to CE for children. Ensuring the components are in line with the cognitive needs of learners is surely an important step in advancing virtue literacy and an essential tool to develop *phronesis* and a virtuous life.

The goal of CE is to teach children how to recognise and apply virtues in various situations, which contributes to both personal and societal wellbeing. The argument under examination is that despite a contemporary turn towards CE as a key aspect of primary and secondary schooling, less attention has been given to the development and delivery of virtue literacy as a theoretical and practical tool for CE among children during a pre-*phronesis* stage of understanding (7–8 years old). However, revising the definition proposed by the Jubilee Centre presents a challenge, as it needs to be accessible to teachers yet not overly simplistic (Harrison et al., 2018). My goal here, then, is to create a valid description of virtue literacy that can be taught in primary contexts without suffering from overly challenging implementation concerns for teachers or other educators.

In order to assist primary schools in developing their children's character during the pre-*phronesis* stage, I aim to present a clear and useful framework which takes into account their developmental and cognitive needs - making it more practical for teachers to implement at the classroom level. The updated definition of virtue literacy is especially important in this context, since it supports the notion of pre-*phronesis* and emphasises the significance of identifying the foundational abilities that allow children to interact with virtues in a meaningful way throughout their early moral development. Pre-*phronesis*, then, allows the foundation for building virtue knowledge, perception, reasoning and reflection - all of which are crucial for developing practical wisdom. Specifically, the inclusion of virtue reflection - which was not part of the original framework, helps children develop a coherent moral identity by encouraging them to carefully think about the decisions they make, the effects they have on other people and their own moral character.

Moreover, the revised definition draws on current psychological research that shows that children at this age are not yet capable of reasoning between conflicting virtues; a more robust approach is therefore required to lay the foundation for cultivating practical wisdom in the future. To do so, the revised definition emphasises the enhancement of virtue knowledge and understanding, perception, and the constitutive function proposed by Darnell, Fowers and Kristjánsson (2019, 2021), while also adding virtue reflection as a central component in developing moral agents. The revised definition is tailored to the primary target group of the study: 7–8 year-old children. It is crucial to outline the distinction between the definition put forth by the Jubilee Centre (2022, p. 10) and the revised definition proposed in the current thesis before introducing the new definition.

Component	Jubilee Centre Definition	Current Thesis Definition
Knowledge & Understanding	Acquiring a complex language usage through familiarity with virtue terms	Understanding the language, concepts, and basic function of virtue
Perception	Noticing situations standing in need of virtues	Ability to perceive virtues in different situations and reflect on their importance
Reasoning	Making reasoned judgements about how to apply individual virtues, which includes the ability to explain differences in moral situations.	Basic ability to reason around individual virtues and reflect on their role in personal and societal flourishing
Reflection	N/A	Capacity for virtue reflection and consideration of personal character growth

Table 1. Comparison of Current Definition Adopted by the Jubilee Centre and Thesis Definition

The Jubilee Centre emphasises ‘acquiring complex language usage through familiarity with virtue terms’, however, I simplify *knowledge and understanding* to focus on the basic function of virtues and meanings. While both definitions agree on the importance of *perception*, I include the need for reflecting on the virtue’s significance after perceiving the morally salient features of a situation, which children may require support with. Under the definition for *Reasoning,* the Jubilee Centre highlights complex moral judgment, however, this definition may not be entirely appropriate or accurate for 7–8 year-old children. Despite converging definitions from the literature (see Malle, 2021), complex moral judgment typically involves the ability to weigh and decide on a course of action in a difficult moral dilemma, one in which there are competing values, complex social contexts, and multiple perspectives. According to psychology research, such skills typically emerge and develop during adolescence or adulthood, highlighting that children are not developmentally capable of meeting such cognitive demands (Froh et al., 2014: Smetana, 2014: Smetana et al., 2012).

In light of these developmental limitations, the definition of virtue literacy proposed in this thesis revises and refines the official definition of the Jubilee Centre. The revised definition focuses on enhancing the following aspects of virtue literacy: virtue knowledge and understanding, virtue perception, the constitutive function of virtue reasoning proposed by Darnell et al. (2019, 2022), and importantly, virtue reflection acting the “engine” through which children learn the importance and relevance of virtues to one's own life and identity. Therefore, the two changes made to the current definition of virtue literacy proposed by the Jubilee Centre are as follows: (1) the removal of the integrative function of moral reasoning,

and (2) the addition of virtue reflection as a key component. I explain these two changes in more detail below.

The integrative function of moral reasoning 'arises when circumstances call for more than one ethically salient consideration through a process of checks and balances' (Darnell, Gulliford & Kristjánsson, 2022, p. 3). This can consist of a 'blended' response, such as compassionate honesty, or it can consist of giving priority to one virtue over another, such as telling a compassionate lie. Balancing such competing virtues, tends to develop in late adolescence to early adulthood (Jambon & Smetana, 2014; Smetana et al., 2012). Jambon and Smetana (2014) found that younger children often focus on just one part of an action, like the harm it might cause, without considering the bigger picture (consequences) or the person's intentions. Older children, on the other hand, begin to consider why someone acted the way they did, and this is a contributing factor to the greater balance in their moral judgments. Thus, the integrative function, which requires one to 'adjudicate the cognitive and affective aspects of situations and choose the best action when conflicting demands arise' (Darnell, Gulliford & Kristjánsson, 2022, p. 3). This skill does indeed appear to demand more mature cognitive and moral functioning, just as the children's own age-related developments in moral judgment sophistication would suggest. In essence, then, taking the research – and these age-related differences – into account can help inform more intentional decisions about how we could teach moral reasoning in developmentally appropriate ways – assisting it's practical execution in CE.

In this thesis, virtue reasoning is defined as the capacity to reason about the best way to exhibit individual virtues, rather than the more complex *phronetic* ability involved in

resolving conflicts between virtues. For instance, a child who wants to exhibit gratitude to a teacher could reason about the best way to express it, such as writing a thank-you note, bringing a treat, or making a handmade gift. This type of reasoning focuses on the display of a specific virtue, rather than making a complex *phronetic* decision that involves weighing different virtues and balancing conflicting values. A number of empirical studies highlight this developmental progression as appropriate: They show that younger children, for example, can begin to understand and express individual virtues such as gratitude (Froh et al., 2014).

Moreover, virtue reflection refers to the capacity to reflect on one's own moral character, thoughts, feelings and actions in order to deepen one's understanding of the virtues and to grow in virtue. It enables children to become more aware of their own moral dispositions and to develop a more coherent and integrated moral self. Lopez and Lopez (2006) have explored the improvement of moral development through an increase in reflection in 13–14 year-olds and found that developing reflectivity as a cognitive style also increases moral development. However, no such research, to my knowledge, explores interventions specifically focuses on how virtue literacy, together with virtue reflection develops in 7–8 year-olds. Investigating this age group can provide more insight into how children engage in moral reflection and the potential challenges that they (and their educators) may encounter. In addition, by beginning to address this research gap, future studies can build upon the findings on moral reflection in childhood. In essence, by including virtue reflection as a central component of developing moral agents, the revised definition of virtue literacy seeks to empower children to become more self-directed and autonomous in their moral lives.

Summary

This revised component seeks to provide a practically viable description of virtue literacy that is feasible for primary school teachers to implement without being overly challenging. First, the new definition seeks to bridge the gap between the understanding of moral reasoning according to educational philosophers and the developmental perspective of psychologists. Second, the addition of virtue reflection as a key component is aimed at enhancing the moral development of children in relation to their capacity to reflect on moral situations and the moral self. The thesis definition extends the Jubilee Centre definition by stressing the significance of self-examination and the capacity to reflect on moral thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

2.8 Pedagogical Approaches to Enhance Character Development in Education

As elaborated in this chapter, instilling character in schooling is a vital step for assisting young people to become conscientious and morally attuned citizens. The question, then, of how to practically develop character in schools is a recurring concern among educators, and it should not be dismissed or relegated to a secondary role in CE research. Even those in education who recognise the importance of character development, such as teachers and senior leaders, often struggle to find ways to implement it in the face of academic demands and time constraints. As a former teacher, I have observed the conceptual misunderstandings around character, morals and virtues, as well as the roles of parents, teachers and schools that evidently create further obstacles to character development. Given these challenges, it is essential to explore the most effective pedagogical methods that support character-based initiatives that promote the goals and application of CE.

In this regard, character-focused pedagogy helps inform educators on how best to teach character-related content in a way that is most effective for students and their developmental needs. The aim of this section is to highlight some of the most effective approaches to developing character through the learning experience. These include the use of stories (that reflect the children from different backgrounds), Socratic questioning and recall and retention techniques, all of which appear in an original and innovative model designed and recommended by me in Chapter 3. The purpose of this penultimate section is to shed light on the importance of these approaches and how they can be integrated into the classroom setting to promote character development in children. By the end of this section, the reader should have a better understanding of how the suggested pedagogical approaches can help to create a positive learning environment that promotes character growth. Chapter 3 then proposes the 4R model as a framework for integrating these approaches into the classroom setting for primary school children.

2.8.1 Enhancing Character Education through Inclusive and Multicultural Narratives and Perspectives

While including diverse stories can enrich the theoretical and pedagogical development of virtue ethics generally, and virtue development accounts specifically, I argue more strongly here that using stories that do not promote diversity between religions and cultures in child-focused interventions can hinder their development. This claim comes from the fundamental questions of virtue ethics: 'What is the good life?' and 'How does a good human being – a virtuous person – behave?' Aristotle begins to answer the first question from 'a man's proper function' (Aristotle, 2004, 1097b 30). To excel as a human being, it is crucial to consider not only our commonalities with other living organisms, such as plants and animals, but also

what makes us uniquely human. I propose that our ability to function in culturally diverse communities is an essential aspect of the distinctively human life and should be a prominent feature in any comprehensive account of the good life. Incorporating diverse stories can help children develop an understanding of the role of cultural diversity in shaping the good life, which can, in turn, foster their virtuous behaviour. Combining Aristotelian ideas with contemporary debates about education advocates for an integrative approach that combines the personal moral development of CE with the political and social awareness of citizenship education; doing so fosters an educational model that prepares students to thrive in and contribute to pluralistic, multi-cultural societies – to be not just good people, but good citizens (Lu, 2023).

Multicultural literature – defined as stories that feature people of colour, religious minorities, regional cultures, those with disabilities, or the elderly (Harris, 1997) – is rapidly becoming an essential component of early childhood settings. It can promote children's cross-cultural knowledge and acceptance of other people's differences, and it has been recommended in helping children to become sensitive to diverse cultural and linguistic communities. As societies become increasingly complex combinations of ethnicities, family types, values, religious beliefs and socioeconomic classes (Banks, 2006), the textured cultural and linguistic variety of these books can promote awareness of and sensitivity to diverse groups and their needs, train children to navigate the varied world around them, and equip them to flourish in it. Research suggests that children's literature becomes a great vehicle for socialising young readers, and for introducing them to frameworks of moral behaviour and ethical thinking through explicit and implicit lessons, as shown in their narratives and characterisations (Emelin et al., 2020, Kurtines et al., 2013, Nelson, 2010, Vitz, 1990). What is missing,

however, is the notion that, by not representing children of various backgrounds in these stories, reading experiences are also correlated with the ability of the reader to see themselves in the story, and the extent to which their moral lessons resonate (Narvaez & Hill, 2010).

The use of stories and narratives to cultivate virtue literacy is not a new discovery. As Paul Watts (2023) recently observed, the primary school teachers in his study gave primary importance to stories as a key resource for the teaching of character education; they saw stories as the most effective and valuable of all methods for developing the character of their pupils. Drawing upon empirical research, the Knightly Virtues programme created by the Jubilee Centre for children aged 9–11 makes use of selected classic stories to help teach virtues such as self-discipline, love, service, humility, and courage, to name a few. The impact of the programme provides substantial empirical evidence for the overall positive impact that stories have on the development of virtue literacy (Arthur et al., 2014). That being said, a number of criticisms have been directed at the use of Christian and conservative moral virtues in the Knightly Virtues programme. Some of the main criticisms include, but are not limited to: (a) Lack of cultural diversity – by focusing solely on Christian and conservative moral virtues, the programme may be seen as exclusionary and not representative of the diverse cultural backgrounds and belief systems of all children; b) Over-simplification – the use of classic stories to teach virtues can be seen as over-simplifying complex moral concepts and issues, without providing children with the tools they need to navigate real-life moral dilemmas; and (c) Dogmatic approach – the programme's approach to teaching virtues may be perceived as overly dogmatic, as it emphasises obedience to a specific set of moral values rather than encouraging children to think for themselves and make their own moral decisions.

In brief, such critiques mainly highlight that the programme uses narratives that are mostly paternalistic, old-fashioned, anti-democratic and individualistic, thus promoting a conservative view of the world (Jerome & Kisby, 2020, p. 1). In addition, the stories do not reflect the diverse learners' cultures and backgrounds permeating the UK schooling system today. Another project developed by the Jubilee Centre - *'Gratitude and Related Character Virtues' (2017)*, explored the relationships between virtues as opposed to exploring them in isolation. Although the project largely failed, the venture found positive qualitative changes post-intervention through the use of mind-maps; the intervention had an encouraging effect on the children's understanding of gratitude and what it means to be a grateful agent. A similar study inspired by *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* explores Narnian Virtues, as depicted by fictional children who practise virtues such as courage, fortitude, love, wisdom, humility and self-control – developing as moral agents as a consequence (Pike et al., 2021). The study was conducted with 11–12 year-olds and implemented both quantitative and qualitative measures of the following six subscales: 'Empathy, Classroom Behaviour, Intrinsic vs Extrinsic Rewards, Emotional Responses, Recognising Situations to Practice Virtues, and Social Interpersonal Skills' (p. 8). The study's key findings highlighted a clear difference in the students' understanding of the virtues and (self-reported) practice of virtue. Although improvement was observed in the students' understanding of the virtues, the psychometric instrument did not show any increase to a statistically significant degree in their (self-reported) practice of virtue. The potential limitations of the study contributed to such results, including the impact of beginning the intervention during the first term of secondary school, when the participating children were in the process of transitioning to a new, unfamiliar secondary school environment. Transition regression from primary to secondary school is well documented, especially in the UK schooling context where primary schools are

much smaller and secondary schools are mostly oversubscribed, educating students up to the age of 18 (Galton et al., 1999, 2000; McGee et al., 2004; Sylva et al., 2008; Daniels et al., 2019). As a result, the decline of virtue self-perceptions would have been greatly impacted by the challenges the pupils would have been experiencing.

In sum, I believe that it was important and appropriate to use a range of stories with different characters and backgrounds for my intervention – and in CE more generally. Although such stories are difficult to find (interest is still developing), I strongly believe that it is precisely this representation that helps promote a more accurate depiction of the world to the children involved, thus allowing them to become more empathic and morally attuned to their environment and making character education more practically relevant to children.

2.8.2 Socratic Questioning in Character Education

As previously described, moral character is the disposition or set of dispositions that determines one's thoughts, feelings and actions in the moral domain. A person of moral character is one whose behaviour proceeds from a stable set of dispositions – to act or respond in certain morally conducive ways. Moral virtues include traits such as honesty, compassion, fairness, courage and gratitude. Socratic questioning is crucially important to the cultivation of moral character in at least three ways: questioning is central to practising many general moral virtues; questioning encourages enquiry that exemplifies what is morally virtuous; and questioning may itself be an integral component of exploring other individual moral virtues.

According to Paul and Elder (2019), Socratic questioning can be used for essentially two main reasons: (1) to help students identify what they know from what they do not, unlocking

intellectual humility in the process, and (2) to help students develop Socratic-style skills (in questioning themselves and others) to emulate and practise (p. 4). More importantly, the method is based on a developing thoughtful consideration that enables critical evaluation of information or ideas, enhancing the students ability to evaluate the validity of those ideas. Within the dialogues, Socrates established the practice of questioning that allowed students to examine and evaluate their own moral beliefs and to consider alternative perspectives. This provocative method of teaching has developed over time and formed the foundation for logical thinking, allowing for thoughts to be questioned and critical thinking to emerge. Teachers now use this method in their everyday teaching, and it has been adapted into various pedagogical innovations in education, such as Bloom's taxonomy, with the aim of stimulating higher-level thinking (Whiteley, 2006). Aristotle's account of the virtues provides further support for the idea that good questioning is an important pedagogical tool in CE.

Moreover, Socratic questioning to promote moral development, specifically virtue literacy, is achieved by teachers encouraging children to explore questions in relation to different ethical perspectives, including how virtues can be actioned across different situations, including why, when and to whom. In addition, Socratic questioning can be used to uncover assumptions and distinguish 'what we know from what we don't know' (Paul & Elder, 2019, p. 4). In this way, children learn to think more critically about the moral decisions of others and their consequences and to appreciate a range of moral viewpoints, thus helping their ability to form reasoning skills. For example, asking questions such as 'What is the right thing to do in this situation?' or 'How would you feel if someone did that to you?' can help students to think critically about moral issues. Such questions can be adapted to the cognitive abilities of the age group, for example, by using questioning taxonomies. In addition, Paul

and Elder (2019) provide useful strategies to probe student thinking in a productive and disciplined way – focusing on purposeful thinking rather than aimless thinking (e.g., 'Why embody the virtue of x?', 'What is the purpose of doing so?'). As a result, Socratic questioning can help children avoid the trap of aimless moral thinking, providing a more structured approach which can be helpful for younger age groups of children. Moreover, research has shown that parental use of Socratic-style questioning helped increase their children's moral reasoning skills (Walker & Taylor, 1991). However, the research is lacking on the use of Socratic questioning as an explicit method to enhance virtue literacy among children.

2.8.3 Improving Recall and Retention in Character Education

My final argument claims that if character-based interventions do not assess for learning retention, then the progress and development of new pedagogical methods that are effective will remain deficient. For virtue literacy interventions to be effective in a child's character development, having the cognitive capacity to store aspects of the knowledge in the hippocampus (the part of the brain that is responsible for storing long-term memory) is critical. More importantly, I suggest here that if the knowledge and skills acquired (perception, reasoning and reflection of virtue literacy) is stored in a child's long-term memory, then the plausibility of being able to recall it and put the knowledge to practical use in the future increases. In contrast, if the knowledge is not retained, it will remain in the short-term memory (pre-frontal cortex) and result in learning loss – impacting whether the individual can recall and then act upon virtue-related behaviour. It is also worth noting here that if a virtue is a habit as Aristotle first posited, the role of neuroscience cannot be undervalued. In neuroscience, habit refers to 'any regularly repeated behaviour that requires

little or no thought and is learned rather than innate – any habit is developed through reinforcement and repetition' (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021). Habits are ultimately formed by experience-dependent neuroplasticity (the passive process when we repeat a habit without thinking and our brain strengthens that habit over time) and self-directed neuroplasticity (the active process of consciously reflecting on how habits make us feel).

In the latter example of self-directed neuroplasticity, Dr. Jeffrey M. Schwartz, author of *The Mind & The Brain* (2002), argues that contrary to the belief that we are helpless victims of our genetic brain activity, we can, in fact, play an active role in influencing our thoughts and choices. This can be achieved by consciously directing their attention, strengthening their neural pathways. Practical wisdom is again of significance here as it links to what Sanderese (2020) states:

> Aristotle did not see virtues as mindless habits that produce behaviour, but as intelligent dispositions that involve a choice to do certain things or feel certain ways that observe a mean between two vicious extremes.
>
> (Sanderese, 2020, p. 99)

In essence, what demonstrates one's ability to form a habit involves the conscious process of activating the relevant thoughts (knowledge of what the virtue requires, and the possible emotions involved). As an example, take a situation where the virtue of gratitude is required. The grateful agent consciously deliberates between activities and emotions that constitute grateful or ungrateful prior to initiating a behavioural response. Likewise, Bowditch (2008) notes that being virtuous involves having some distance from one's emotions and being able to rationally assess whether one's action or emotional reaction hits the mean. This requires knowing that some emotions and actions are just, temperate, and courageous (and others not),

but not yet why a virtuous act is virtuous – that is to say, how it is related to a happy life (Curzer, 2012, p. 304).

Considering this in the context of early childhood learning, experience is of paramount importance for later cognitive and emotional outcomes (Barnett, 1995). During the process of learning, memory is vital, as it enables the storing and retrieval of the information learned and creates the basis for linking new knowledge to prior knowledge. Essentially, this is a symbiotic relationship that continues to develop and evolve throughout a lifetime. While learning is the acquisition of knowledge, memory is the expression of what has been learned. More specifically, learning retention is defined as the ability to store new information in the long-term memory and recall it at a later date (Ritter et al., 2013; Cowan, 2014). Take learning a language, for example, where one can speak it by using memory to retrieve the words learned. In a similar way, if virtue-based interventions are going to drive behaviour change, it can be argued that knowledge of what it means to be courageous, and where it sits between the two Aristotelian extremes, needs to be retained by the learners. This is important for two reasons: first, so that children can have a strong chance of developing into *phronetic* agents, and second, for adults to sustain their *phronetic* capacities after reaching moral maturity so as to avoid throwing away the habits formed after they have become practically wise (Sanderse, 2018). In this sense, Aristotle hints at habituation as a lifelong endeavour; people must 'confirm their habit, when they are grown up' (NE, 1080a). I contend that this can only be achieved through conscious deliberation, which begins with the retention of virtue-related knowledge.

In this thesis, I argue that the ability to recall and retain information held in long-term memory is crucial for developing virtuous habits and activating *phronesis* later in life. In

essence, understanding how to store new information in a way that allows for easy recall and application in future situations is essential for the development and maintenance of virtuous behaviour. Failure to retain this information can result in it being lost from short-term memory, hindering an individual's ability to rationally assess whether their actions or emotional reactions align with virtuous behaviour. The argument here is grounded in the scientific understanding of habit formation and neuroplasticity. It is now widely accepted that habits are learned rather than innate, and that they rely on experience-dependent neuroplasticity - the process of strengthening habits through repeated, unconscious actions.

The argument also recognises the active role that individuals can play in shaping their own neural activity through self-directed neuroplasticity. This process involves consciously reflecting on one's habits and making choices about where to place one's attention. This skill is critical in building character and highlights the role of habitual moral thinking in practising and getting better at moral decision-making. In addition, this habitual learning is essential for developing *phronesis* and is built through a combination of reflection, practice and the intentional changing of habits. Through regularly engaging in contemplative reflection on one's habits, individuals can check to determine whether the character traits they are practising will lead them to the right or wrong kind of action/consequence. Doing so repeatedly reinforces the skill and fosters changes that eventually become habitual. In this way, practical wisdom emerges as an outcome not merely of deliberation, but also of lived experience and introspective practice.

In the next chapter, I introduce the 4R model, a framework designed to enhance character education. One key component of this model is the concept of 'recall', which was specifically included to ensure that children are able to remember and apply what they have learned in

previous lessons, as well as earlier in the current lesson. This emphasis on recall is grounded in the understanding that for virtue literacy interventions to be effective, children must retain and recall knowledge to form lasting virtuous habits and activate practical wisdom (*phronesis*) throughout their subsequent lives.

2.9 Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to make a case for utilising Aristotle's virtue ethics framework to enhance character education in schools. It serves as a foundation for the empirical part of the research project on how CE can be advanced in the UK to bridge the current gaps in pedagogy and theory. The literature research revealed that CE interventions need to account for the diverse learning environments in which they are implemented. Furthermore, the current definition of virtue literacy proposed by the Jubilee Centre does not align with the latest cognitive research on how children reason, which can hinder the practical application of promoting virtue literacy among primary school children. In addition, the omission of virtue reflection from the definition of virtue literacy and the existing research can offer the field of CE a starting point for exploring how children aged 7–8 develop – or struggle to develop – virtue reflection.

To summarise briefly the key points from chapter 2: this study uses Aristotle's virtue ethics as the foundation for developing a revised definition of virtue literacy that considers children's cognitive development and the practical application for educators. The new definition is revised based on the components of virtue development identified in the Jubilee Centre's Building Blocks of Character framework, with a focus on cultivating the blueprint function required for *phronesis*.

The ultimate goal of the study, then, is to provide practical recommendations for advancing character education in the UK, with a focus on promoting virtue literacy in primary school children. By using Aristotle's virtue ethics as a foundation and tailoring pedagogical methods to diverse learning environments, the study seeks to bridge the current gaps in advancing primary school character education in practice.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents my methodology, explaining the research design and teaching methods used in the study. The methodology section explains the steps taken to gather and analyse the data and describes the design and execution for both the pilot and the main study. This chapter also introduces an original 4R model, a pedagogical approach I designed to facilitate the implementation of a six-week virtue-focused programme, specifically aimed at enhancing primary school children's virtue literacy.

The aims of this chapter are to provide the following:

- Research positionality and research design of the empirical component of the study.
- Background and rationale for using qualitative methods in virtue literacy research.
- Explanation of the 4R model (Read-Review-Reflect-Recall) and how it informs the design of the intervention.

3.1.1 Overview of the Research Questions

In the preceding chapter, I outlined the three main research questions that this thesis aims to address:

RQ1: What role does an explicit virtue-focused intervention have in supporting the development of virtue literacy among 7–8-year-old children?

RQ2: How do children's conceptualisations of moral virtues differ between two different school contexts, one with a virtue-focused ethos and one without?

RQ3: To what extent do different pedagogical methods enhance children's development of virtue literacy?

3.2 Phases of Research Study

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, the study was conducted in two phases, designed to explore the usefulness and appropriateness of the pedagogical strategies employed in developing virtue literacy among 7–8-year-old children. In the first preliminary phase, a lesson focused on compassion was conducted with 20 students aged 7-8. During the lesson, the students engaged with the narrative story and related tasks: answering questions from the Socratic guide, discussing answers with peers and expressing their conceptualisations on the mind-maps provided. This was essential to ensure that the materials were age-appropriate and that the methods encouraged active participation and meaningful engagement. Finally, this phase provided an important opportunity for me to refine the resources and strategies based on the observed interactions and feedback.

In the second phase, a six-week virtue-focused educational programme was implemented to explicitly teach the six identified moral virtues (kindness, gratitude, honesty, courage, loyalty and humility) to children across two school settings. When referring to 'intervention' throughout this study, I am specifically describing a structured virtue-focused educational programme designed to facilitate children's engagement with virtue concepts through explicit teaching and interactive learning activities, rather than a 'treatment' in the clinical or experimental sense. With that said, the intervention was designed specifically for the age group with the aim of developing the four main virtue literacy building blocks, namely: (1) virtue knowledge and understanding, (2) virtue perception, (3) virtue reasoning with a focus on the constitutive function, and (4) virtue reflection. The preliminary lesson participants were not the same individuals from the main study, so the main intervention did not share the same population as the preparatory phase. The forthcoming sections provide a descriptive

overview of each phase, detailing how the methods were designed to engage children with virtue concepts and facilitate their moral development.

Phase	Method of Data Collection	Administration	Participants	Period of Data Collection	Purpose
Preliminary Lesson (One)	Mind Maps, Socratic Questioning, Focus Groups	Conducted in one school, facilitated by the researcher.	20 students (single school)	One lesson in one week.	To refine the intervention tools and methodologies and assess their suitability for the age group.
Main Study (Two)	Mind Maps, Socratic Questioning, Focus Groups	Conducted in two schools, facilitated by the researcher.	46 students (22 School A, 24 School B)	Six lessons across six weeks.	To explore how children conceptualise, reflect on, and engage with virtues in differing educational contexts.

Table 2. Overview of the Research Design

Table 2 provides a clear summary of the research design adopted for this study, detailing the two phases— Preliminary Lesson (phase one) and Main Study (phase two).

The phases of research study focused on three key areas:

1. ***How children developed their understanding of the different components of virtue literacy and Individual Virtues***

The first was exploring how the children conceptualised the various aspects of virtue literacy and the six virtues individually. Here, I aimed to understand the nuanced ways children came to express their understanding of each virtue. This aim also involved exploring how the children related the virtues to their own social worlds, in turn, uncovering any changes in such conceptualisations through engagement with the lessons.

2. ***Exploring the Pedagogical Methods***

The second aspect was to consider whether the pedagogical approaches that were designed by me (a teacher-practitioner), specifically for this intervention and age-group helped contribute to the children's development of virtue literacy. This phase emphasised how explicit teaching of moral virtues, grounded in storytelling, Socratic questioning, focus groups and the use of a new 4R model – supported children's engagement and understanding of virtues. This aim also focused on understanding any challenges to such methods for the age group.

3. Understanding Contextual Differences

The third aspect of the study sought to understand the acquisition of virtue literacy within two different educational settings – one based on a virtue-focused ethos, and another that did not. It was not intended to compare or measure the schools objectively, but to explore whether their different and subjective approaches to education might have influenced the children's

conceptualisations of virtue literacy. It is important to note, that the study places more emphasis on the interpretive and contextual dimensions of these contexts.

In summary, the present thesis highlights the need for CE initiatives to focus on pedagogical approaches, particularly those that align with the developmental needs of younger children. Through the emphasis on the interpretive and exploratory nature of this research, the thesis aims to advance forward-thinking pedagogy in character education by giving teachers useful tools for implementing character development at a pre-*phronetic* age group.

3.3 Positionality Statement

I am a secondary school teacher (in English Language and Literature) with an undergraduate degree in Linguistics and a master's degree in Education. I have taught in both affluent and disadvantaged school settings. These experiences have significantly shaped my values and beliefs, particularly around the importance of character education. Both my personal and academic backgrounds influenced the way in which the study was designed and the data was collected – and, most importantly, interpreted. As a researcher, it is important to be mindful of one's own positionality and its potential impact on a given study. Accordingly, I considered the primary beliefs and values that informed my research, as well as how I interpreted and evaluated the intervention results, and limitations were recorded at the end of the thesis project. As such, I had to consider my own personal beliefs and values about the significance of virtue education, which may have formed the basis of how I interpreted the data. This meant that my own personal beliefs and values most certainly influenced which research questions I asked, which methods I used for exploring those research questions, and how I interpreted the data so that, in keeping with my existing values, I may have been

inclined to interpret virtue education research and data to support the primacy of virtue education within the broader educational landscape by embracing particular virtues or forms of character within schooling.

Nonetheless, epistemic responsibility on the part of the researcher requires awareness of a researcher's positionality as a determinant of their potential role in shaping the study. Given the significance of acknowledging positionality in research, it is important to reflect on how my positionality may have impacted the study, and to minimise the biases and limitations this may have incurred. One way I did so was by incorporating feedback from multiple academic perspectives throughout the research. This helped to identify potential blind spots or limitations that I may have otherwise overlooked. In addition, I incorporated a range of data collection methods (mind-maps and focus groups) to ensure that my interpretation or experience did not bias or skew the study's findings. Reflecting on these potential biases and limitations and acknowledging them within the study was done concurrently throughout the research process.

3.4 Research Design

This section describes the procedures in the study design that were used to help build virtue literacy among 7–8 year-olds. To begin, the use of a qualitative research methodology for this study is grounded in its capacity to provide rich, in-depth insights into complex phenomena, such as – how children conceptualise, reflect on and engage with moral virtues. In this way, qualitative research focuses on exploring how participants make sense of their experiences, emphasising depth over breadth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Instead of 'measuring' outcomes, I chose to focus on and prioritise how the children made sense of and interpreted their

understanding of virtues within the context of their lived social and cultural experiences. As such, qualitative research prioritises understanding meaning, experience, and context - making it especially suitable for studies that aim to explore subjective perspectives and processes (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Moreover, the choice to use solely qualitative methods was driven by the challenges inherent in measuring character development, specifically in young children, as well as the need to capture the depth of meanings of their conceptualisations and experiences of moral virtues. One of the primary challenges in measuring character development in young children is their developmental stage, which influences how they articulate their thoughts and understand abstract concepts such as moral virtues. For instance, studies have highlighted that young children often struggle with standardised assessments that fail to consider their cognitive and linguistic capacities (Zualkernan & Shapsough, 2024). In essence, by using qualitative methods such as focus groups**,** narrative-based activities and mind maps, this study provided a more accessible and developmentally appropriate way for children to express their understanding of virtues. More importantly, the methods I selected to use align with research that strongly support the importance of creating participatory, child-centred approaches in educational research (Freinet, 1993; Shaik & Mji, 2024).

Therefore, qualitative research acknowledges the uniqueness of individual experiences and prioritises contextually rich interpretations (Denzin, 2018). This was of particular importance, since the study not only highlights individual perspectives but also explores the broader societal and cultural influences that may also play a role in shaping the children's development of virtue literacy and understanding of individual virtues. Consequently, the qualitative approach aligned well with the interpretive paradigm, specifically since it

emphasises meaning-making and the co-production of knowledge (Phothongsunan, 2010; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Moreover, the flexibility and depth of qualitative methods, coupled with their capacity for iterative exploration, ensured that the study could adapt to the emergent and diverse ways children conceptualise and engage with moral virtues. In this way, the chosen methodology reflects a commitment to an interpretive approach to understanding children's moral development. Importantly, as I previously outlined in chapter two, the theoretical foundation in which this thesis and research design is based upon is virtue ethics, which is highly suited to the qualitative method because it provides a descriptive framework to consider how children's experiences and social interactions shape moral character development and interpretation.

Next, I present a figure that describes the methodology and theoretical framework – highlighting how the study integrates both to explore the children's development of virtue literacy.

Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the study design for the research on the development of virtue literacy among 7–8 year-olds.

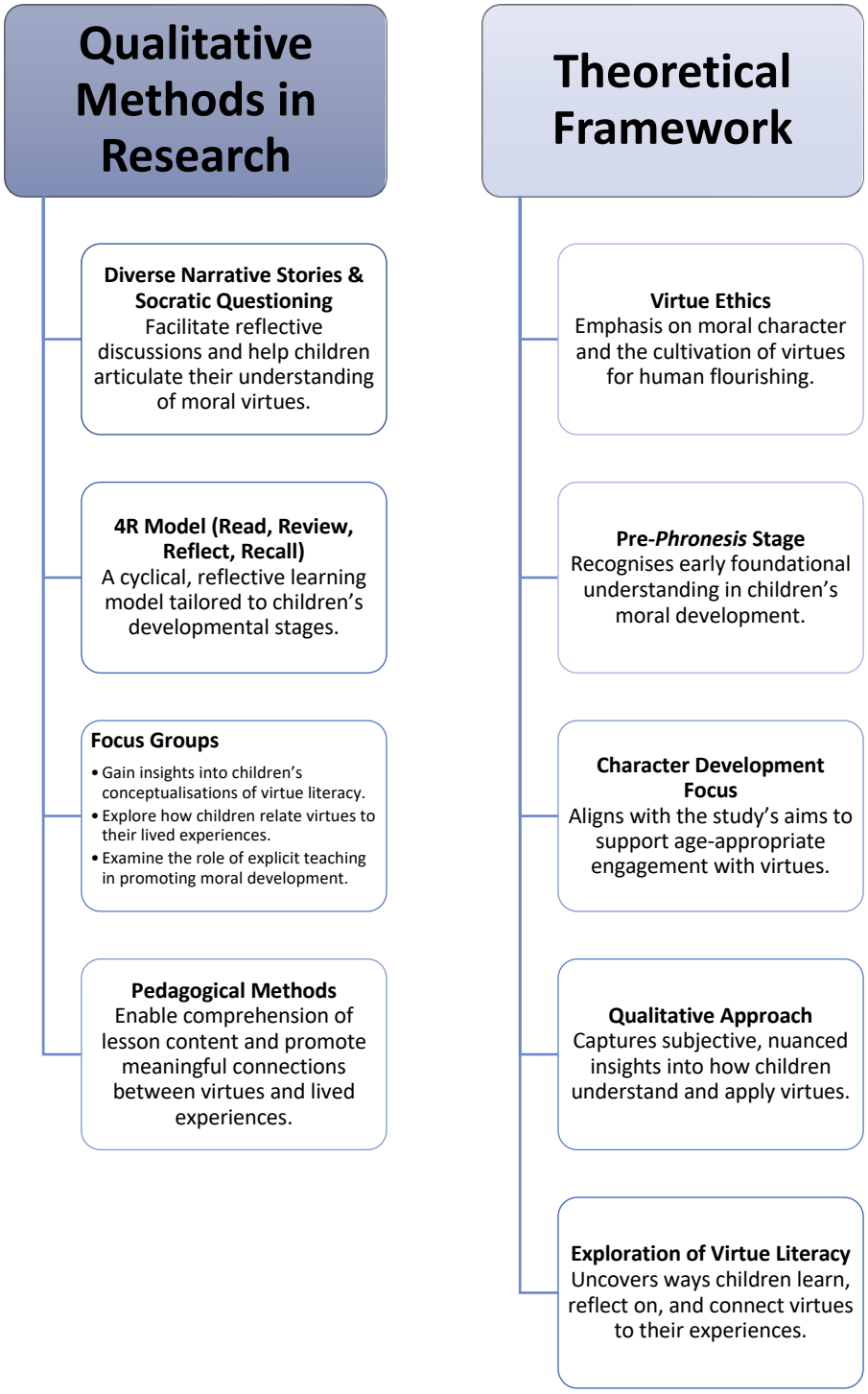


Figure 3. Visualisation of Study Design

3.5 Methods Overview

The research used a variety of qualitative techniques to interpret how the children's knowledge of virtues progressed during the lessons. The intervention incorporated a range of narrative stories and fables, with Socratic questioning integrated throughout the lessons – ending with focus groups. Character education has been found to be most successful through narrative approaches – by presenting relatable, context-specific experiences in which moral thought and evaluation can take place (Nussbaum, 1990; Kristjánsson, 2015). Narrative-based methods have been shown to be effective in character education by providing relatable and context-rich scenarios that encourage moral reasoning and reflection (Nussbaum, 1990; Kristjánsson, 2015). Socratic questioning, guided by the educator, encouraged critical thinking and dialogue, allowing children to actively engage with the moral content and connect it to their personal experiences. These lessons were complemented by focus groups conducted before and after the intervention to capture children's evolving perspectives on the virtues. Table 3 provides an overview of the qualitative methods used in both the preliminary and main study.

Method	Researcher's Role	Participants	Duration	Additional Details
Pre- and Post-Intervention Mind Maps	The researcher facilitated the creation of mind maps to explore children's understanding of virtues.	Children used mind-maps to express conceptualisations of virtues.	Conducted at the beginning and end of each session (approximately 5–7 minutes).	Mind maps were used to encourage children to articulate and reflect on their evolving conceptualisations of virtue literacy.
Socratic Questioning	The researcher used semi-structured questions to guide reflection and dialogue.	Children engaged in thinking and discussing deeper aspects of the virtues.	Embedded throughout each session as part of the teaching process.	Semi-structured questions encouraged learners to engage in critical thinking and connect virtues to their experiences.
Semi-Structured Focus Groups	The researcher facilitated group discussions to explore children's reflections and shared understandings.	A sample of children contributed to discussions.	Two sessions (approximately 20 minutes each, one conducted before and one after the teaching period).	Focus groups provided an opportunity for children to articulate their reflections on virtues and engage in collaborative dialogue.

Table 3. Breakdown of Methods and Researchers Role

Each method was carefully chosen to fit the qualitative design of the study, which essentially prioritised richer exploration, interpretation and understanding the children's conceptualisations of virtues and how these were drawn from their social worlds.

Participants and School Context

Participants were recruited from two primary schools in Birmingham, UK, as well as a separate group for the preliminary lesson. Table 4 outlines the number of participants involved in each phase of the study.

Phase	School	Number of Participants
Preliminary Lesson	N/A	20
Main Study	School A (Virtue-Focused)	22
	School B (Non-Virtue-Focused)	24

Table 4. School & Number of Participants

This table highlights the participant distribution across the preliminary and main study, ensuring clarity and transparency in the research design while maintaining confidentiality for the schools and individuals involved.

School Selection

Both schools were chosen for their distinctive qualities. One school adopts a virtue approach; the other adopts a non-virtue approach. The virtue school places emphasis on both religious and non-religious character education (taught) and is mission-oriented both in its curriculum and extra-curriculum (sought). This school aims not just to cultivate good character in its pupils, but also to make them lead a good life while they are young and beyond. The non-virtue school prioritises academic achievement with no explicit mention of character development in or outside the curriculum, although it does run regular social and emotional development (SMCS). The two schools thus represent different approaches to education and a description of the different methods used by each school is outlined in table 5 below.

Aspect	**Virtue-Focused School**	**Non-Virtue-Focused School**
Curriculum	• *Character education is explicitly embedded, with lessons focused on moral virtues and their application.*	• *Moral principles are embedded within broader academic curricula, but no explicit character education lessons.*
Pedagogy	• *Structured activities encourage active engagement with virtues through individual reflections.* • *Weekly group discussions focus on virtues and beliefs to encourage practical application.*	• *Pedagogy focuses on academic content with occasional moral or ethical discussions tied to broader curriculum goals.* • *Weekly British Values lessons discuss moral principles in the context of SMSC (spiritual, moral, social, cultural) learning.*
Teacher Training	• *Teachers receive specific training on how to deliver virtue-based lessons and facilitate moral discussions effectively.*	• *Teachers rely on their own initiatives to address moral topics; no formal training is provided for character education.*
School Values	• *Core virtues such as gratitude, courage, compassion, kindness and humility are integrated into the mission statement, policies, and classroom displays.* • *Virtues are consistently reinforced during assemblies and other school activities.*	• *The school focuses on promoting academic success and general social skills.* • *British Values (e.g., respect, democracy) are reinforced during SMSC sessions and integrated into daily classroom discussions.*
Classroom Environment	• *Classroom culture is intentionally designed to promote an awareness of virtues with visible displays of virtues, booklets containing definitions and examples and group discussions to reinforce learning.*	• *Classroom culture prioritises academic achievement and behavioural expectations.* • *Moral values are less explicitly referenced, relying on broader discussions of social behaviours and expectations.*
Developmental Approach	• *Students are encouraged to participate in long-term activities reinforcing virtues from a young age (e.g., starting from Year 1, ages 4–5), ensuring engagement over several years.*	• *Activities like SMSC Form Time (short daily sessions) and reinforcement of British Values throughout the year provide some exposure to moral education but without a structured progression.*

Table 5. School Selection and Practices

While these schools were selected for their differing educational practices, it is important to acknowledge that the categorisation as ‘virtue-focused’ and ‘non-virtue-focused’ schools is

based on observed and reported curricular practices rather than definitive or objective criteria. More importantly, while these labels provide a useful framework for comparison, the differences between the schools may not be as stark as suggested by their descriptions. Both schools undoubtedly engage in some degree of character development, whether formally or informally, as part of their broader educational goals. This study, therefore, does not seek to objectively compare their effectiveness but rather to explore how these differing contexts shape children's experiences and engagement with moral education.

3.5.1 Phase 1: Preliminary Lesson

This section covers how the preliminary lesson was conducted, what I learned and how this was applied to the main study. Preliminary (or pilot) studies are an integral part of qualitative research, helping to ensure the credibility and practicality of the research design (Janghorban et al., 2014). It is important to note that the preliminary school was specifically selected to be different from the primary research schools. This choice was motivated by the necessity to examine the practical application in a setting distinct from the main study whilst ensuring that adjustments could be made without influencing the primary research context. If the preliminary lesson was conducted at either of the main study's schools, the children might have talked about their experiences with their main study peers. This might have influenced how participants in the main study interacted with and understood the activities by spreading information, concepts or expectations about the other intervention lessons.

Nonetheless, this phase acted as a foundational exploratory step which aimed at refining the pedagogical tools and methods before employing them in the main study. This was achieved by allowing for an initial assessment of the proposed methods with a smaller group (20

participants) and identifying any challenges in the application of the methods for both educator and students. Furthermore, by exploring how a smaller group of children responded to and engaged with the lesson, I was able to refine the tools and techniques used for data collection and to address any issues that could hinder their implementation. As a result, this process helped ensure the suitability of the tools for the main study (Creswell, 2014). This further ensured that the children's cognitive and developmental needs were being tailored too – including taking into account children with additional learning difficulties and ensuring additional resources were scaffolded/ differentiated based on their learning needs. This iterative process supports the development of a more inclusive approach, ensuring that the study is responsive to the nuances and complexities of the participants learning needs and experiences (Magare et al., 2010). Table 2 outlines the methodology and tools used in the Stage 1 preliminary lesson.

Table 6 outlines the methodology and tools used in the Stage 1 preliminary lesson.

Methods
1. Student-led activity 2. Preliminary version of the evaluation rubric for concept maps, focusing on elements such as understanding, perception, reasoning, and reflecting about the virtue. 3. Focus group discussions for students to discuss their understanding of the virtue and to test the semi-structured focus group questions for the age group. 4. Revisions and refinement of the evaluation rubrics based on feedback from the preliminary lesson, with necessary adjustments made before conducting the full study.
Tools
1. Pre- and post-concept maps 2. Student-led activity 3. Teacher-led, semi-structured Socratic questions during the lesson 4. Semi-structured focus group questions and topics

Table 6. Stage 1 Methodology and Tools

Different methods and tools were explored to understand how the activities supported children's engagement with the lesson and, their evolving conceptualisations of the virtue 'compassion'. First, the children created mind maps to express their understanding of the virtue both before and after the lesson. These mind maps were reviewed using a preliminary version of the marking rubric, which focused on key components of virtue literacy, such as understanding, perceiving, reasoning, and reflecting on the virtue under exploration.

Semi-structured Socratic questions were also introduced during this phase to ensure they were accessible and inclusive, accommodating the diverse needs of the children. Additionally, the discussions provided valuable insights that informed the refinement of the focus group questions, particularly in understanding how children interpreted and engaged with the concepts of virtue being explored. For instance, the discussions highlighted the types of language and phrasing that resonated with the children, as well as areas where questions needed to be simplified or scaffolded to align with their developmental stage.

These discussions also revealed the importance of framing questions in a way that encouraged open-ended responses, allowing the children to share their thoughts and experiences without feeling constrained by overly structured prompts. Additionally, the insights helped identify topics or scenarios that were particularly engaging or meaningful to the children, enabling the focus group questions to be tailored to elicit richer and more nuanced reflections. In essence, this process was critical as it ensured that the questions were meaningful, age-appropriate, and allowed children to engage with the virtue in ways that supported thoughtful and effective participation without unnecessary challenges or barriers to learning.

3.5.2 Preliminary Lesson Sampling

The purpose of the preliminary lesson was to explore how the lessons could be meaningfully applied in a classroom setting and to evaluate the appropriateness and practicality of the intervention, including the tools and methodologies designed to promote virtue literacy in children. A group of 20 children aged 7–8 in Year 3 were invited to participate in this phase. The lesson was delivered through one weekly classroom session, facilitated by me, a qualified teacher. During this lesson, the virtue of 'compassion' was selected, namely, the ability to understand, feel, and respond to others' emotions and needs—lays the groundwork for empathy, social connectedness and ethical behaviour. The lesson centered on compassion, focusing on its role in the narrative story and its relevance to the children's everyday experiences. Consequently, the preliminary lesson helped shed light on how the children engaged with the activities and what areas posed as a challenge for them – so that they could be adjusted and refined before implementing the main study.

The preliminary lesson was adapted from previous attempts at developing virtue literacy for children (Arthur et al., 2014: Harrison et al., 2020), although some modifications were made to the design to better suit the needs of the 7–8 year-old age group. Studies have shown that interventions are more likely to be effective in children when they are developmentally suitable (Lickona, 1991; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). Therefore, the activities and discussions were designed to be age-appropriate and interactive. The preliminary lesson also included greater emphasis on ensuring that the lesson (mainly the use of Socratic questioning) was consistent and differentiated to the needs of the learners, as I believed that this would be particularly beneficial for this age group.

The sample selection strategy involved a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. Convenience sampling involved the selection of the most easily available participants/schools who met the study criteria, on a first come first serve basis, specifically since Covid-19 majorly impacted the ability to recruit schools. Although convenience sampling offers practical benefits such as being time-efficient to recruit schools during Covid, it also possesses limitations, for example, in terms of its limited generalisability beyond the population studied (Robinson, 2014, p. 32). Despite this, I applied convenience sampling by selecting schools that were accessible within the practical constraints of the research, such as geographical proximity, willingness to participate and logistical feasibility (willingness of Head Teachers to facilitate the availability for the lessons to take place).

Purposive sampling, on the other hand, involved purposely selecting participants or schools whose perspectives appeared essential to the formulation and attainment of the stated objectives of the research (Robinson, 2014, p. 32). For example, the main study schools were chosen based on their differing approaches to moral education (virtue-focused and non-virtue-focused) and were selected after reviewing the curriculums, pedagogical practices and having informal conversations with teachers and SLT. This selection was intentional, allowing for a comparative exploration of how differing educational contexts influenced children's conceptualisations and engagement with virtue literacy. The use of both sample selections in this study allowed for a sample that was both accessible and suitable for the study goals. However, it is important to note that the findings of this study may not be generalisable to other populations or locations.

The process of inviting and selecting students to participate in the study comprised several steps. In the preliminary study, it was necessary to obtain ethical approval from the

University of Birmingham's Ethics Committee (ERN_22-1020). Accordingly, I emailed the school principals and provided them with information about the study details, such as the aim and methods that would be used in the session. Once I received the school's consent to proceed, I distributed school letters to provide parents/guardians of children who would partake in the study with a consent form. This letter explained the purpose of study and stated that the contacted person could ask questions regarding the researcher and lead supervisor, as contact details were provided. If any parent/guardian wished for their nominated child to join the research project, they were asked to return the consent form to the school providing consent. If the parent/guardian wished for their child not to be involved, they returned the slip not providing consent.

Once the schools were shortlisted for the preliminary study, 25 schools were selected out of those schools considered broadly on the basis of their ethos and curricula accessible on each school's website. The schools contacted included a mixture of religious (n = 10), non-religious (n = 15), mainstream (n = 22) and private (n = 3) schools. This stage was crucial in identifying schools that met the criteria for the virtues-focused and non-virtues-focused approaches/ethos required for the main study. However, out of the shortlisted 25 schools visited to obtain permission to approach their staff and subsequently contacted, 22 rejected or did not respond to the invitation, some having shown initial interest and then cancelling following the confirmation of visit due to Covid-19 safety concerns, or due to work pressures such as not having enough time to undertake research due to the curriculum being the main priority for their classes. Overall, this meant that only three primary schools agreed to participate in the study. Of these three primary schools, two were from personal contacts in education. All three primary schools were based in Birmingham, UK.

As a result of the sampling methods listed above, the study has its limitations, such as the potential for selection bias. This is mainly because the schools were selected on an established relationship with myself (the researcher) or alternatively expressed interest in taking part in the study. It is plausible then, that the schools had a favourable interest/ attitude towards CE and therefore, the intervention. Additionally, while I requested representative samples of participants for the study, it is plausible that schools offered their best students or classes who were going to receive and engage with the intervention more enthusiastically – to appear more suitable as institutions. Despite the potential for schools to present more articulate or enthusiastic pupils, the data analysis phase was designed to counteract some of these risks. For example, when selecting the data to present in the findings section of this thesis, I included data samples from different student profiles, including varying academic levels, engagement and learning needs. This provided a more accurate representation of the student populations across different learning abilities.

Key Insights from Preliminary Study

From the preliminary study findings - a few key changes were essential to inform the design and execution of the main study, namely the following:

1. The findings revealed that a slower pace was more effective in maintaining engagement and supporting the children's understanding of the material. This adjustment ensured that activities and discussions allowed sufficient time for reflection and meaningful engagement.
2. The Socratic questioning guide was shown to be well-suited to the age group. Due to it being scaffolded using accessible language, the children were able to engage in

reflective thinking and connect moral virtues to their own experiences. This validated the guide as a central tool for the main study.

3. The original focus group duration of 30 minutes was found to be too long for sustained engagement among the children. Consequently, the focus group sessions were shortened to 20 minutes in the main study, making them more manageable and allowing for richer and, in turn, more focused discussions.
4. The preliminary lesson revealed that there was insufficient time to include longer student-led activities within the lesson structure. These activities were therefore removed from the main study to streamline the sessions and ensure that other key elements, such as Socratic questioning and focus groups, were prioritised.

With these insights in mind, the preliminary lesson played a central role in enhancing the trustworthiness and reliability of the main study by helping to refine the tools and methods to align with both the study's goals and the children's cognitive and developmental needs. More importantly, the separation of the preliminary school from the main study schools ensured that insights from the preliminary did not introduce bias into the primary research context.

3.6 Phase 2: Main Study

This section outlines the design of the main study intervention, highlighting its innovative elements and its potential to contribute to character education pedagogy. This intervention includes the development of a novel 4R model (Read, Review, Reflect and Recall), specifically designed to enhance the teaching and learning of virtue literacy. The 4R model serves as a bridge between theoretical understandings of virtue ethics and practical,

classroom-based pedagogy, offering an adaptable framework that educators can use to scaffold and deepen children's engagement with moral virtues.

Order	Tool	During Intervention	After Intervention	Time Needed
1	**Pre-mind-maps**	Explore children's initial understanding and perspectives on the virtue	Reflect on how children articulate and expand their understanding of the virtue	10 minutes
2	**Narrative stories and questioning (reading, reflections, and discussions)**	Facilitate engagement with the virtue and support contextual understanding through dialogue	Ensure stories and questioning are inclusive and appropriate for the age group, addressing diverse learning needs	40 minutes
3	**Post-mind-maps**	Support children in revisiting their ideas and reflecting on their learning	Gather insights into how children's perspectives have evolved after the intervention	10 minutes
4	**Focus group discussions**	Facilitate semi-structured discussions to explore how children connect with and interpret the virtue	Gather feedback on the lesson and understand how children engaged with and processed the virtue in their own ways	30 minutes

Table 7. Overview of Tools Used During and After Intervention

Table 7 outlines the tools used during each session, describing their sequence and role in supporting children's engagement with virtue literacy. The sessions began with pre-mind maps, where children were invited to express their initial understanding of the virtue. Narrative stories and Socratic questioning followed, encouraging reflection, dialogue, and a

deeper exploration of the virtue. Post-mind maps were then used to provide children with an opportunity to revisit and expand their ideas. Finally, focus group discussions allowed for in-depth conversations, enabling children to share their reflections and engage collaboratively in exploring their understanding of the virtue. These discussions also provided an opportunity to refine the semi-structured focus group questions, ensuring they were inclusive and meaningful.

The Socratic guide developed for this study provides a resource that educators can tailor to suit various contexts, enabling children to actively engage with moral concepts in ways that resonate with their lived experiences. As such, this intervention design reflects a qualitative approach to understanding how children learn about and understand virtues, while also providing practical tools and strategies for educators to use in character education. By combining the 4R model, Socratic questioning, and focus group discussions, the study not only explores the development of virtue literacy but also offers valuable pedagogical resources for bridging the gap between theory and practice in character education.

The intervention was based on previous research that has shown that a well-designed intervention can help children develop good character traits (both moral and ethical) as well as a deeper understanding of virtuous behaviour and how it can be exercised in daily life (Kristjánsson, 2022; Wright et al., 2021; Berkowitz, 2021). The two schools in the study were selected based on their different practices with regard to the implementation of character development, including the use of ‘sought’, ‘taught’ and ‘caught’ methods (Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues, 2022). To gain a deeper understanding of these practices, a short discussion was carried out with the headteacher or senior leadership team (SLT) at each school. However, due to the difficulty in assessing the accuracy of such practices, the

intervention was designed and implemented with the assumption that both sets of children had no prior knowledge of virtue, thus ensuring that the researcher had no predetermined biases towards either group.

To ensure the success of the virtue-based intervention, I took steps to avoid the self-fulfilling prophecy first identified in experiments such as 'Pygmalion in the Classroom' (Merton, 1948). The results of this experiment, while debated, have been shown to persist among teachers, where low expectations can impede student learning, whereas high expectations can encourage it and contribute to improved academic performance (Jussim et al., 2009). To avoid this effect, I made a conscious effort to maintain neutral expectations and to approach each student with the belief that they were capable of making positive changes and developing virtue literacy. Furthermore, the classroom teacher provided verbal feedback on the students during the intervention to help ensure that children with learning needs were provided extra support.

3.7 Intervention Design

The intervention took the form of a narrative-based lesson that aimed to increase students' virtue literacy in primary school by promoting the cultivation of six moral virtues (gratitude, courage, kindness, loyalty, honesty and humility) via storytelling. Specifically, it was designed to deliver these six virtues to the students through stories that (a) were enjoyable/interesting, and (b) had the capacity to help impart moral knowledge and understanding of the virtues. Furthermore, the stories were chosen for their ability to help generate a variety of questions that could be asked about narrative plot, characters, ideas, vocabulary, dialogue, emotions, relationships, and consequences of actions – ultimately to

help teach the moral virtues. Through the use of Socratic questions, as the learners read the narrative story, the practitioner scaffolded further inquiry and reflection on the appropriate moral virtue, helping the students to make sense of and engage in dialogue about key concepts and ideas in a way that could be interesting and accessible, while building capacities in virtue literacy as well as the moral skills and knowledge needed to help them develop their own virtues.

To ensure the integrity and trustworthiness of the study, the virtue 'compassion' was not included in the main intervention, as it had been the focus of the preliminary lesson. Repeating compassion could have influenced the findings in ways that might complicate the exploration of other virtues and limit the ability to gain fresh insights. Instead, the decision was made to focus on a broader range of moral virtues, offering a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how virtue literacy can be developed in primary school children. This approach reflects the principles of rigorous qualitative research, which values the creation of study designs that are contextually unique and responsive to the aims of the research, rather than seeking to replicate prior explorations.

Finally, the novelty factors of the intervention design were as follows:

- **Teaching six core moral virtues:** The focus on six moral virtues (gratitude, courage, kindness, loyalty, honesty, humility) allowed for a more-in depth exploration of how these virtues are understood by children aged 7–8. By teaching a range of virtues, the study was able to identify which of the less commonly taught virtues the children struggled to grasp, and to offer potential reasons as to why. This diverges from

traditional empirical studies that focus on popular virtues, such as gratitude (Morgan, Gulliford & Waters, 2022).

- **Comparing two different schools:** Exploring the intervention across different school environments (virtue-focused and non-virtue-focused) provides new insights into its adaptability. This comparison is a relatively unexplored approach in virtue education research, particularly in primary school settings; it also builds on Arthur et al.'s (2015) empirical study across diverse schools (i.e., faith-based and non-faith based).
- **Age-appropriate approach:** The intervention was tailored specifically for primary school children aged 7–8, with a focus on the developmental appropriateness of virtue literacy, the selected virtues, and the pedagogies used (see Section 3.7.2). This sought to address a gap in the literature, as prior studies have focused on an older definition of virtue literacy that does not reflect the cognitive needs of younger children (Arthur et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2020).
- **Original design of 4R model:** The intervention incorporates an innovative and original design of a 4R model (Read-Review-Reflect-Recall). While the model incorporates established educational practices such as active learning and cognitive engagement (Silver et al., 2023), it is applied uniquely here in the context of enhancing virtue literacy.
- **Emphasis on Pedagogy:** Despite there being growing interest in the field of character education, this study offers a unique perspective shaped by my first-hand experiences as a teacher and navigating the realities of the modern classroom. This includes addressing challenges such as diverse student needs, time constraints and the practicalities of implementing character education within a busy school timetable. This thesis also helps offer practical, adaptable and effective strategies for

integrating virtue education into real-world classrooms. This focus is arguably the golden thread of the thesis – helping to enhance discourse on how pedagogy bridges the gap between theory and practice.

In summary, these strategies represent a novel intervention, insofar as I have been able to identify from the existing literature, that has neither been conceptually developed nor empirically explored elsewhere. The emphasis on pedagogy in this intervention is of particular importance since it contributes to applied CE by offering a structured, evidence-based pedagogical approach to teaching moral virtues in primary-age children, including the challenges in doing so. It also provides a practical starting point for educators to promote moral development in primary schools.

3.7.1 Integrating Virtue Literacy: Intervention Design

The purpose of the intervention used for the empirical component of this thesis was to promote the development of pupils' knowledge, understanding, perception, constitutive reasoning and reflection in morally conducive ways.

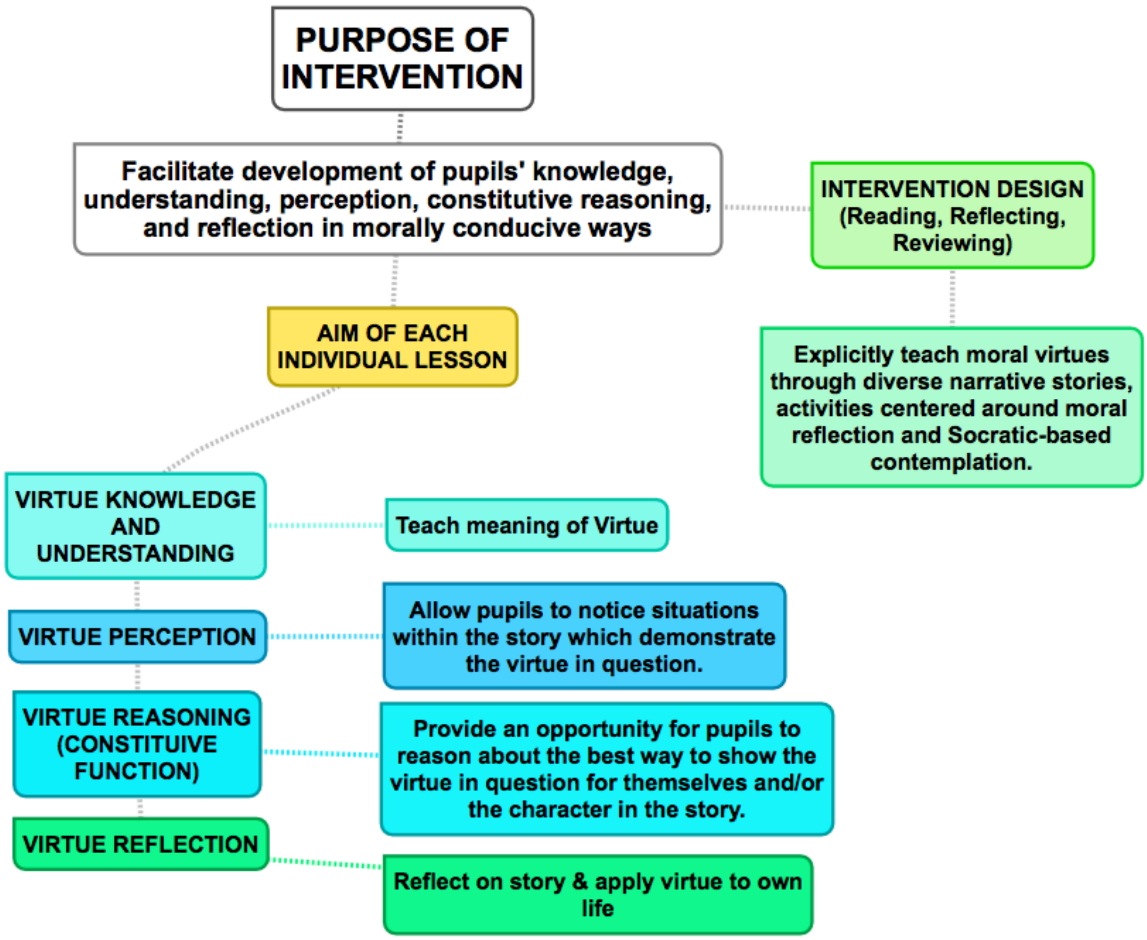


Figure 4. Outline of Lesson Aims

The intervention, as outlined in figure 5, was designed to promote the development of virtue literacy among primary school students by explicitly teaching moral virtues through the use of diverse narrative stories, activities centred around moral reflection, Socratic-based questioning and contemplation. The pre-structured focus group provided an opportunity for students to articulate their evolving understandings of virtue literacy in their own words, capturing the richness of their reflections and perspectives.

3.7.2 The 4R Model

The proposed 4R model (Read-Review-Reflect-Recall) is a forward-thinking, scaffolded approach to character education that encourages children to actively engage with, reflect on and recall the content they are learning, thereby informing important steps in the development of virtuous behaviour. As the designer of the model, I chose to base it in the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics, which upholds that the development good moral habits (promoted in childhood) are essential for the formation of good character which, in turn, is essential to living a flourishing life. For educators and academics wanting to use the 4R model in their classrooms, it is intended to be a practical, easy-to-implement tool for CE instruction. It is an original design, created by myself (a former teacher) with teachers (and the practical challenges they face) and children (ensuring they are cognitively and practically engaged) in mind, as it provides both a structured and accessible approach to teaching and learning the components of virtue literacy. More specifically, the model offers a straightforward structure for promoting virtue literacy and develops the components through active engaging in a structured way. In this way, the model helps ensure that character education is both developmentally appropriate (for children) and practically achievable (for teachers), bridging the gap between theory and practice.

The 4R Model for Virtue-based Teaching

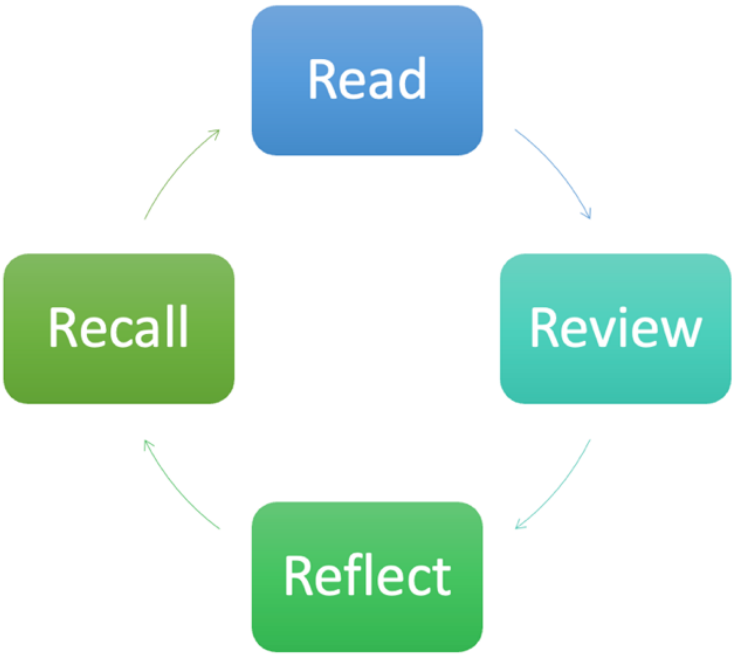


Figure 5. A Visual 4R Model for Virtue-Based Teaching

The 4R Model employs a circular learning approach where each stage builds upon the previous one (constructed), gradually leading to learners being able to *recall* what they have learnt, either in the same lesson, or in previous CE lessons. This way, any CE that is received by learners is reinforced and contributes to developing habitual virtue thinking, whereby, children develop the capacity to remember moral lessons from stories, consequences of decisions exhibited by the characters, emotions and other morally relevant features – each of which are critical to form habitual moral character.

Step	Description	Implementation
Read	Expose children to the virtue through reading or hearing a narrative story. This allows them to learn about the virtue in a relatable and engaging way.	Teacher presents a narrative story and students actively read it either together or individually. Strategic pauses for comprehension questions and Socratic questioning.
Review	Review the plot, characters in the story, specifically focusing on the virtue in question. This allows the story to be understood more contextually relevant to the virtue.	Students review the characters, plot or consequences of actions from the story. The teacher asks Socratic questions to help promote students to review the story in relation to the virtue.
Reflect	Encourage children to reflect on the virtue and how it relates to their own lives, making the virtue more meaningful and relevant.	Students reflect on virtues presented in the story and discuss their application to their own lives. Emphasises self-directed learning and creativity.
Recall	Recall the virtue and reflections from previous steps to retain and apply it in daily lives. Regular review makes the virtue an ingrained part of their moral compass.	Concept maps, discussions, peer activities or focus groups used to retrieve content learned and reinforce learning and knowledge retrieval.

Table 8. The Read-Review-Reflect-Recall (4R) Outline for Teaching Virtue Literacy

The Read-Review-Reflect-Recall (4R) outline is an effective method for teaching virtue literacy to children because it incorporates key principles of learning and memory retention. The implementation of the model can be adapted according to the learning needs of the pupils and is not conclusive to the methods used in this thesis. For example, incorporating a range of other activities during the different stages is encouraged; the Review stage, for instance, can include quizzes, group discussions, or think-pair-share activities. Similarly, the Reflect stage can include reflective journals. Finally, the Recall stage can be used for starter activities to

help children recall prior virtue learning. Overall, the 4R model is meant to be adaptable for teachers to help promote the development of virtue and character in a way that remains grounded in educational teaching and learning strategies, as outlined below.



Figure 6. The 4R Model as a Framework for Effective Virtue-Based Learning

3.7.3 Socratic Virtue Guide

In the intervention design, a key step was taken to develop the Socratic questions to help the children develop the capacity to deeply think about, reflect on, and understand the moral virtues presented in the narrative stories.

Due to a lack of purposeful guidance or resources on how best to use questioning to guide the teaching of virtue literacy in the classroom, a Socratic Virtue Guide was created with children aged 7–8 (or primary school children more generally) in mind. By asking scaffolded and age-appropriate questions, the children were encouraged to reflect on the moral implications of the story and apply their insights to their own lives. Taking into consideration the practical focus of the thesis and CE more broadly, the Socratic virtue guide was designed to:

- **Provide practical support for educators** - The guide provides a ready-to-use framework for implementing Socratic questioning in lessons, making it accessible for teachers who may lack formal training in character education or philosophical inquiry.
- **Encouraging children to self-reflect** - Children were prompted to think about how the virtues applied to their own lives and behaviours, making the learning process relevant and personal.
- **Be flexible to the children's needs** - The guide was adaptable across various contexts and age groups, allowing for questions to be scaffolded up or down based on students' developmental levels. For instance, for older students, Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956) could be applied to ask higher-order questions that focus on analysis, evaluation and creation.
- **Facilitating engagement throughout the lesson** - The use of scaffolded questions ensured that the discussions remained accessible and meaningful for younger children helping to promote their ability to reason through moral dilemmas and understand virtues at a deeper level.

Topic	Socratic Questions
Story Character Showing Virtue X	• In this story, what virtue does (character name) show to x? • How does he/she show that virtue? • What does this virtue tell us about (character name)? • Can you give me an example?
Choosing Between Virtues	• Why doesn't he/she choose to be (a different virtue) instead? • Why is it important that he/she chooses to be (virtue)?
Consequences of Not Showing Virtue	• What could happen if he/she doesn't show x?
Defining Virtue	• What does virtue x mean?
Personal Experience with Virtue	• Has there been a time when you showed the same (virtue)? • Do you know anyone who does/doesn't show this (virtue)?
Impact of Virtue on Others	• How would that affect someone? • What emotions would they feel?
Timing of Showing Virtue	• When is the right time to show virtue x? • What amount of virtue x is a good amount to show? • What could happen if we show too little or too much of virtue x?
Self-reflecting on Virtue	• How does the character's actions reflect their virtue? • In what ways could you apply this virtue to your own life? • Have you ever struggled with this virtue? If so, how did you overcome it?

Table 9. Socratic Questioning Guide for Children

During the intervention lessons, the Socratic approach involved three main steps:

1. During each session, I read a narrative story highlighting a specific virtue, followed by structured questions to provoke thought. For example, questions such as, *"What do you think the character could have done differently?"* or *"How might this virtue be important in your own life?"* - which invited children to reflect on the moral implications of the story.
2. After discussing the narrative, the children were encouraged to relate the virtues to their own lived experiences. This step involved open-ended prompts, such as *"Can you think of a time when you showed kindness or courage?"* or *"How might honesty help you at school or at home?"*

3. Group discussions provided an opportunity for children to build on one another's ideas, deepening their collective understanding of the virtues. The collaborative nature of these reflections ensured a participatory learning environment where children collaborated their thoughts on the virtue in question.

In summary, the Socratic approach to teaching moral virtues and in turn, engaging children in critical thinking and reflective skills is particularly significant given the developmental stage of the children. At this stage, children benefit from structured guidance on what virtues mean at a foundational level – but more importantly, how the virtues become relevant in their day-to-day lives. The Socratic approach uses scaffolded, age-appropriate questions to gently challenge their thinking while respecting their cognitive limits. For example, instead of asking abstract questions like *"What is courage?"* (which may be too complex), educators can frame questions such as *"Can you think of a time when you felt scared but decided to do the right thing anyway?"*. This then, makes the concept of courage accessible and relatable.

3.7.4 Focus Group Guide

To understand how the children developed their understanding of the six moral virtues, two focus groups were conducted. To explore the children's initial conceptualisations of virtues and how they connected these to their social worlds prior to the intervention, the first focus-group discussion was conducted. Following the intervention, a second focus-group discussion was held to examine how the children's understanding and engagement with virtues had developed, particularly focusing on how they could apply what they had explored during the lessons to their everyday lives. The second discussion followed a similar format to the first but provided space for the children to reflect on their experiences during the intervention and

how these influenced their conceptualisations of virtues in relation to their social interactions and environments.

Four children from each class and school participated in the focus-group discussions, which I facilitated as the educator leading the intervention. Practical considerations, such as time constraints and the developmental needs of the age group, made it necessary to work with smaller groups. This smaller size allowed for more meaningful engagement, promoting a comfortable and supportive environment where children could share their thoughts, reflections and ideas about the virtues they explored. This approach is consistent with the emphasis in qualitative research on creating participatory and child-centered spaces that allow for rich, nuanced insights into how children understand and relate moral concepts to their lived experiences (Christensen & James, 2017).

These sessions used pre-structured, open-ended questions to encourage the children to reflect on and articulate their conceptualisation of virtue within three main themes: what being virtuous means to them in the context of being a good human; how they see virtues playing a role in their everyday lives; and how they might approach situations involving difficult choices. Focus groups are particularly effective in qualitative research for promoting group dialogue and enabling participants to collaboratively explore complex concepts in a supportive environment (Bryers and Wilcox, 1991; Morgan, 1996). The discussions were guided by the children's responses and their own experiences, allowing their perspectives to shape the direction of the exploration. This is also consistent with Johnson (2017) who places emphasis on creating participatory spaces in research with children to centre their voices and experiences.

The children were not required to respond to all questions and the approach emphasised active listening, patience and providing time and space for them to think and share at their own pace. This further connects with Sanders and Munford (2005), who stress the importance of reflective and flexible research methods when working with young participants to ensure their agency and authentic engagement. By offering time and space for responses, the focus groups provided insights into the children's verbal reflections on virtue literacy and character.

Theme	Questions (Before Intervention)	Questions (After Intervention)
Understanding of Virtue	What do you think it means to be a good person? What other virtues can you think of?	Did you learn about any new virtues during the lessons? How do you think virtues help us become better people?
Application of Virtue in real life	Can you think of a time when you demonstrated a virtue such as kindness or honesty? What did you do and how did it make you feel?	Can you think of a time when you applied one of the virtues you learned in the lessons to a real-life situation? What did you do and how did it make you feel?
Decision-making process	Can you think of a time when you had to make a tough decision? What did you do and why?	Can you think of a time you had to make a tough decision and how has what we have learnt helped you?

Table 10. Outline of Focus Group Guide Before and After Intervention with Themes

From the preliminary lesson findings, the length of each focus group discussion was adapted (from 30 minutes) and limited to 20 minutes to keep the children engaged, attentive and active. This was because, at their age, it was unlikely they would be able to actively participate in a discussion for a prolonged time. Despite the shorter time, each discussion was conducted in a way that each participant had the opportunity to speak and answer questions, although the depth of answers varied across participants.

3.7.5 Designing the Intervention Schedule

This section sets out the precise schedule of the intervention and its aims. The intervention was designed to positively influence pupils' (1) knowledge; (2) understanding; (3 perception; (4) constitutive reasoning; and (5) reflective functioning. The design focused on seven (preliminary and main study) key moral virtues for a moral agent to flourish: compassion (preliminary), gratitude, courage, kindness, loyalty, honesty and humility.

Lesson no.	Type of Moral Virtue	Narrative Stories	Story Description
Pilot	Compassion	We're All Wonders by R.J. Palacio	This story showcases diversity in terms of the main character's unique appearance and emphasises the importance of treating all people with kindness and compassion, no matter their physical differences.
Lesson One	Gratitude	All Are Welcome by Alexandra Penfold and illustrated by Suzanne Kaufman	This story showcases gratitude as a moral virtue through a diverse group of children who come together in a school setting. The story highlights the importance of gratitude to appreciate the differences in the people around us and to be thankful for the good things we have. The book encourages children to be grateful for the diverse community they live in and to show appreciation for the contributions made by others. Through this story, children can learn about the value of gratitude and inclusivity in a fun and engaging way.
Lesson Two	Courage	The Proudest Blue by Ibtihaj Muhammed	This story is about a Muslim-American girl who overcomes the challenges of being different and stands up for herself. The girl demonstrates courage by being true to herself, facing her fears, and standing up for what she believes in, even in the face of adversity. The story highlights the importance of courage as a moral virtue and how it can help individuals navigate challenges and obstacles in life.
Lesson Three	Kindness	Kindness is my Superpower by Alicia Ortego	This story is about a young girl who transforms the world around her with acts of kindness and compassion. The girl demonstrates kindness through her actions, making the world a better place for everyone around her. The story highlights the importance of kindness as a moral virtue and how it can help individuals make a positive impact in the world.
Lesson Four	Loyalty	The Ugly Duckling by Hans Christian Andersen	This story demonstrates the importance of loyalty through the journey of a duckling who is different from the others and faces rejection but eventually finds friends who accept and support him.
Lesson Five	Honesty	The Empty Pot	This story is a fable from China about a young boy named Ping who is given a seed by the emperor and told to grow the most beautiful flower. Ping works hard to care for the seed, but it never grows. When the emperor asks to see the flower, Ping must face him and tell the truth about what happened. The story teaches the importance of honesty as a virtue and shows how it can help individuals earn respect and trust from others.
Lesson Six	Humility	The Lion and the Mouse by Aesop	This classic fable follows a lion who is saved by a small mouse. The lion learns the importance of humility when he realises that even the smallest creature can be helpful.

Table 11. Intervention Schedule and Narrative Selection

Each virtue was discussed in the context of a short narrative parable, chosen based on accessibility (for age group), diversity, relatability and length. Each lesson employed the 4R model for greater clarity and coherence. The intervention timetable was deemed important to the study overall as it provides the backbone of the research aims – to increase the children's virtue literacy across all four components.

Table 11 outlines the seven lessons of the virtue literacy intervention (including the preliminary virtue), alongside the type of moral virtue on which each lesson focused (see Appendix 4). The narrative stories listed under each lesson served as a resource for teaching the specified moral virtue. The stories were used to spark discussions, provide examples and create opportunities for students to reflect on and apply the moral virtue in real-life scenarios. After reflecting on my experience in teaching English – for instance, teaching students how to write stories, examining characters' lives, analysing the language to reveal plot and conflict, and understanding the curriculum – I understood how to create the list of stories that would guide the intervention. This also meant that the stories needed to be age-appropriate in relatability and engagement – stories the children would want to read and keep them interested. Moreover, they had to meet certain criteria particular to the age group and the virtue in question: characters of diverse ethnicities, explicit or implicit virtue, opportunities for Socratic questioning, accessible vocabulary, and appropriate length for the age group and time conditions.

Moreover, the diversity of these narratives was also depicted by the various cultural background and experiences of their characters (i.e., stories from a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds intimate the focus on cultural and ethnic diversity in moral education). In addition, narrative diversity helps promote empathy, understanding and respect for the

different perspectives and experiences of others, especially those from other cultures. As such, the narrative stories formed an integral part of the 4R model for teaching virtue literacy. The 4R model represents the key structure for learning about, understanding and internalising moral virtue. Despite the challenge of ensuring that the stories met the criteria stipulated, one of the primary objectives was for the stories to be virtue-based. This was defined as a story that has a moral teaching through which children can learn to better understand how moral choices can benefit them and others in meaningful and fulfilling ways. For this reason, the selection process for appropriate stories was specifically designed for the 7–8 age group and in relation to virtue learning and teaching potential.

3.8 Data Analysis

This section describes how the research data was interpreted and understood. Different qualitative approaches, like thematic analysis and a marking rubric were used to identify patterns and meanings within the data. Furthermore, I describe each of the data analysis steps taken for each data collection approach and how they worked to establish a more detailed picture of how the children engaged with, conceptualised and ultimately developed their understanding of virtue literacy.

3.8.1 Development and Refinement of the Virtue Literacy Marking Rubric

To support the qualitative exploration of virtue literacy, I designed the rubric based on constructivist learning theory, virtue ethics and other education-based assessment approaches. Rubrics are widely recognised in educational research for enhancing the credibility and depth of assessment practices (Reddy, 2007; Reddy & Andrade, 2010). Using constructivist principles, the rubric captures both the cognitive aspects of virtue literacy and students'

ability to apply virtues in real-life situations and reflect on personal experiences. To structure the levels of assessment, I incorporated elements from Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revised taxonomy, ensuring that the rubric evaluated not only theoretical knowledge but also how students engage with and reflect on virtues in practice.

In the preliminary phase, it became clear that the original rubric required significant revisions to be made in order to adapt it to the cognitive capacities and developmental levels of the 7–8-year-olds. Those adjustments included reducing the complexity of language, clarifying expectations and describing explicitly which virtue components - each of which were scaffolded to meet the children's age group. These modifications made it easier to calibrate the assessment tool against children's developmental demands, providing a more meaningful tool for evaluating their progress in virtue literacy.

More importantly, each mind-map was analysed using the marking rubric (table 13), that was specifically designed to explore the children's pre- and post-virtue literacy conceptualisations. In this way, the rubric helped act as a framework for interpreting the children's conceptualisations across four key categories: knowledge, perception, reasoning and reflection. Although the categories were assigned a scale ranging from 0 to 3 (with 0 being the lowest and 3 the highest), as outlined in Table 13, the analysis was conducted qualitatively to explore the depth, nuance and richness of the participants' conceptualisations of the virtues. This was essential and ensured that although the scoring served as a guide, the emphasis still remained on uncovering how the children reflected on and engaged with each virtue and component of virtue literacy. This, in turn allowed for a deeper exploration of how children articulated their understanding of virtues and connected them to their lived experiences.

Criteria	Score of 3	Score of 2	Score of 1	Score of 0
Virtue Knowledge	Accurately labels and explains important parts of the virtue with some details. For example, they can define compassion as "helping others when they are sad or hurt."	Labels and explains some important parts of the virtue, but with less detail. For example, they mention that compassion means being nice to others.	Labels or explains parts of the virtue vaguely, with minimal understanding. For example, they mention being nice, but do not fully explain.	No Comments
Virtue Perception	Includes examples and connections of how the virtue can be used in real-life situations. For example, they can mention comforting a friend who is upset or sharing toys with others as acts of compassion.	Includes limited examples or connections of how the virtue can be used in real-life situations. For example, they mention being nice to family members, but struggle to provide specific instances.	Provides vague examples or connections of how the virtue can be used in real-life situations. For example, they mention being nice but without concrete examples.	No Comments
Virtue Reasoning	Makes connections between the virtue and other concepts or ideas, demonstrating some understanding. For example, they can explain that showing compassion is similar to being kind and caring.	Makes limited connections between the virtue and other concepts or ideas. For example, they mention that compassion is important, but struggle to explain why.	Makes vague or unclear connections between the virtue and other concepts or ideas. For example, they mention compassion but offer little explanation of its relevance.	No Comments
Virtue Reflection	Provides reflection on personal experiences and values related to the virtue, showing some understanding. For example, they share a story about a time when they showed compassion towards a friend in need.	Provides limited reflection on personal experiences and values related to the virtue. For example, they mention that being nice is important but struggle to elaborate further.	Provides vague reflection on personal experiences and values related to the virtue. For example, they mention being nice but offer little detail about personal experiences.	No Comments

Table 12. Virtue Literacy Marking Rubric

3.8.2 Mind-Maps

Arguably, one of the most common criticisms in the implementation of character education is about how character can be assessed, because character traits can be elusive and difficult to quantify. However, the rubric described in the previous section (see table 13) was applied to address this issue, specifically with the aim of assessing virtue literacy using mind-maps—a method chosen for its accessibility and engagement with children. By exploring their virtue lexicon, the children developed their own 'virtue literacy mind map' outlining their understanding of the virtue in question. The previous qualitative marking rubric described helped support the comparative analysis of the children's pre- and post-intervention virtue literacy mind-maps. It also provided a set of criteria for judging the content of these maps, based on the set of descriptors (progressing from limited to more insightful).

A qualitative marking rubric was used to explore the richness, clarity and depth of the children's conceptualisations of virtue terms that were present on the pre- and post-intervention mind-maps produced by the participants. The rubric provided a structured framework for analysing how the children expressed their understanding of virtues on the mind-maps, enabling a nuanced interpretation of the changes and continuities in their virtue literacy. In essence, the rubric guided an interpretive analysis, focusing on how the children articulated and connected virtues to their personal and social contexts.

Moreover, the rubric was developed in consultation with a colleague who is a qualified teacher with extensive experience in assessment protocols and who is also familiar with character education. The colleague graded the pre- and post mind-map reflections blind to the identity of the participant. Next, we collaboratively examined the findings to refine the

descriptors and ensure alignment in how the rubric was applied. This iterative process ensured that the rubric served as a meaningful tool for qualitatively understanding and interpreting the children's responses.

In summary, the virtue literacy rubric served as a useful and adaptable framework for understanding the children's development of virtue literacy and the role of the virtue-based intervention. More importantly, the rubric offers educators and researchers a valuable tool for qualitatively exploring how children engage with and conceptualise moral virtues.

3.8.3 Focus Groups & Themes

For the qualitative data analysis within this study, I employed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a useful approach for the analysis of children's pre- and post-intervention development of virtue literacy for three reasons. First, it identifies the patterns and themes that emerge from the expressions and experiences of the children. Second, as thematic analysis is grounded in the data, it appeared to be a valuable method for exploring how children understand virtues across various contexts, providing more enriching insights into their cognitive and moral development. Third, the flexibility of thematic analysis allowed me to adapt the coding to match the developmental levels of the participants, ensuring that the analysis was both thorough and considerate of the children's voices and perspectives.

Figure 9 presents the stages followed as part of the thematic analysis in this study:

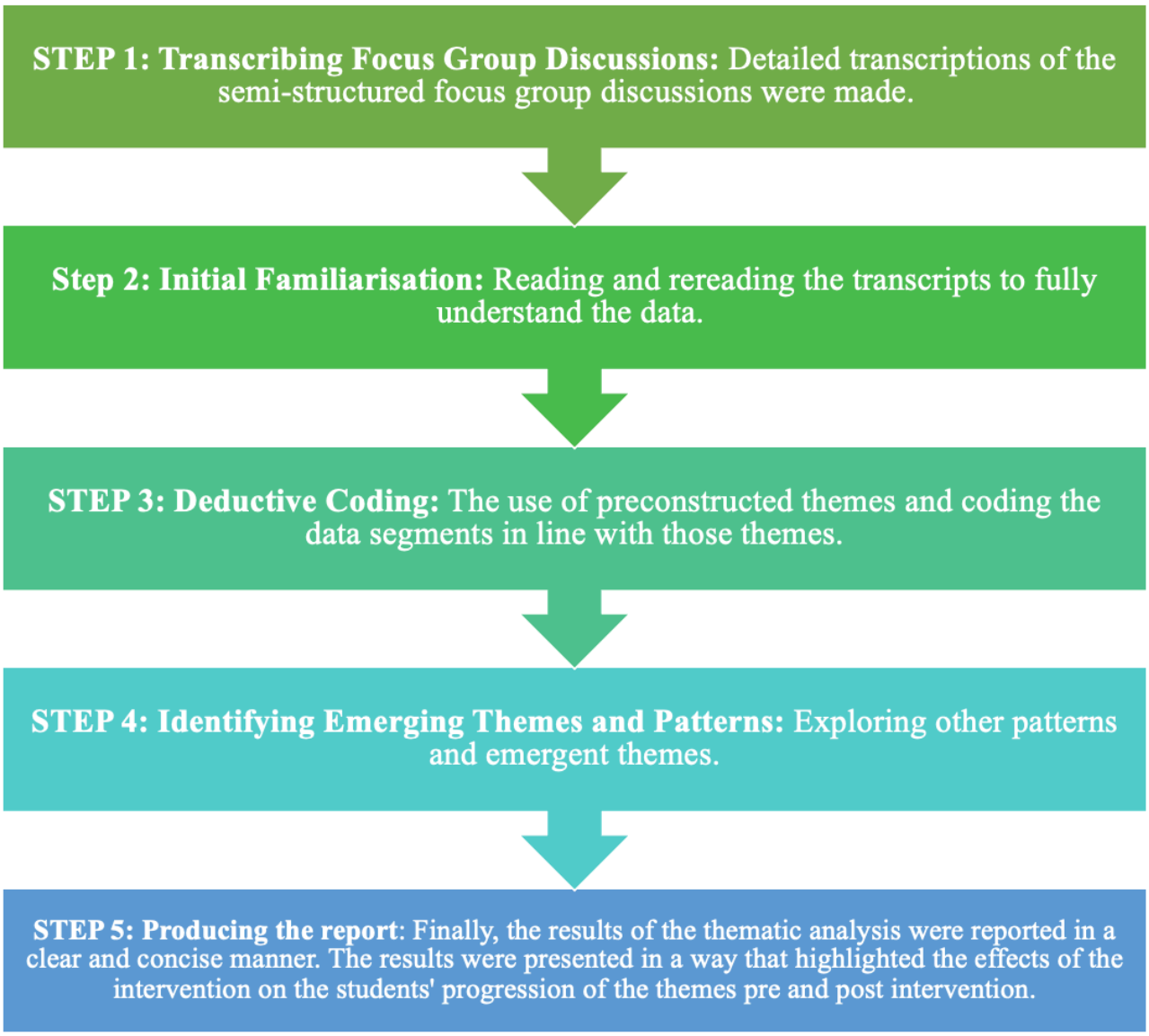


Figure 7. Stages of Thematic Analysis

Transcription Process

All focus groups were transcribed line by line, with attention given to both verbal and some non-verbal cues (e.g., pauses, interruptions; see Appendix 9). I then read the transcripts several times to become more familiar with the data.

Coding Process

Theme	Example of Coded Responses	Colour code
Understanding Virtues	'Helping people and not being mean'	Orange
Application to Real Life	'I helped my little sister tie her shoes'	Yellow
Decision-Making Processes	'I told the truth about eating the last yogurt, even though I got told off'	Blue
Challenges in Applying Virtues	'Sometimes, like when others are not being nice, it's hard to be the only one who is'	Green

Table 13. Example of Coded Responses

The data was then coded by identifying recurring themes and patterns that represented how the children were developing their meanings of the virtues or how they used them. Given that the participants were younger in age, I semi-structured the questions for the focus groups to keep the focus groups active, accessible and at a developmentally appropriate level for the children.

Coding the participants' responses according to the predetermined themes and emergent themes allowed the analysis to focus on how the experience changed the children's understanding and use of the virtues. In addition, the coding process is an important method for maximising the rigour of any interpretive analysis (Braun & Clark, 2012).

Initially, I approached the transcripts with three pre-structured themes based on the intervention objectives:

1. **Understanding of Virtues**: How participants understood the meaning of the six moral virtues.
2. **Application to Real Life**: How participants described applying the virtues they learned in everyday situations they experienced.
3. **Decision-Making Processes**: How participants discussed making virtue-related decisions.

During the coding process, I discovered additional themes; however, due to the limited scope of the study, I selected only one of these themes that seemed valuable to explore further:

4. **Challenges of Virtue Application**: An emergent theme was how participants described the difficulties or obstacles they encountered when trying to apply the virtues, such as peer pressure or fear of negative consequences.

To perform the analysis, the coding approach was adapted for deductive coding, in which the predetermined themes were applied to the data gathered from the focus groups. Due to the age group of the children, deductive coding ensured that the analysis was consistent with the purposes of the study, enabling a systematic investigation of how the intervention on virtue literacy affected the participants' cognitive development of moral virtues in relation to the three themes described above. In addition, using a deductive approach allowed for a targeted examination of specific areas of interest while staying open to the identification of any other emerging themes or patterns from the data. This approach is supported by research that

claims the usefulness of deductive coding in maintaining consistency and focus on studies involving predetermined themes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The coding allowed me to clearly capture understanding of the children's responses. The participants' statements were highlighted under each theme, and I made sure to check the consistency of the data across participants. I also took into consideration the overlaps between themes: for example, where a participant discussed a situation in which they had to decide whether to help a friend who had been unkind in the past. This response not only demonstrates their practical application of virtue in a real-life situation, but also the challenges they consider in doing so. One solution that I used to minimise any interference from overlapping themes was to code flexibly. For instance, when a child said something in response to a decision-making case that was also applicable as a challenge related to applying a virtue, I double-coded the response. In this way, clearer distinctions were possible without undermining the participants' moral understanding.

3.9 Advantages and Limitations of the Research Design

This section highlights some potential limitations that future teachers or researchers should consider before implementing the qualitative research design proposed here, particularly in understanding the development of virtue literacy among children.

- **Subjective Analysis** – Firstly, the use of analysis procedures applied to the data for the purpose of this study involved using a marking rubric to evaluate student's mind-maps and thematic analysis to interpret the pre-determined and emerging themes. Such analytical approaches are more dependent on subjective interpretations of the data and therefore different researchers may come to different conclusions about the same data

depending on their own viewpoints, biases or analytical frameworks. Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that although thematic analysis offers richness and flexibility when exploring qualitative data, it is not as reproducible as quantitative approaches. This limitation is especially relevant to this study because it relied solely on interpreting the children's conceptualising of virtues in the focus group discussions and the children's mind maps – which inherently introduces the potential for researcher interpretation to influence the findings. I did indeed make efforts to mitigate such limitations through using peer reviews and a coding framework, but the potential for interpretation bias remains highly plausible.

- **Difficult to Generalise** – Secondly, by its very nature, qualitative research places more emphasis on depth than breadth, concentrating on an exploratory investigation of the phenomenon, rather than generating conclusions that can be widely applied. In relation to the present study, the data sets are derived from two different school settings previously described (see section 3.5). Taking this factor of the study into account, two main limitations need to be considered. The first is that the study did not employ ethnographic methods, which might have provided a more accurate and holistic understanding of the school's cultures, practices and everyday interactions. Therefore, whilst the framing of 'virtues-focused vs non-virtues-focused' schools for the purpose of this study was required to answer RQ2, the framing was solely based on my interpretation of the available data gathered - rather than a definitive or exhaustive account of the schools ethos and practices based on empirical research. It is important then, to note that without such immersive and potentially longitudinal data that ethnography could offer, this framing remains an interpretive lens shaped by the evidence I was able to gather, rather

than an absolute characterisation. Building on this limitation, the second limitation is that the findings are deeply rooted in the specific cultural and demographic contexts of these schools, shaped by their ethos, faculty and student populations. As a result, the study's conclusions are inherently context-dependent, reflecting the particular dynamics of these institutions rather than being generalisable to wider populations. In other words, the findings may apply to only the group of students and teachers that took part in this study.

- **Sampling Biases** – Thirdly, a key limitation of this study lies in potential sampling biases derived from the convenience and purposeful strategies I adopted that will have influenced the findings. For example, I was able to compare the results across contexts because I only chose two schools, but this meant that the purposeful sampling strategy inevitably gave preference to particular students over a wider range of experiences. As a result, the diversity of experiences and perspectives captured in the study are limited. In addition, the use of convenience sampling meant that I opted for a practical and accessible route to recruiting schools rather than ensuring a balanced representation of schools. This approach may have inadvertently excluded schools with differing approaches to character education, such as those serving more economically disadvantaged populations or those with alternative educational philosophies. Such exclusion limits the study's ability to capture the full spectrum of how virtues are understood and taught in varying environments of children in the same age group. Furthermore, because participation in the study was optional, participants and schools may have been more inclined to be more engaged in the lessons or had a greater incentive in doing so, which could have led to self-selection bias - where the study's findings reflect the views of these engaged participants rather than the wider group. Consequently, this

limitation reinforces the potential for the results to be influenced by the enthusiasm of those who opted in, rather than capturing the full diversity of experiences and views.

- **Small Sample Size** – Fourthly, the small sample size used for this study further limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to wider populations or contexts. While the focused approach allowed for in-depth exploration of how the children developed their conceptualisations, it also meant that the results represent only a narrow portion of the population. In other words, the number of children involved was insufficient to capture the full spectrum of experiences and conceptualisations across different educational contexts and cannot be claimed to capture the cognitive and moral development of every child at this age. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note, qualitative research often relies on small, purposefully selected samples to gain insight into particular phenomena. While this approach was appropriate for exploring virtue literacy, expanding the sample size in future research would allow for greater diversity in perspectives and more robust conclusions.
- **Social Desirability Bias –** Fifthly, an important limitation of this study, is the possibility that the children were affected by social desirability bias. Children participating in the study may have been inclined to provide responses they believed were expected or socially acceptable, rather than their genuine reflections. For instance, it is plausible that children answered questions or gave responses in order to fit into the 'correct' answers. This bias is particularly challenging to mitigate in studies, specifically involving younger participants, who may have a heightened desire to please adults or peers. As Fisher (1993) highlights, social desirability bias can compromise the authenticity and richness of qualitative data, particularly in focus group settings. In this study, efforts were made to

create a comfortable and non-judgmental environment to encourage honest responses, but the potential impact of this bias on the findings cannot be entirely discounted.

- **Constraints of Largely Untested Instruments in the Age Group –** Finally, the instruments and methodologies that were created for this study, including the rubric, the innovative 4R model and the overall design of the intervention were created specifically for this study and tailored for the age group. Therefore, while these tools were tailored to the study's objectives, they remain largely unvalidated for broader use. This limitation poses challenges in terms of comparability, as the findings cannot easily be situated within the broader body of research on character education. Validation of these instruments across diverse contexts and populations is necessary to establish their reliability and practical usefulness. Future research should therefore be aimed at developing and validating these tools across educational contexts.

However, it is hoped that these limitations are offset by several key strengths:

- **Flexibility** – The nature of the activities - the narrative story, the Socratic questioning and the 4R model helped keep the students more engaged and provided more flexibility in how different students with diverse learning needs and cultural backgrounds accessed can the learning. This also provided more support for (me) the teacher to scaffold the lesson to individual and group needs. For instance, some children were able to engage more deeply with the material by relating it to their own experiences, while others benefited from the guided discussions that the model facilitated. This flexibility not only supported differentiated learning but also encouraged a more inclusive approach to character education. According to Tomlinson (2001), flexible and differentiated teaching practices

are essential for meeting diverse learners' needs, making this aspect of the study an important strength of the study.

- **Trustworthiness of Findings** – Having more than one source of data (e.g., mind-maps and focus groups) enhanced the credibility and richness of the analysis by enabling a comparison of insights across different methods. Triangulating these approaches therefore made it possible to comprehend children's virtue literacy development in a more thorough manner. For instance, the focus groups offered a verbal and more discussion-based exploration of the children's application of knowledge, whereas the mind maps presented written representations of their ideas and conceptualisations.
- **Developmental appropriateness** – I choose to design the intervention that was tailored to the developmental stage of the participating children. The key aspects that were customised included: (1) The revised definition of virtue literacy, (2) the novel 4R model, (3) the semi-structured nature of the focus groups including the Socratic virtue guide and (4) the marking rubric – each designed for children of this age to make the intervention developmentally appropriate. This was a key strength of the study and thereby minimised limitations around the quality and accuracy of the data collected and analysed.
- **Use of Qualitative Methods –** Lastly, the qualitative approach used in this study was a significant strength as it offered a richer and more contextually relevant insight into how the children in the two schools develop their understanding of virtues and relate them to their everyday social experiences including the challenges they face. For example, the qualitative methods (e.g., semi-structured focus groups, using Socratic questioning and mind-maps) helped me uncover 'what the children are learning' and 'how they are applying such knowledge' to their real-life experiences and understanding of the world.

This provided rich data, particularly evident in the children's ability to progress their conceptualisations over the course of the intervention. The qualitative approach then, highlights the depth and variety of children's viewpoints rather than striving for objectivity or generalisation. In this way, a more genuine investigation of how virtues are understood and applied in the children's real social settings is enabled and ultimately helped children understand virtues in a way that was both relevant and anchored in their environment - a key objective of character education.

Another key strength of using qualitative methods is its emphasis on interpretation and exploration which meant that my role in both designing the intervention and understanding the data as a teacher-researcher was particularly beneficial for offering a pedagogical perspective. With the experience of teaching and being physically present in the classroom, I was able to not only observe what the children were learning and engaging with, including the challenges - but adapt my approach based on the real, live needs of the students. This became particularly important during the preliminary focus group whereby I could facilitate discussions and adapt my approach based on the children's responses. Similarly, the development of the 4R Model was also another key advantage of the study's use of qualitative approaches. Rather than following a fixed structure - I was able to adapt and improve the model whilst illuminating the disadvantage and advantages based on how the children engaged with the lessons in real time. This, I would argue was the highlight of thesis that helped me offer some unique perspectives on ways we could potentially bridge the gap between the abstract nature of character theory and character practice.

Finally, in regard to exploring the student voices, the qualitative approach was fundamental in helping shape the design of the intervention, with particular emphasis on capturing how the children conceptualised their understanding of virtues in their own words and how they made sense of what they were learning. In essence, both the flexibility and rich nature of qualitative methods, combined with the emphasis on pedagogy meant that I was able to provide a unique application of qualitative methods to align with the goals of the study.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

As this was a study among a vulnerable population (all participants were under 18), the initial consent form was written for parents, with permission slips to be signed and a deadline for their return stated in the consent form so that the intervention could begin in a timely manner. If a student did not return the signed consent form prior to the deadline, they were asked to sit with a different teacher in a different room and continue their school activities as normal.

To address any potential ethical issues, I distributed an information sheet to the parents explaining the purpose of the study, and verbally outlined all aspects of the study with the children so that they would understand and be able to ask questions on any aspect they were uncomfortable with. The children were also asked to provide consent for their participation on a form. If there were still lingering questions about my study for the parents, they were welcome to email me directly via the email address provided on the information letter; they could also call my lead supervisor. In addition, it was crucial that the children understood their right to withdraw, and I personally explained this to them verbally to ensure they comprehended the process. Participants and their parents were encouraged to speak to me, their class teacher or the pastoral lead if they had any questions or concerns, or if they wished

to withdraw from the study. If a participant wanted to withdraw, any data obtained from them was immediately destroyed and was not used in the research. The project received full ethical approval from the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee ERN_22-1020. The child consent form, parental information sheet and parental consent form can be found in Appendix 1.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of my research exploring the influence of the virtue-based intervention in promoting virtue literacy in primary school children across two different primary schools – one with and one without a virtue ethos.

The chapter opens with a presentation of the preliminary lesson data (before and after the preliminary lesson) on the virtue compassion. The preliminary lesson involved one class size of 20 children aged 7–8 with only one focus group. The findings from the preliminary lesson were explored and interpreted to refine the methods used for the main study, with particular emphasis given to the adjustments made to the rubric used to interpret children's conceptualisations of virtue literacy, which was an essential step to ensure the tools aligned with the developmental abilities of the young participants. After an analysis of the preliminary lesson's teaching methods (including the Socratic questioning), I critically discuss the insights gained from these methods and explore the adaptions needed to ensure that they fit with the children's learning needs in order to facilitate their understanding of virtue literacy. I also discuss the use of the narrative stories and the focus groups, and how these contributed to the study's overarching aims and objectives.

I then shift my focus to interpreting the key preliminary and main study findings. Such findings provide a foundation for understanding how children conceptualise and engage with virtues, highlighting changes in their evolving conceptions of virtue literacy across the individual virtues. Particular attention is given to the illustrative examples of participant

mind-maps and how they provide rich, qualitative insights into the children's reflections and interpretations of virtue.

Following this, Chapter 5 explores the influence of the virtue intervention in developing virtue literacy across both schools as a whole. The discussion situates the findings of the study in the context of existing research on moral philosophy and moral psychology – specifically in relation to the individual virtues, and each component of virtue literacy – as outlined in chapter 2. Following this, I finalise the thesis (chapter 6) with the vision of CE in mind, including how my findings contribute to CE discourse and pedagogy – identifying key areas where further research and practical applications can enhance the understanding and teaching of virtues in educational settings.

4.2 Stage One: Preliminary Lesson Findings

The preliminary lesson provided an initial opportunity to explore and refine the intervention methods (prior to the main study) to ensure that they were suitable, practical and accessible for the younger age group. In doing so, the preliminary lesson informed the following research questions:

1. Do the methods fit well with the characteristics and developmental needs of the sample population?

2. Are the intervention and assessment materials appropriately adapted for the sample population?

In this way, the qualitative approaches adopted in the preliminary lesson (further detailed throughout this chapter) allowed me to understand and explore how the methods functioned in practice before conducting the main study.

The preliminary lesson on the development of virtue literacy focused on 'compassion' and was delivered and explored with a group of 20 children (aged 7-8, year 3) of mixed genders and academic ability. The children's progress and responses were noted and interpreted based on the following step-by-step evaluation overview:

Step 1 – Qualitative methods were selected which allowed me to carefully select the number of methods that would be appropriate to assess for the scope of the study.

Step 2 – Mind-maps were used as visual tools during the evaluation which allowed me to ensure the methods of assessment were suitable for the age group.

Step 3 – Socratic questioning techniques were applied within the individual and group discussions with the children throughout the lesson. The 4R model (detailed in section 3.9.2) was trailed. This allowed me to practically trial the pedagogical methods to further ensure they were engaging, provided opportunity for active engagement, inclusive to diverse learning needs and lastly, would provide the relevant data to answer the research aims and objectives of the study.

Step 4 – Following steps 1,2 and 3, one focus-group was conducted. This allowed me to understand and gauge the number of participant's required for the main study focus groups, the pre-structured questions and the engagement levels of the discussions.

The data collected in the preliminary lesson proved to be a good indicator of how children engage with and conceptualise virtue literacy, specifically with regard to the virtue of compassion. This stage also provided an opportunity to refine the assessment tools and pedagogical approaches before the main study, ensuring they were better aligned with the developmental and cognitive needs of the children.

4.2.1 Mind-Maps, Rubric Assessments and Amendments

The preliminary lesson results revealed that the use of mind-maps as a tool for exploring children's conceptualisations of virtue literacy was successful among 7–8 year-old children. The children engaged actively with the task and it provided key perspectives and ideas into their initial and evolving conceptualisations of moral virtues. However, when reflecting on the participants' responses to the prompt 'what compassion means', it became clear that the original marking rubric designed to interpret the mind-maps required further refinement. The rubric, which aimed to align the children's responses with the intended learning outcomes, needed adjustments to better cater to the cognitive abilities and developmental stages of this age group. As such, these revisions focused on ensuring the descriptors were clear, accessible and appropriate for capturing the nuanced ways in which young children articulate and reflect on virtues.

More importantly to the study's overarching design, the refinement process not only sought to enhance the rubric's alignment with the developmental needs of the children but also to ensure it facilitated a more interpretive and meaningful analysis of their responses. The aim was to move beyond simple categorisation and enable a deeper exploration of how virtue literacy develops through the children's reflections, expressions and lived experiences (see

section, 3.10.1). In essence, this iterative process of reflection and adjustment demonstrates the importance of adapting tools and frameworks in CE to better align with the unique needs and capacities of young learners, particularly in qualitative research that prioritises understanding and meaning making.

Mind-Maps

The mind-maps were qualitatively coded and analysed to enhance the understanding of how children conceptualised and connected to the virtue of compassion. The key findings that emerged from the use of mind-maps were as follows:

4. **Engagement** – The mind-maps provided an opportunity for children to express what they had learnt in relation to the lesson, in a visual and creative manner. The simpler and non-linear activity, meant that children could articulate their thoughts spontaneously and intuitively, reflecting their unique perspectives and understandings.
5. **Understanding the Virtues** – The children's pre-lesson mind-maps allowed me to explore their initial ideas and conceptualisations of the virtue 'compassion' - an effective strategy to assess for learning (AFL), and therefore revealing their prior experiences and understanding. The simplicity of their mind-maps, as well as the ideas and words that they choose, provided an indication of their pre-knowledge and interpretations of compassion in their social and personal contexts.
6. **Growth and Progress** – After the virtue literacy lesson, the children created new mind-maps. A qualitative comparison of these post-lesson mind-maps with their pre-lesson counterparts showed clear differences and growth in knowledge (see Figures 8–9). Here, the participant was able to add more detail, show deeper understanding and make more

insightful connections – a reflection of their developing understanding and internalisation of compassion following the lesson (see figures 8-9).

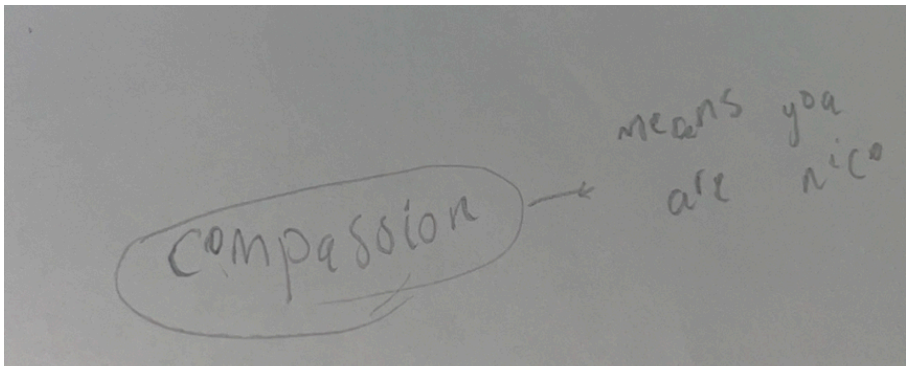


Figure 8. Preliminary Participant No.5's Mind-Map of Compassion Post-Lesson

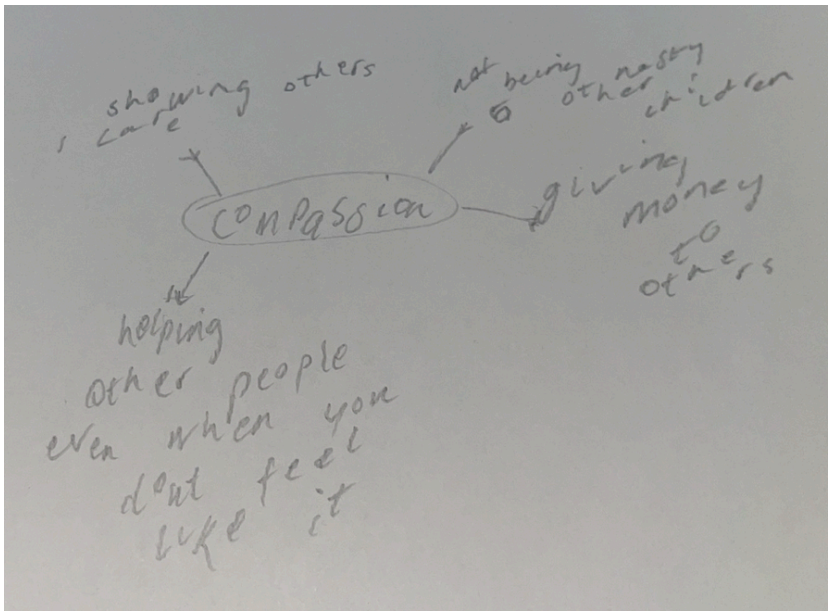


Figure 9. Preliminary Participant No.5's Mind-Map of Compassion Pre-Lesson

Figure 8 presents the compassion mind-map that participant 5 created at the beginning of the lesson of the preliminary lesson, while Figure 9 depicts the same participant's compassion mind-map after the lesson had finished. By exploring the visual changes, the qualitative

progression in the child's conceptualisation of compassion can be explained. In Figure 8, participant 5 appears to have a limited understanding of compassion, represented by only one characteristic ('being nice'). However, when comparing Figure 8 with Figure 9, it is clear that participant 5 has expanded and deepened their conceptualisation of compassion. In Figure 9, participant number 5 has expanded their comprehension of the term by listing a number of other facets not mentioned at the beginning of the lesson. In the post-intervention mind-map, the child has added new aspects of compassion, such as 'not being nasty to other children', 'help other people when you don't feel like it', 'giving money to others', and 'showing others I care'. Similar patterns of growth and nuanced understanding were observed across the other participant mind-maps and seems that the preliminary lesson proved that positive qualitative shifts occurred in the participants' thoughts and reflections about compassion. Furthermore, the lesson appears to have encouraged deeper and more diverse conceptualisations of this important virtue.

4.2.2 Pre-and Post- Mind-Map: Rubric Assessment

In this section, I explored and interpreted the data collected using the adapted rubric as the marking tool to understand the participants' conceptualisations of virtue literacy. The tool was applied to the virtue of compassion, both pre- and post-preliminary lesson. For each of the four quadrants of virtue literacy, the students were given a score of 1, 2 or 3. A 0 was given to any participant who did not participate in the activity or was absent from the session. However, while the rubric provided a structured framework, the primary focus was on the qualitative interpretation of the children's responses. I analysed the data to explore the depth, nuance, and richness of the participants' conceptualisations of compassion, both pre- and post-preliminary lesson. The scoring served as a guide, but the emphasis remained on

uncovering how the children reflected on and engaged with the concept of compassion, ensuring that the findings captured their unique perspectives and developmental progress.

An asterisk (*) next to a participant's number indicates an EAL (English as a second language) student or an LD (learning difficulties) student. It is important to note here, that in addition to recognising learning barriers – the participants literacy levels were also a critical consideration in the study. While the study did not directly control for literacy levels in a quantitative sense, the methods and tools were designed to accommodate varying levels of literacy among participants. For example, the use of mind maps and Socratic questioning allowed children to express their ideas through visual or verbal means, reducing the reliance on written literacy. This approach was particularly effective in ensuring that children who might struggle with traditional literacy tasks were not disadvantaged in their ability to articulate and reflect on moral virtues. In addition, sentence starters and extra support were provided by myself for children who might have otherwise struggled to access the lesson.

Nonetheless, literacy levels may still have had an indirect impact on the children's conceptualisations. Children with higher literacy skills may have been better equipped to articulate their thoughts in greater detail, whether through writing, drawing, or verbal discussions. In contrast, children with lower literacy skills might have found it more challenging to express their conceptualisations fully, potentially leading to a less detailed representation of their understanding. With this in mind, to account for the potential influences of literacy levels on the results, the analysis focused on qualitative themes and patterns rather than making comparisons based solely on the quantity or detail of the responses. Finally, the findings emphasise that any differences in children's ability to

articulate their understanding may not solely reflect differences in virtue literacy but could also relate to broader developmental or literacy-related factors.

Preliminary Lesson Findings

PARTICIPANT NO	PRE KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING	POST KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING	PRE-PERCEPTION	POST PERCEPTION	PRE-REASONING	POST REASONING	PRE-REFLECTION	POST REFLECTION	PRE-OVERALL SCORE	POST OVERALL SCORE
1	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	2	4	7
2	1	3	1	3	1	3	1	3	4	12
3	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	4	7
4	2	3	2	3	1	3	1	3	6	12
5	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	4	5
6*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
7	3	3	1	3	3	3	1	3	8	12
8*	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	4	7
9	1	3	1	3	1	3	1	1	4	10
10	2	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	5	8
11*	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	4	7
12	2	3	1	3	1	3	1	2	5	11
13	2	3	1	3	1	2	1	1	5	9
14	1	3	1	2	1	2	1	2	4	9
15	2	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	5	8
16	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	2	6	7
17	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	4	8
18*	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	5
19	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	6	7
20	2	3	1	3	2	3	1	3	6	12

Table 14. Scores for Preliminary School on Virtue Compassion

Based on Table 16, the pre-lesson data on the virtue of compassion showed a range of initial scores for the participants, which indicates that they had different initial levels of understanding and expression of the virtue of compassion. This range suggests diverse initial conceptualisations of compassion. For example, the participant's reflections generally indicated a good understanding of compassion, with several participants (e.g., participants 4, 16, 19, and 20), showing a relatively better understanding of compassion than other participants - as seen in their ability to articulate examples of compassionate actions Participant 7, in particular, offered a deeper and more nuanced account, suggesting they may have been especially adept at recognising and applying compassion. This diversity highlights the richness of individual interpretations of the virtue prior to the lesson.

Turning to the post-lesson results, the data highlights that all participants, apart from participant 6* (an outlier), showed positive shifts in their understanding of compassion. Among the participants with stronger initial conceptualisations, participants 2, 4, 7 and 20 demonstrated even richer and more detailed expressions of compassion after the lesson. This suggests that the lesson enabled them to deepen their pre-existing understandings of the virtue, building on their prior knowledge

Turning to the results that reflect the individual components of virtue literacy, the analysis reveals slight differences in how participants engaged with each component. For the knowledge and understanding component, the participants initially scored between 1-2, reflecting basic and limited conceptualisations, with participant 7 scoring 3 – offering a slightly more developed insight. After the lesson on compassion, the participants score between 2-3, highlighting slightly broader expressions of the virtue.

A similar trend is observed for the perception component where participants demonstrated greater awareness of compassion in different contexts following the lesson. The reasoning component generally highlights a different pattern with lower reasoning scores prior to the lesson, and lower increases after the lesson - demonstrating less developed critical thinking about when and why compassion is appropriate. The results also indicate that participant's 1, 7 and 18* scored the same suggesting that additional scaffolding and support may be required to help children develop deeper critical thinking skills in this area. Despite the generally lower increases, participants 2,4,9,12 and 20 increase to 3 after the lesson, whereby they began to provide more thoughtful connections between compassionate actions and the wider significance of such actions -indicating a positive improvement in reasoning after the lesson.

The results for reflection diverge from the overall trends found across the other components of virtue literacy. In particular, the results highlight that the reflection scores remained relatively low with participants increasing by 1 point or remaining the same highlighting a relatively low ability to connect compassion to their personal experiences and social interactions. This suggests that the participants require more support or guidance in their ability to reflect on real-life situations and personal experiences that relate to the virtue of compassion.

Overall, the findings suggest that the lesson positively helped the participants' conceptualisations of compassion develop, particularly with their K&U and perception skills. While progress was observed in reasoning and reflection, these components appear to require longer-term engagement, further scaffolding and guidance, in order to fully support the children's ability to think critically and reflect deeply on their experiences with

compassion. That said, further progress could be made, particularly in relation to reasoning about and reflecting on the virtue in question.

4.2.3 Use of Socratic Questioning

Socratic questioning was used throughout the lesson, particularly one-to-one, as a class, and during the focus group discussions. The lesson steps I followed are detailed below:

1. I introduced the concept of 'compassion' to the pupils. An open discussion was set up where the children were free to speak out to verbalise their initial thoughts on the concept.

2. After the initial introduction, there was time for quiet thinking during which children were encouraged to think about the concept of compassion as individuals.

3. After introducing the concept, pupils were invited to have a peer discussion where they could talk to a partner about their initial understanding of the concept of compassion.

4. After the peer discussions, Socratic questioning was used to add questions to each discussion to aid higher-order thinking and understanding of the concept of compassion. The questions I asked were: *'what does compassion mean in your own words?*', '*can you think of a time you showed compassion and how did that feel*?', '*why do you think it is important to show compassion, what might happen if we don't?*', and '*when is the right time to show compassion?*'.

5. I finished the lesson with a focus group in which I asked four of the pupils – pre structured questions to discuss the concept and share their ideas with each other.

With these steps, I effectively structured the lesson to expand on the meaning of compassion, developing a process for personal and group reflection and utilising Socratic questioning to aid the students in understanding compassion in its various forms.

Question Category	Socratic Questions	Student Engagement	Challenges	Rectifications for Main Study
Introduction to Compassion	What do you think compassion means?	Most students engaged well	Some struggled with abstract definition.	Providing examples and discussing scenarios of compassion.
	Can you give an example of a compassionate act you've seen or experienced recently?	Most students engaged well	Some students had difficulty recalling specific instances.	Discuss explicit examples from the narrative story.
Exploring Compassion	Why do you think it is important to show compassion to others?	Mixed engagement	Some students found it hard to articulate reasons.	Discuss benefits of compassion on relationships and community.
	How does it feel when someone shows compassion to you? How do you think it feels for them when you show compassion?	High engagement	Few students struggled with empathising.	Consider the different emotions associated with someone showing compassion.
Understanding Compassion	Can you think of a situation where it might be hard to show compassion? Why might it be hard, and what could you do in that situation?	Mixed engagement	Some students had difficulty imagining complex scenarios.	Discuss real-life situations and potential compassionate responses.
	Is there ever a time when it might not be good to show compassion? Why or why not?	Low engagement	Many students found this question challenging, as it seemed contradictory as they understood it to always be a positive virtue.	Discussing nuances and the importance of boundaries in compassion.
Reflecting on Compassion	How does showing compassion impact our relationships with others?	High engagement	Few students had difficulty making the connection.	Discussion of positive effects of compassion in friendship and family relationships.
	Can we show compassion to ourselves? If so, what might that look like?	Mixed engagement	Some students found the concept of self-compassion unfamiliar.	Discussing examples of self-care and self-kindness.
Applying Compassion	What is one way you could show more compassion in your daily life?	High engagement	Most students were able to identify ways after the discussion.	Brainstorming practical examples together.

Table 15. Overview of Student Engagement During Preliminary Lesson

Table 17 presents examples of the questions asked and the students' responses during the preliminary lesson, as well as how any challenges were rectified before the main study.

Methodological Strategy	Assessment Approach	Observations
Encouraging Critical Thinking	Observational notes focusing on immediate responses and reflections	Observations from the study showed that the children were capable of asking exploratory questions, sharing their thoughts constructively, and building upon their peers' ideas. This suggests that the Socratic method successfully encouraged the children to think critically.
Facilitating Personal Reflection	Observational notes emphasising explicit mentions of personal experiences	Through the use of Socratic questioning, children were seen explaining how personal experiences, such as friendships and family interactions, shaped their understanding of compassion. These instances, recorded in the observational notes, indicated that the method facilitated personal reflection effectively.
Enhancing Group Discussion	Observational notes recording the range of perspectives expressed and the degree of collaboration	Observations recorded during the group discussions showed a variety of perspectives from the children. They demonstrated the ability to collaborate, listen to their peers, and showed respect during discussions. This indicated that Socratic questioning significantly enhanced the level of group discussions.

Table 16. Overview of Strategies and Assessment Approaches

Table 18 demonstrates a detailed outline of the strategies used in the study and the assessments used to explore and interpret the suitability and practicality of each strategy. Additionally, the table shows that the level of engagement from the children for each category of questioning, which were recorded by me throughout the lesson in the form of observational note sheet (converted into table 17). The Socratic questioning style may have influenced the children on three levels: developing critical thinking by providing reasoning and analysis, personal reflection by allowing the children to process their thinking

holistically, and discussion by engaging different children in conversation. Each row in the table signifies a strategy for a specific question, the observation method used to record the specific strategy, and the core aspect observed, thus evaluating the strategy's success. The notes taken from the observations about each group of children were crucial in how the Socratic questioning influenced their ability to discuss and learn about compassion to different degrees. Based on the findings collated, I concluded that the Socratic questioning was scaffolded appropriately for the age group of children and identified which questions/ categories they struggled to engage with. This is important for pedagogy in CE and highlights the necessity to adapt questioning to the cognitive stages of learners.

4.2.4 Narrative Story: Preliminary Lesson – *We're All Wonders* by R. J. Palacio

Another important aspect of the virtue literacy preliminary lesson was using the illustrated story *We're All Wonders* by R. J. Palacio, a powerful tale about diversity, inclusion and compassion that helps children understand the connection between compassion and acceptance. *We're All Wonders* tells the story of Auggie, a boy with a facial deformity, and his classmates' reactions to him. It encourages children to think about diversity, to examine manifestations of inclusion (and lack thereof), and to develop a greater sense of compassion in their connections with others. In particular, this book was chosen to help the children develop conversations about compassion and understand why it is important to offer compassion to everyone, even/especially if they are different. In this way, *We're All Wonders* was used in the preliminary to make compassion a central theme of the lesson through reflections and discussions. The narrative was received positively by the children; more importantly, they identified with Auggie and could engage with the situations and characters in the narrative since it was age-appropriate. As discussed in Chapter 2, stories have the

power to instil and inspire virtues as they help children understand and appreciate the virtuous intentions, thoughts and actions of the characters in the narrative – even encouraging them to emulate those characters.

4.2.5 Semi-Structured Focus Group

For the preliminary lesson, I implemented a semi-structured focus group with the aim of encouraging the children to freely express their understanding on compassion in a small interactive setting. I chose a semi-structured format because it offered a balance between a discussion with a clear structure and an open-ended approach, thereby allowing the children to explore aspects of compassion that arose from what they had learnt and their own personal experiences.

I collated the views of seven children in my focus group, a mix of genders and ethnicities. This provided a broad set of perspectives wherein the children were encouraged to consider and respect alternative viewpoints to their own. During the preliminary lesson focus group, it became evident that this younger age group required additional prompts and guidance for the children to engage in the discussion. Many of the children were shy and reluctant to share their views with a group of strangers, while some found it hard to express novel views and would repeat the same ideas multiple times. This reinforced my impression that using pre-determined themes and questions for the age group would help create more structure and coherence in the discussions, as opposed to open-ended discussions that lacked clear focus.

Additionally, the children were hesitant to discuss the questions with each other, almost always directing their questions and responses to (me) the facilitator/researcher; the focus group sessions ran over their allocated time as a result. This experience highlights one of the

challenges when conducting group discussions with very young children, and the length of time was reduced for the main intervention as a result.

An unexpected finding was that the young children showed a preference for an adult as a discussion partner in such settings, and this needs to be taken into consideration when conducting groups with young children. This obstacle can be overcome by providing more explicit prompts that allow pupils to discuss the questions/topics with each other as opposed to the facilitator, as shown below:

- Talk with your group. How does showing compassion impact our relationships with others? Share examples from your own experiences with one another.
- What are some ways you could show more compassion in your daily life? Share your ideas with the person next to you, ready to share with the group.

Based on the experiences and reflections from the preliminary lesson, I decided to shorten the focus groups in the main study and, furthermore, to structure them as follows: The timing of the focus group needed to be adapted to 20 minutes rather than 30 minutes. Based on the age group, less time was deemed to be more beneficial and less tiring. While space for the children to speak freely was critical, as some children took longer to articulate their thoughts and often repeated the same points. For the main study, I planned to formulate questions that were specific, succinct and suitable for children and to closely stick to the timings and scheduling. Moreover, I planned to provide more specific prompts or guide the conversation more strictly in order to stimulate the talk and encourage the children – especially the quiet ones or the ones who seemed less confident. In this way, the children would be able to

engage in the discussions to the point that they also had the freedom to move away from the topic or express their own ideas if they so wished.

4.2.6 Pedagogical Application of the 4R Model: Read, Review, Reflect, Recall

The preliminary lesson on virtue literacy utilised the 4R model (Read, Review, Reflect, Recall) to create a more structured pedagogical approach to assist with both teachers' delivery of and children's engagement with the virtue compassion.

Read – In the Read stage, the children read about compassion in the narrative story selected. Here, the children took turns to read a page of the story. At this point, I paused the reading to ask Socratic questions and to ensure comprehension and active listening.

Review – In the Review stage, the children reviewed the themes and ideas presented in the narrative story to ensure that the story and key ideas were understood, and that understanding of compassion was consolidated. This review stage included activities such as group discussion and more Socratic questions from the teacher.

Reflect – The Reflect stage took place in close proximity to the Review stage. In this stage, the students reflected on what they had read and observed during the story/lesson discussions. Through appropriate questions, the students were prompted and guided to think about the ideas of compassion, empathy and kindness. This stage included activities such as group discussion and sharing of children's personal experiences of compassion. The questions helped them interpret the meaning of the concepts and to start creating an understanding of the virtue in relation to their own lives.

Recall – In the Recall stage, the students were invited to recall their own knowledge on the virtue and what they had learned throughout the lesson. Here, they were able to retain and remember the key ideas relating to compassion – consolidating their learning.

4.2.7 Benefits of the 4R Model Used in the Preliminary Lesson

The preliminary lesson also confirmed the potential of the 4R model as a pedagogical approach to providing a framework for virtue literacy. Specifically, it provided some empirical evidence that the 4R model was (1) conducive to effective teaching and learning, (2) potentially helpful for students who feel overwhelmed by the demands of reading, and (3) potentially more appealing to children with learning difficulties who may struggle to engage with the lesson.

More specifically, using the 4R model provided the following advantages, contributing to the overall effectiveness of the intervention and also providing direction for potential revisions prior to the main study:

Staged and structured learning process – The 4R model created a staged, structured learning process for the children, who were guided through the different stages of learning in a sequential way.

Active engagement and deepening understanding – The different stages involved in the 4R model provided multiple opportunities for children to engage with the content of the story and deepen their understanding of the key concepts.

Multiple learning modalities – The 4R model allowed the children to engage with the different learning modalities: Reading was a visual and auditory modality, reflection

promoted critical thinking and introspection, review involved group interaction, and recall was engaging and consolidated their learning.

After reflecting on the outcomes of the preliminary lesson, several revisions were outlined for the main study:

Time allocation – The timing of each stage in the 4R model was tweaked to ensure appropriate balance of time allocation to maintain an appropriate pace throughout the intervention.

Differentiation – Any type of material was differentiated to match the varied needs and abilities of the children. Individualised support was also given to ensure that every child could participate and access the learning material. For instance, if children with learning difficulties struggled to access the content, they were given more prompts (sentence starters or verbal support).

4.2.8 Summary of Preliminary lesson Key Findings & Amendments

Overall, the preliminary lesson was necessary in providing a useful opportunity to refine my methodology prior to the main study, as well as being in line with the relevant literature citing the need for pre-main-study trials (Smith et al., 2020). For instance, I discovered the importance of setting aside the right amount of time for every activity to ensure engagement and learning, along with the need to adapt all teaching methods and material to the cognitive stage age of younger children.

Table 17 provides an overview of the key findings from the preliminary lesson and the final amendments made before the main study.

Preliminary Lesson Key Findings	Main Study Amendments
The mind-map activity was able to assess virtue literacy pre- and post-lesson and was suitable for 7–8-year-olds.	The main study removed the use of student-led activity to ensure smooth flow of lessons.
The marking rubric for assessing virtue literacy was too complex for the cognitive abilities of the age group.	The marking rubric was revised to better meet the students ages and cognitive needs and to ensure an effective assessment tool.
The use of Socratic questioning prompted critical thinking and reflection on compassion.	The semi-structured focus groups were made shorter and more structured, with targeted prompts and a stricter adherence to time limits.
The inclusion of the student-led activity was promising, but it could not be completed in time due to other required activities in the lesson.	Additional support and guidance were provided to encourage peer-to-peer discussions during the focus groups.
The semi-structured focus group was harder to facilitate and prompt, and children were more likely to address the researcher directly rather than each other.	Learning through stages was implemented using the 4R model to help the children access and retain the material; this also contributed to enhanced differentiation strategies to match diverse learning needs.
The 4R model helped to integrate the practice of compassion in an organised way and kept the children engaged in the learning process.	

Table 17. Preliminary Key Findings and Main Study Amendments

Ultimately, these modifications were needed to help solve the hurdles identified above and to enhance the capacity of the main study, making it more interactive, engaging and participatory, and thus enhancing the children's development of virtue literacy.

It is important to note, that the adjustments made after the preliminary lesson were carefully integrated and observed during the main study to ensure they were appropriate for the children's developmental levels and research objectives. The insights gained from the preliminary lesson, such as the need for shorter focus group sessions and refined Socratic questions, were applied with caution in the main study. While the adjustments themselves were not formally re-assessed due to logistical (such as Covid restrictions) and time constraints, the suitability of the revised methods were assessed in real-time during the early sessions of the main study. This iterative approach allowed for ongoing monitoring of the tools and methods, ensuring that they remained aligned with the study's objectives and responsive to the participants' needs. This process reflects the adaptive nature of qualitative research, which values flexibility and responsiveness to emerging insights during the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In particular, the refinement of tools, such as the Socratic guide and shortened focus group discussions, showed immediate improvements in children's engagement and comprehension. These observations suggested that the adjustments were effective in achieving the study's aim of exploring children's conceptualisations of virtues while minimising the risk of bias or misalignment with their cognitive and developmental stages. The next section goes into more detail about the design of the main study intervention.

4.3 Stage Two Findings: Main Study Intervention

Building on the findings from the preliminary phase, during the main intervention phase, I proceeded to implement the CE intervention explore its role in supporting the children's development of virtue literacy across the six moral virtues. Here, I outline and report the major findings from the main study intervention focusing on differing educational contexts in virtue-focused School A and non-virtue-focused School B. Rather than a rigid comparison of outcomes, the aim was to investigate how the differing approaches within these schools shaped the children's evolving understanding of virtue literacy.

Rehearsing my steps, below is an outline and a step-by-step summary of what I did at the beginning and end of each intervention:

1) **Assessment for learning** – I asked each student to draw a mind-map. This initial step was an assessment for learning (AFL) to capture their initial understanding and perspectives of moral virtues. This step encouraged children to freely express their initial understanding in a visual format.
2) **Narrative storytelling** – After the students drew a mind-map, I read a narrative story (allowing children to sometimes participate in the reading process). The narrative story focused on the character virtues selected for this study.
3) **Socratic questioning:** I used Socratic questioning in my intervention. These questions prompted students to evaluate and reflect on the material. This dialogue encouraged deeper thinking and allowed the children to relate the virtues to their own experiences and social worlds.

4) **Integrated 4R model (Read, Review, Reflect, Recall)** – This intervention includes reading material on character virtues for students to read, review key concepts just learned, reflect on their personal experience, and recall what they have learned, before ending with a post-mind-map activity. This process was designed to help scaffold the children's conceptualisations of the virtues.
5) **Focus groups** – Two focus groups were formed at the beginning and end of the study. Each focus group was a small with four participants who shared a common interest in fulfilling the stated purpose of the group. Meanwhile, a facilitator (myself) led the focus group's dialogue. This was an essential part of the data collection and provided a alternative method for understanding participants' perceptions and understanding of their virtue literacy development that differed from the mind-maps.

As children's understanding and knowledge of the six moral virtues was the central focus of the study, I developed and used a marking rubric specifically designed to support the qualitative exploration of their responses. For example, the virtue knowledge and understanding (K&U) domain encompassed how well the students could articulate their understanding of the virtue in their own words. The virtue perception domain included the students' ability to recognise situations whether from the narrative or real-life - where a certain virtue might be relevant or needed. The reasoning domain was geared towards whether students could arrive at decisions, reflecting on their ability to think about the best way to express a virtue. Lastly, the reflection domain focused on their ability to draw on personal experiences and reflect meaningfully on the role of virtues in their own lives. For a detailed description of the methods and marking rubric employed, revisit Chapter 3.

4.3.1 Overall Virtue Literacy Scores: School A and B (Main Study)

The outputs of this study included insights derived from the children's evolving conceptualisations during the pre- and post-assessment stages, as well as rich qualitative data gathered from focus groups. An evaluation of the children's understanding of the virtues was captured during the mind-map exercise based on a marking rubric with four criteria: K&U, perception, reasoning and reflection. These criteria provided a framework for analysing the depth and nuance of the children's responses to questions about virtues.

Moreover, the pre- and post-assessment stages provided an opportunity to explore how the intervention may have influenced the children's understanding of the six virtues. The findings presented hereafter reflect details of such changes. In addition, to provide a more balanced perspective, the student mind-maps have been included alongside excerpts from the focus groups to capture student voices. While these representations provide a glimpse into the cognitive processes as the children engaged with the six virtues, they should be viewed as part of a broader interpretive effort to understand how children reflect on and apply virtues in context. These will be brought to light in the following sections.

To begin, I outline the overall virtue literacy scores for schools A and B (see table 18), whilst providing a comparative exploration of how the two schools demonstrated understanding and engagement with each virtue. The table highlights general trends and brief descriptive trends on the ways these virtues were expressed and understood within the context of each school.

School	*Gratitude*	*Kindness*	*Honesty*	*Loyalty*	*Courage*	*Humility*
School A	Demonstrated strong expressions of appreciation and thankfulness.	More frequently expressed empathetic and caring behaviour across interactions.	Reflected an understanding and commitment to truth-telling in various scenarios.	Expressed relational loyalty, but less prominently compared to other virtues.	Showed emerging understanding of perseverance and bravery in challenges.	Exhibited limited awareness of humility.
Scores	**143**	**148**	**130**	**94**	**90**	**30**
School B	Expressed foundational ideas of gratitude but with slightly less depth than School A.	Frequently displayed caring behaviour, though slightly less consistently than School A.	Reflected a slightly more deeper understanding of honesty, scoring higher than School A.	Demonstrated some awareness of loyalty but with fewer connections to personal relationships.	Showed similar conceptualisations of courage to School A.	Reflected a deeper awareness of humility than School A.
Scores	**132**	**135**	**140**	**85**	**94**	**52**

Table 18. Overall Virtue Literacy Scores for Schools A and B

In School A, the children's conceptualisations of the virtue's kindness (148) and gratitude (143) appeared to reflect deeper and meaningful expressions whereby the children would make stronger interpersonal connections and recognise acts of care and appreciation within their social contexts. For courage (90) and humility (30), the conceptualisations appeared less developed, However, in School B, students frequently articulated the value of truthfulness, making honesty (140) the most meaningfully expressed virtue. Similar to School A, children's conceptualisations of kindness (135) were well developed albeit with somewhat

less nuance in its relationship elements. The lower understanding of loyalty (85) and humility (52) suggests that these qualities may not have received as much explicit attention or integration into the students' everyday lives in this educational setting.

4.3.2 Main Study Presentation of Mind-Map Findings

Throughout this section, mind-maps (presented in the form of figures) were used to represent how the participants conceptualised the virtues learned both prior to the intervention and after the intervention ended. The visual representations provide richer descriptions of the way children understood and expressed the different virtues they learned during intervention delivery.

To successfully answer the proposed research questions, I chose examples of mind-maps that exemplified the different levels of responses from the children, showing varying levels of depth and conceptualisations. This approach highlights the diversity of the children's engagement and provides a nuanced exploration of their evolving conceptualisations. Additional mind-map examples that further support this exploration are available in Appendix 6.

4.4 Main Study: Overall Pre- and Post-Intervention Analysis by Virtue – School A (Virtue-Focused)

In this section, both 'pre-overall' and 'post-overall' progressions are shown and explored for each virtue in order to gain a deeper understanding of how the conceptualisations and engagements with virtue literacy evolved throughout the intervention in School A. The students (all aged 7–8) participated in learning about six moral virtues, namely gratitude, kindness, courage, loyalty, honesty and humility, which were selected to not only promote their moral/character development, but for the children to reflect on and connect these concepts to their lived experiences and interactions.

Participant No	Gratitude Pre-overall	Gratitude Post-overall	Kindness Pre-overall	Kindness Post-overall	Courage Pre-overall	Courage Post-overall	Loyalty Pre-overall	Loyalty Post-overall	Honesty Pre-overall	Honesty Post overall	Humility Pre- overall	Humility Post- overall	Pre-overall Scores	Post-overall Scores
1	4	12	4	11	1	4	2	4	4	8	1	3	**15**	**42**
2	2	6	3	7	1	3	1	5	2	6	1	2	**10**	**28**
3*	1	3	3	5	0	2	1	3	1	1	0	2	**6**	**16**
4	2	6	2	7	2	5	2	5	2	6	0	1	**10**	**30**
5	1	3	1	4	0	2	0	2	1	4	0	1	**3**	**16**
6	2	7	3	8	1	3	2	4	1	5	0	1	**9**	**28**
7	3	6	3	5	2	5	4	6	2	6	0	1	**14**	**29**
8	1	4	2	6	0	2	2	4	1	5	0	0	**6**	**21**
9	2	9	3	10	2	5	4	7	3	9	1	2	**15**	**42**
10*	0	5	1	5	0	4	0	2	1	4	0	2	**2**	**22**
11*	1	7	2	6	0	2	1	3	1	6	0	3	**5**	**27**
12	5	10	6	11	1	4	2	5	6	12	1	2	**21**	**44**
13	3	6	4	6	2	5	2	3	2	5	0	1	**13**	**26**
14	2	7	3	9	1	6	1	5	3	6	1	1	**11**	**34**
15	2	8	3	7	0	5	2	5	4	8	0	0	**11**	**33**
16	1	5	2	7	0	4	0	4	1	3	0	2	**4**	**24**
17	2	6	3	6	2	6	2	5	2	6	0	1	**11**	**28**
18	3	8	2	7	1	8	1	6	2	6	1	2	**10**	**37**
19	2	6	3	5	1	3	0	4	1	5	0	1	**7**	**24**
20	2	5	3	6	0	3	2	4	2	4	0	1	**9**	**23**
21*	1	3	2	4	0	2	0	3	1	4	0	1	**4**	**17**
22	3	6	3	7	1	4	1	4	3	5	0	1	**11**	**27**

Table 19. Comparative Analysis of Overall Pre- and Post-Intervention Scores by Virtue (School A)

As shown in Table 19, the 22 participants provided fruitful insights into the ways the intervention influenced their engagement with and understanding of virtue literacy. The overall trends highlight that the post-intervention data reflected a deeper understanding of the six virtues compared to the pre-intervention data. The pre-intervention expressions for gratitude, kindness and honesty show that some children had an initial understanding of these virtues. For courage and loyalty, on the other hand, the pre-intervention expressions were lower, with 2 participants scoring 4 for loyalty prior to the intervention, demonstrating a limited ability to articulate loyalty. Pre intervention conceptualisations for humility, on the other hand, highlights a different pattern, with 6 participant's scoring 1, offering minimal understanding of this virtue prior to the intervention. This further indicates that the children's prior understanding of humility, in particular, was less familiar to the children and developed less in comparison to other virtues.

Nonetheless, the majority of participants displayed a richer articulation and connection to one or more virtue categories, indicating that the teaching methods encouraged thoughtful engagement and understanding. However, not all the participants' demonstrated progress to the same degree, nor did all the virtues see equal increases. Among the six virtues under exploration - gratitude, kindness and honesty seemed to be more accessible for the children as reflected in their conceptualisations of these virtues post-intervention. For example, participant 1 moved from an initial limited understanding of gratitude (4) to a much more enriched conceptualisation (12). Similarly, participant 9, whose understanding of kindness progressed from 3 to 10, and participant 12, who deepened their articulation of honesty from 6 to 12 - exemplify the nuanced ways in which children understood these virtues. Furthermore, although all 22 participants exhibited some level of progression across the

virtues, the variation in their expressions highlight both the different and subjective nature of how children connect with and articulate their understanding of moral concepts.

The results for loyalty and courage, on the other hand, showed more varied expressions among the participants and showed less rich and deeper conceptualisations and thus, more inconsistent progress compared to gratitude, kindness and honesty.

Nonetheless, the qualitative shifts in participants understanding and articulation of these virtues suggest that the intervention provided opportunities for growth in their virtue literacy. The conceptualisations for courage reflect the participants generally ranged from limited initial expressions (scores between 0-2) to broader articulations after the intervention (scores between 2-5). Interestingly, only participant 18 demonstrated a deeper understanding, progressing from a limited response (score of 1) to a more enriched one (score of 8).

The results for loyalty show a similar pattern where participants generally scored between 0-2 pre intervention, with participant's 7 and 9 scoring 4. After the intervention, the conceptualisations of loyalty generally ranged between 3-5, with participant 9 progressing to a score of 7, highlighting a more insightful engagement with this virtue. These findings indicate that while loyalty and courage were less prominent in the children’s initial conceptualisations, the intervention provided a framework for participants to explore and expand their understanding, even if the progress was uneven.

Conversely, the results for humility show a different pattern altogether and departs from the trends observed across the other virtues. Most participants started with minimal expressions on humility, with six scoring 1 and the remainder scoring 0. However, after the intervention, the participants ability to develop their conceptualisations remain low, with participants 8 and

15 scoring the same score of 0, signifying no changes in virtue literacy understanding. This implies that these virtues may need to be taught over an extended time period, or that learning about humility may be cognitively complex for children at this age group to understand more meaningfully.

Moreover, the intervention results highlight a promising qualitative shift in the engagement and understanding of virtues among children with learning difficulties. Participant's 10*, 11* and 21* improved their conceptualisations across the virtues, with participant 11* in particular, increasing from 1 to 7 (gratitude), 2 to 6 (kindness), 1 to 6 (honesty) and 0 to 3 (humility). Such findings are important and suggests that these children, despite their learning difficulties, were able to develop engage with the lessons and express more thoughtful understanding of the virtues, showing that the intervention was inclusive in its approach and provided scaffolded opportunities for the children with learning needs to explore and express their learning.

4.4.1 Analysis by Virtue: School A

To explore the children's knowledge, perceptions, reasoning and reflections with regard to each virtue (gratitude, kindness, courage, loyalty, honesty, humility), a more detailed qualitative-focused interpretation of the participants conceptualisations is required. The purpose of this section, therefore, is to understand what changes occurred across each virtue in greater depth. Rather than focusing solely on numerical changes, this analysis explores how the children articulated their thoughts and connected their experiences to each virtue over the course of the intervention. As such, I provide an interpretive analysis of how the children's engagement with each virtue unfolded.

4.4.1.1 Gratitude

Figure 10. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Gratitude) – Participant 11*

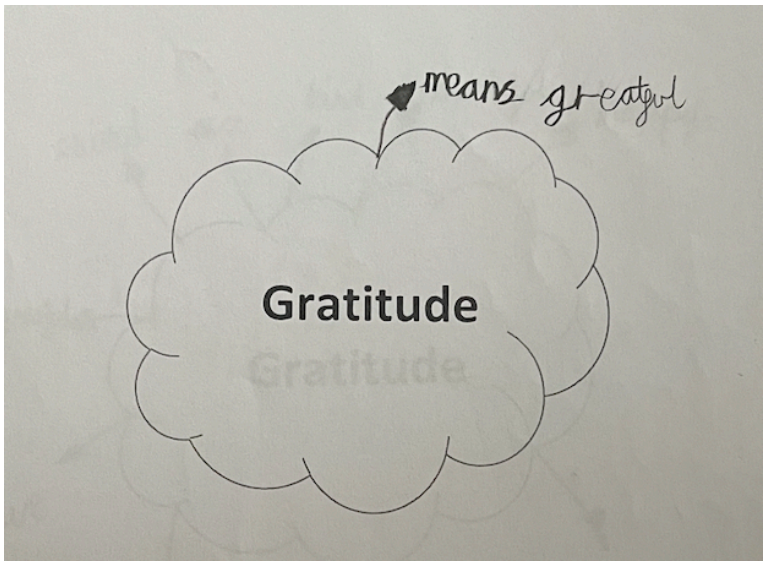
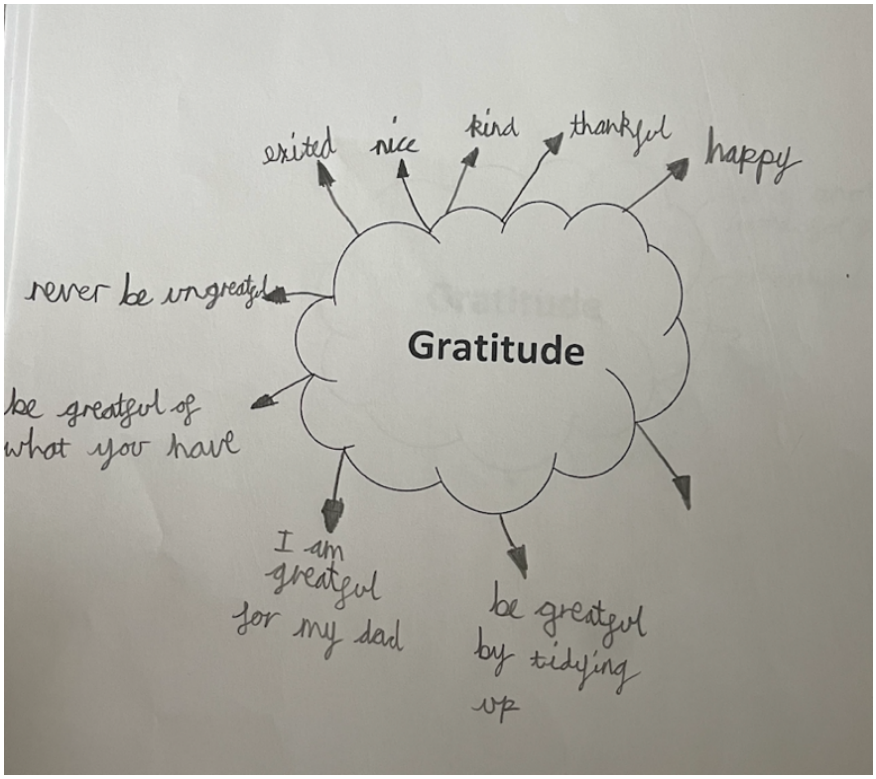


Figure 11. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Gratitude) – Participant 11*



The results for gratitude demonstrate a qualitative shift in understanding from pre- to post-intervention in the case of participant 11*, whose original score was 1, but who improved considerably to 7. This progress was especially notable, given that this specific student had moderate special educational needs (SEN). Here, it would seem that the intervention provided extra support to this particular student, who was then able to express a deeper understanding of gratitude, thus suggesting that the intervention created a accessible and supportive environment for the child to engage with the virtue.

Before the lesson, the children's understanding of gratitude often reflected a general or surface-level awareness, such as being grateful or acknowledging good things that others have given them. After the lesson, however, the children's vocabulary and multiplicity of meanings about gratitude have been expanded to reflect a more developed understanding of gratitude and the actions/feelings required to express it more meaningfully. Examples of conceptualisations include a range of affective terms as well as associated behaviours and principles, such as 'never be ungrateful', 'excited', 'nice', 'kind', 'thankful', feelings/senses/expressions, 'I am grateful at my mum', and 'be grateful for the things you have'. Indeed, such actions as 'be grateful by tidying up' reflect more action-orientated comprehension of gratitude. In addition to feelings of gratitude, the broader group findings indicate that the children became more able to recognise a wider range of emotions, behaviours and dispositions as part of gratitude, as well as more specific objects or experiences for which they were grateful. It appears, then, that the intervention helped the students regard the virtue of gratitude with greater nuance: they can now talk and think about it more meaningfully.

Figure 12. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Gratitude) – Participant 9

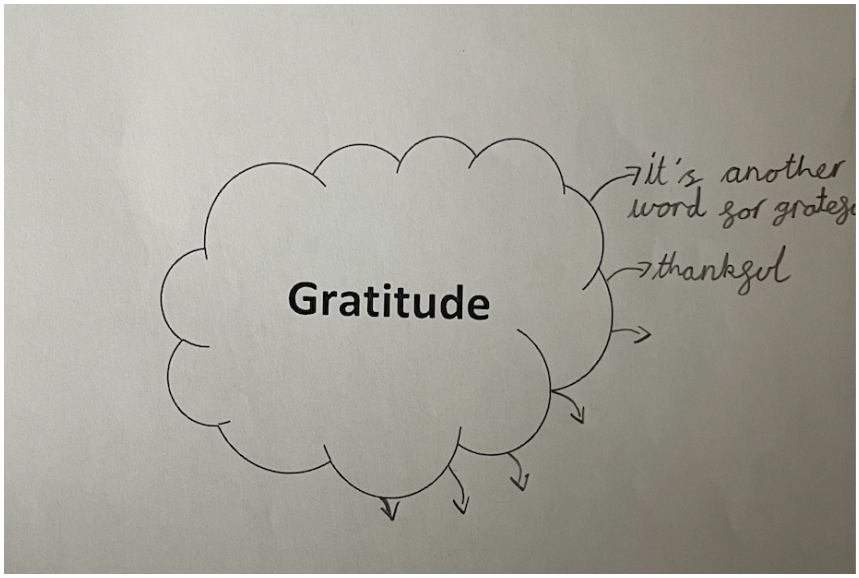
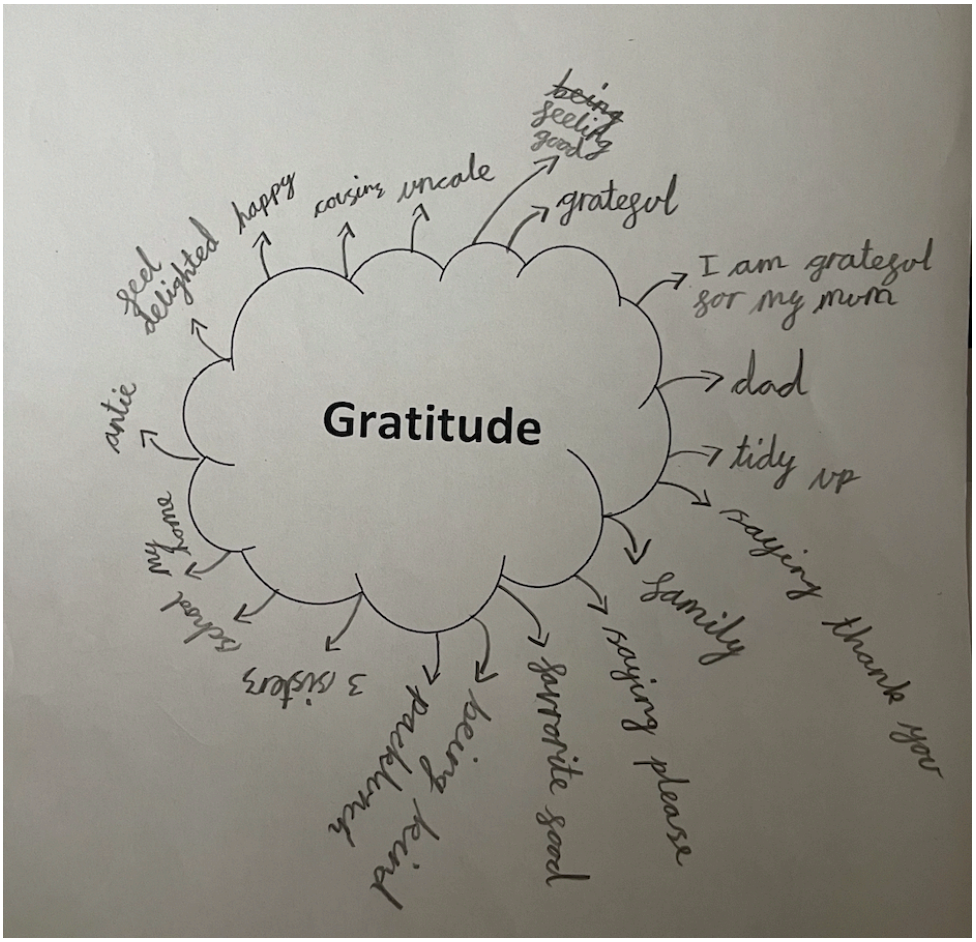


Figure 13. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Gratitude) – Participant 9



In another example, the pre-lesson mind-map by participant 9 describes synonyms of gratitude, simplified to phrases like ‘it’s another word for grateful’ and ‘thankful’. These early responses suggest that participant 9’s initial understanding of gratitude was limited to its lexical meaning without deeper exploration of its implications or expressions. Post-intervention, participant 9’s conceptualisation of gratitude evolved qualitatively. They expanded the concept to encapsulate a number of positive emotions, such as connecting the virtue with happiness, pleasure and overall satisfaction – reflecting a deeper understanding of the virtue. Similarly, the children’s mind-maps post-lesson collectively became more concrete and personal when articulating gratitude. For example, the children named specific relatives for whom they were grateful (aunts, cousins, sisters and uncles), indicating an increased awareness of their interpersonal relationships. Moreover, home and school held a place in their descriptions; such simple material things and their recognition of the safety and reassurance that specific environments (such as home) provided for them.

The children also linked gratitude to actions and prosocial processes, thus suggesting a behavioural understanding of gratitude. They understood that gratitude is enacted through actions such as tidying up, using polite words such as ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, and through the act of kindness. These connected to the attitudinal components the children had identified; they understood that gratitude is done towards the person who has done something for you. Lastly, the inclusion of items such as a ‘packed lunch’ and references to favourite things reflects an appreciation of life’s daily comforts and little pleasures. This progression in understanding – from a mere lexical concept to something that is experiential and action-oriented – suggests that the intervention was successful in deepening the children’s understanding of gratitude. Evidently, it now resonated with them as a multi-component

virtue: as something that is felt emotionally, that is well-expressed by a range of kind actions, and that is experienced through a variety of personal relationships and daily comforts. The intervention had thus facilitated a more rounded and holistic literacy of gratitude.

4.4.1.2 Kindness

Figure 14. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Kindness) – Participant 12

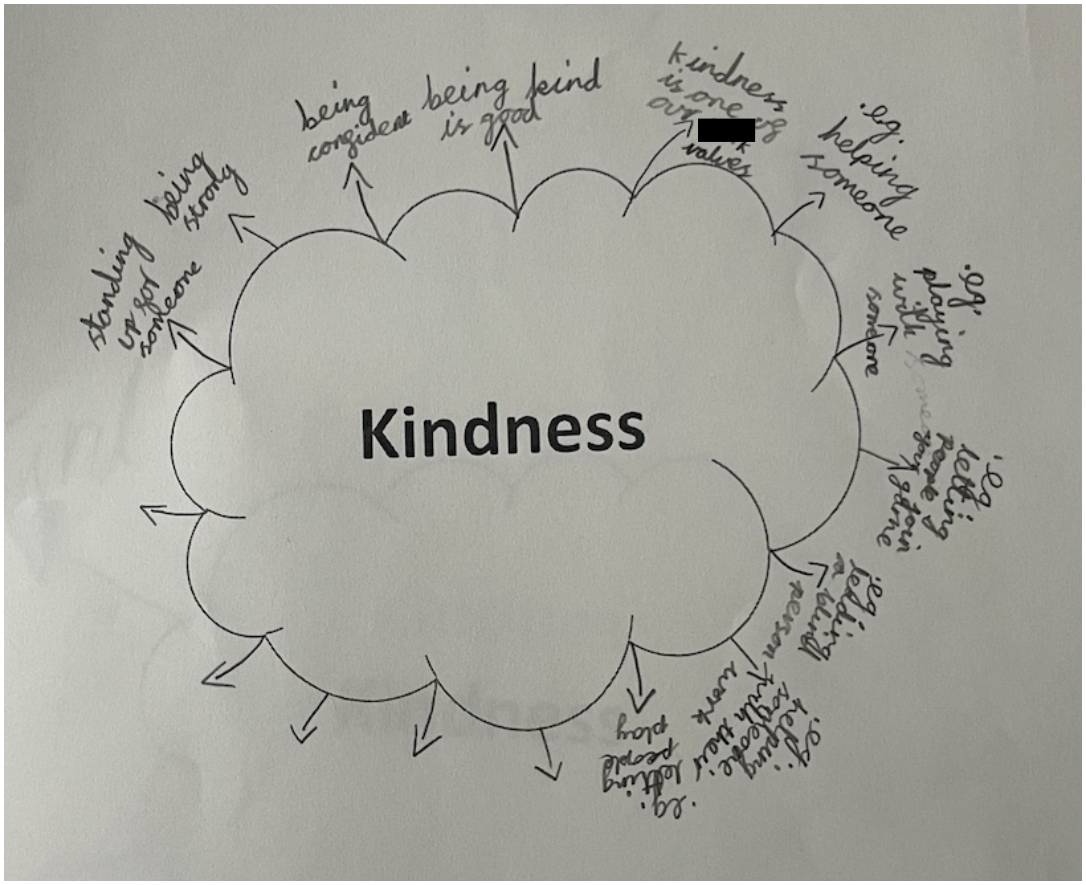
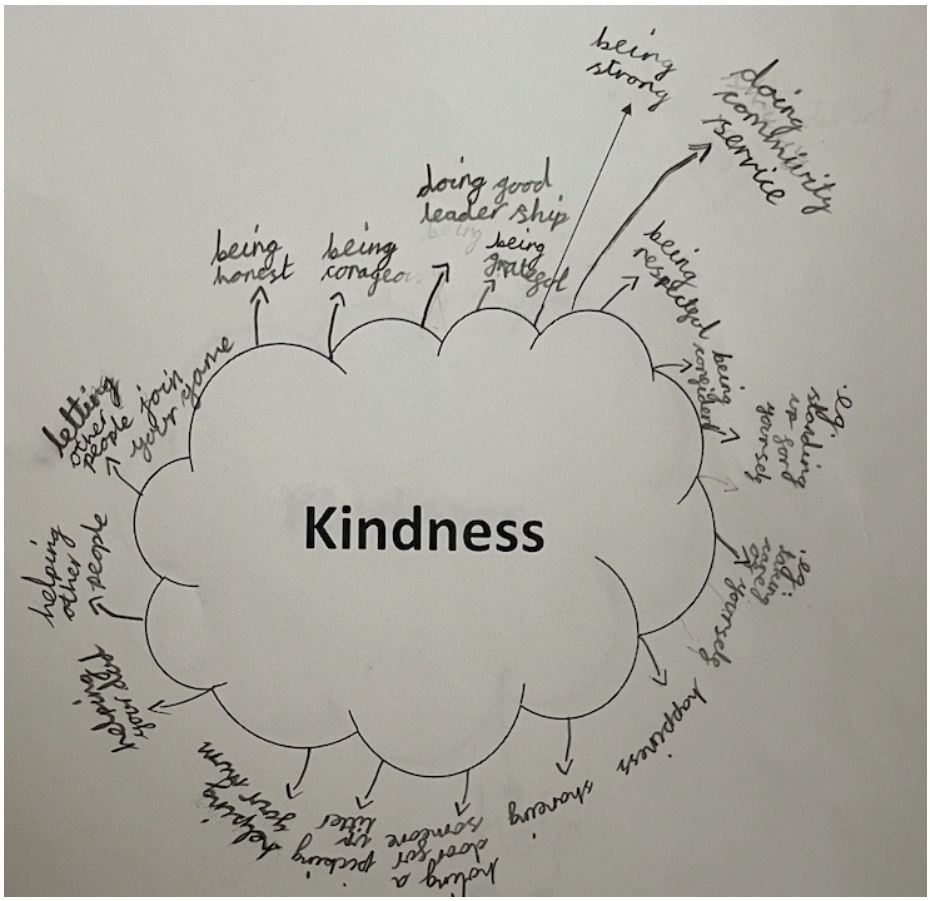


Figure 15. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Kindness) – Participant 12



Participant 12's understanding of the virtue 'kindness' evolved, as evidenced by their post-lesson descriptions. Before the lesson, the child's perception of kindness was rooted primarily within the parameters of a school setting, including the school ethos and values: for example, 'kindness is one of the school's values'. This shows recognition of kindness as something that they were already putting into practice and that was reinforced by the school environment. More general observations of the mind-maps indicate that kindness was seen as an interpersonal action: Their collective descriptions – which included 'standing up for someone', 'helping someone with their work' and 'letting people join in your games' – showed their recognition of kindness as an interpersonal and direct action. They were also

able to identify it as a virtuous behaviour. These accounts suggest that they saw kindness as an action that one could perform directly for someone else, that is, an action that is straightforward and easy to perform. Drawing on the pre-lesson descriptions, the children generally saw kindness as a strength. Interestingly, they used adjectives such as ‘strong’ and ‘confident’ to think about kindness. This suggests an implicit belief that kindness is not a passive virtue but a strength, which has implications for how they view the performance of kindness.

Building on this analysis, the more general post-lesson descriptions of kindness across the participant's showed that the children demonstrated a deeper and more expansive understanding of this virtue. They began to conceptualise kindness beyond actions that might be performed in the school community and started to apply the virtue in broader social and personal behaviours. This could be considered as an expansion of the meaning of kindness into a wider application beyond the school setting. For example, the children started thinking about kindness in broader terms: They saw the virtue as being enacted not just in the immediate actions of being strong or helping others, but in a holistic way. In addition, they started using descriptions such as ‘being honest’, ‘being courageous’ and ‘doing good leadership’, suggesting a more sophisticated and nuanced concern for the broader meaning of kindness, where the virtue was seen as a multifaceted personality trait, one associated with moral integrity and ethical personal development. Engaging in the virtue of kindness was no longer just seen as ‘doing something’ for someone else; the idea that the action of ‘doing community service’ was a kind response to the community, and that a child should ‘help your mum’ or ‘help your dad’, was evidence of a broader concern for their social environment context. Additional examples, such as ‘being respectful’ and ‘standing up for yourself’ added

to the appreciation of how acting in kind ways involved both others (i.e., being respectful) and oneself (i.e., standing up for oneself), which implies that the virtue of kindness can also involve elements of self-respect or self-care.

Finally, the addition of 'picking up litter' as an example of an act of kindness is suggestive of a shift in conceptualising the virtue towards environmental stewardship. This reflects a more inclusive view of kindness that extends to caring for the environment. Taken together, the post-lesson descriptions of kindness resonate with kindness becoming conceptualised as a more mature virtue – not just as an action, but as a way of being – that integrates personal values, social responsibility, environment and wellbeing in one's life. The lesson seemed to have expanded the children's perspective and to have allowed them to recognise the manifold personal, social and physical dimensions of the virtue of kindness as actionable values towards the self, others and the environment.

Figure 16. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Kindness) – Participant 18

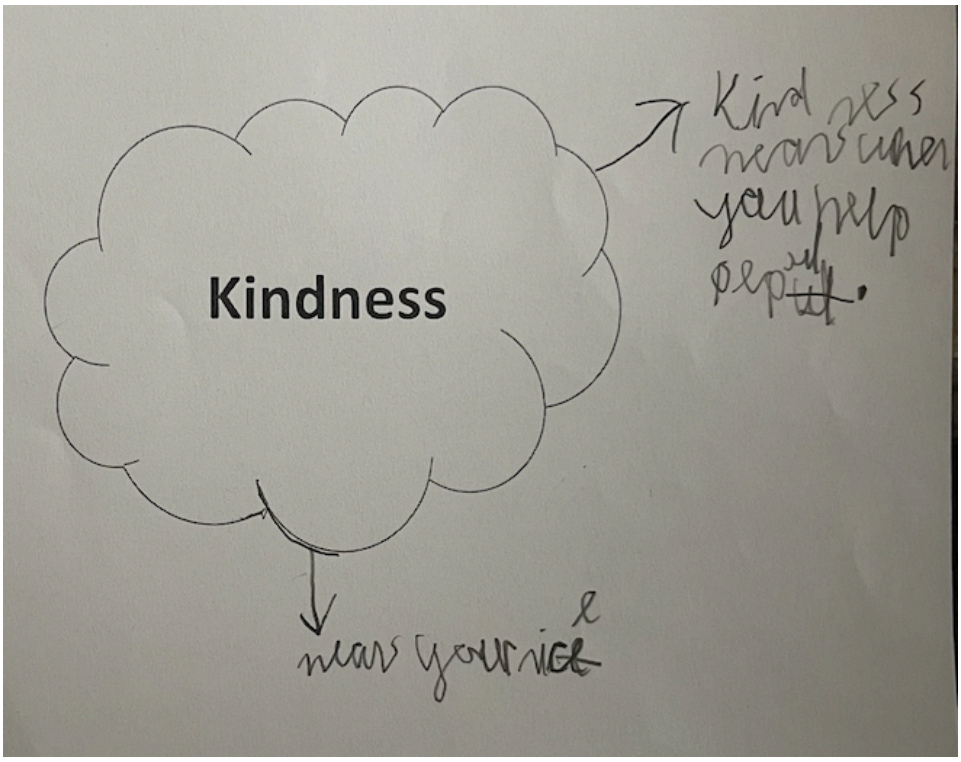
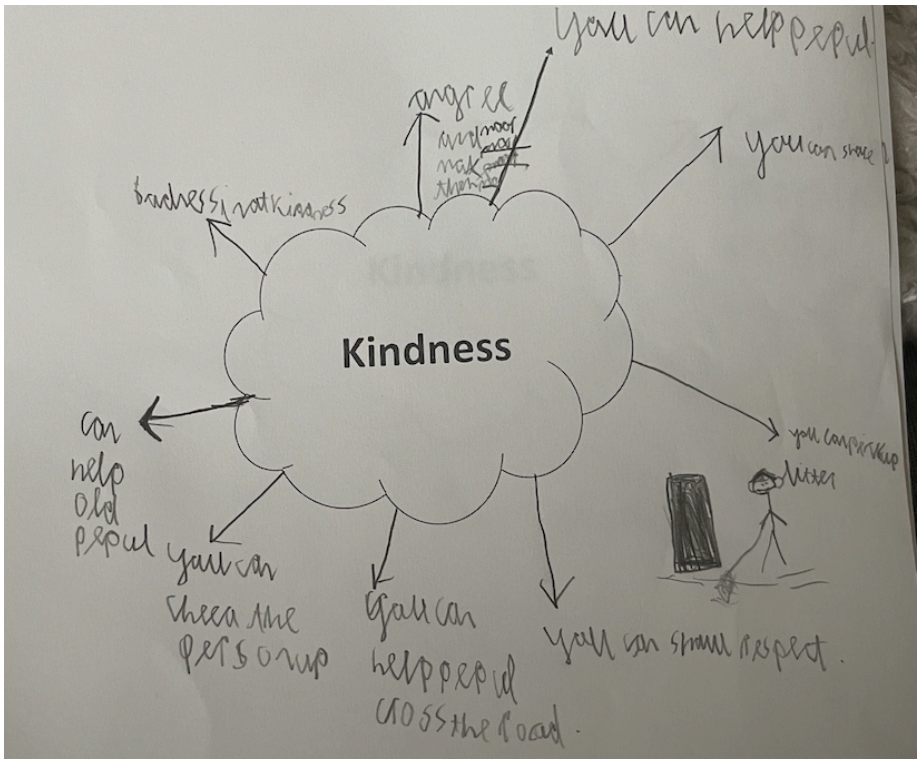


Figure 17. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Kindness) – Participant 18



The score increase from 2 to 7 for participant 18 is interesting, as it highlights an improvement in their understanding of kindness. Their pre-lesson understanding of kindness was rudimentary and generalised, as captured by the simple phrases ‘kindness means you help people’ and ‘means you’re nice’. This represents an initial recognition of kindness in terms of basic helpfulness and pleasantness in their approach to kindness interaction, characterised as a rudimentary, surface-level encounter with kindness that foregrounds simple gestures and a friendly attitude. However, following the intervention, the child’s understanding of kindness seemed to have deepened and expanded. The child labels examples such as ‘you can help people cross the road’ and ‘you can cheer the person up’. These examples show increased awareness for the various times at which kindness can be actioned. Additional action-oriented examples include ‘you can pick up litter’ and ‘help old people’, highlighting being kind to more vulnerable members of the community and contributing towards keeping the environment clean.

In addition, the child acknowledged that kindness involves the attitudes we hold, as suggested by ‘you show respect’. Here, there is a recognition that kindness is not simply defined by actions, but also by the respect and dignity with which we treat others. The phrase ‘badness is not kindness’ signals a shift in thinking from simply labelling actions as good or bad to focusing on whether they are virtuous or not. This suggests the child is understanding kindness in relation to behaviour – where actions are judged based on virtues like kindness rather than just being categorised as right or wrong. The collective sense of the children’s understanding highlighted that the virtue involves specific behaviours that they can do to be kind, or when others are being kind. Recognition of a lack of kindness, and the actions that

contradict kindness, is also suggestive of an understanding that encompasses both action and intention.

4.4.1.3 <u>Honesty</u>

Figure 18. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Honesty) – Participant 14

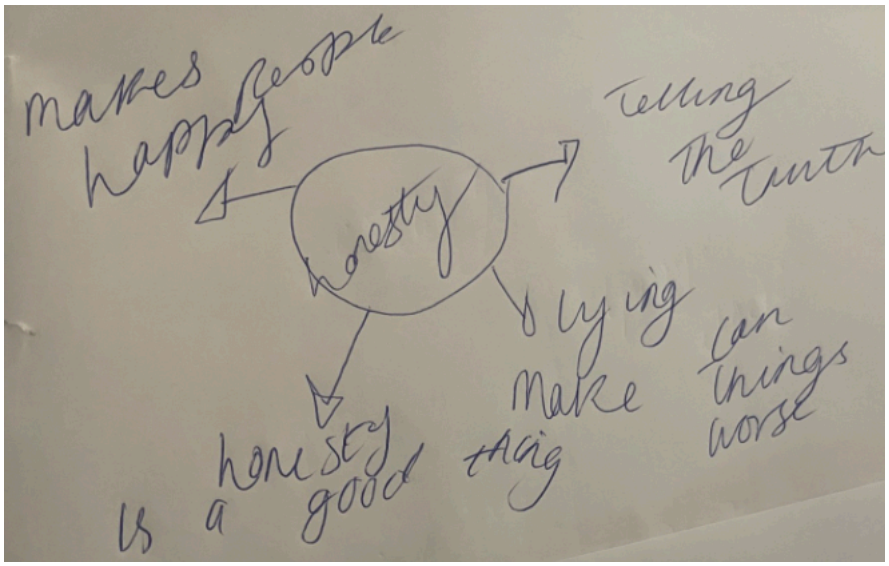
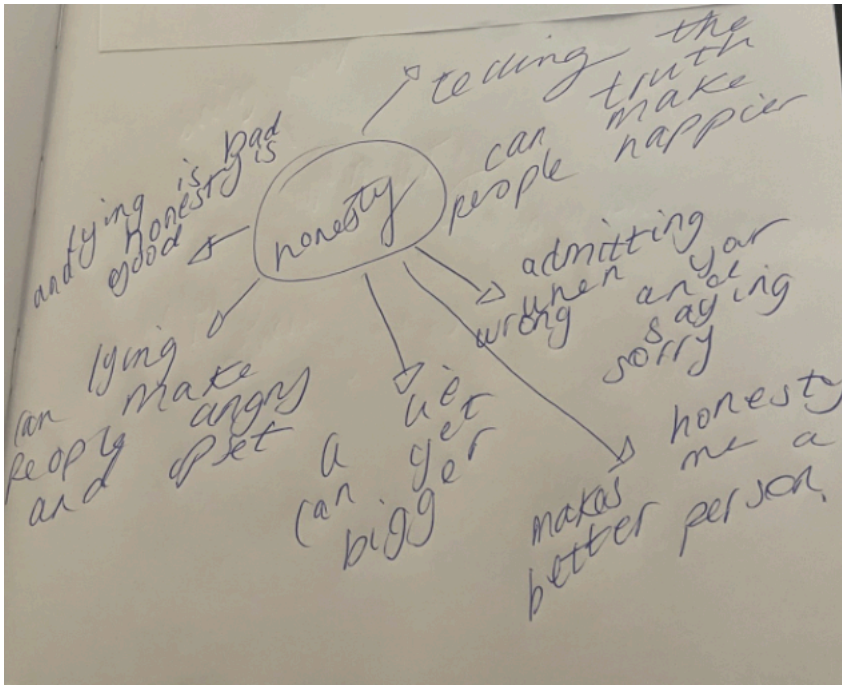


Figure 19. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Honesty) – Participant 14



The scores for participant 14 on the virtue of honesty, rising from 4 to 8, show their increasing conceptual development and understanding of honesty. Prior to the lesson, participant 14 appears to have a somewhat simplistic but good understanding of honesty as a positive virtue. Their pre-lesson mind-map includes statements like 'makes people happy', 'telling the truth', and 'honesty is a good thing', which indicate an association of honesty with positive outcomes. In other words, people ought to be honest because this will make others happy. However, 'makes people happier' also implies that the underlying reason for the virtue's value is that it makes others feel good and contributes to their emotional state. More interestingly, 'lying can make things worse' is an early understanding of the negative consequences of dishonesty, which has the effect of favourably distinguishing honesty as the opposite virtue to lying. However, while these examples indicate some understanding that honesty is about telling the truth, they do not suggest a deep awareness of the virtue.

After the lesson, participant 14's understanding of honesty has deepened and progressed from their pre-lesson conceptualisation. The post-lesson mind-map displays a much more nuanced understanding of the virtue: 'Lying is bad and honesty is good' displays the continued awareness of honesty compared with dishonesty, but this time it incorporates a disapproving moral judgment. The inclusion of 'making a mistake and apologising' is more than merely being honest; it means to accurately self-assess, recognise when one can be wrong and finally having the courage to own up to being incorrect. The understanding of honesty here is broadened beyond telling the truth to include intellectual humility and accountability. This way of thinking about honesty suggests that it is a flexible character trait. To be honest means not only being honest to others, but also knowing when one has made an error and being transparent with oneself, which leads to taking accountability. In a similar way, 'a lie can get

bigger' may signal that the child understands that dishonesty grows not just because of direct consequences, but because dishonesty leads to further lies, leading to damaged relationships and trust. Related to this is the idea that 'honesty makes me a better person', which suggests that honesty is vital for their mental and emotional wellbeing, showing how virtues provide peace of mind and personal growth. The final example – 'lying can make the people angry and upset' – demonstrates that the child has contemplated how lying could emotionally affect others as a starting point in comprehending empathy.

4.4.1.4 Loyalty

Figure 20. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Loyalty) – Participant 17

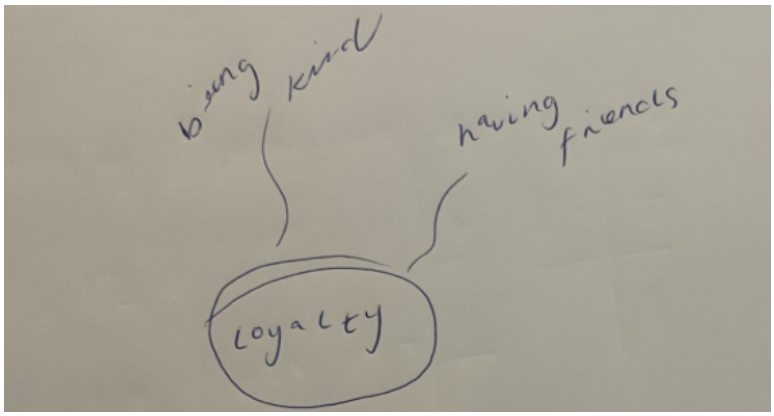
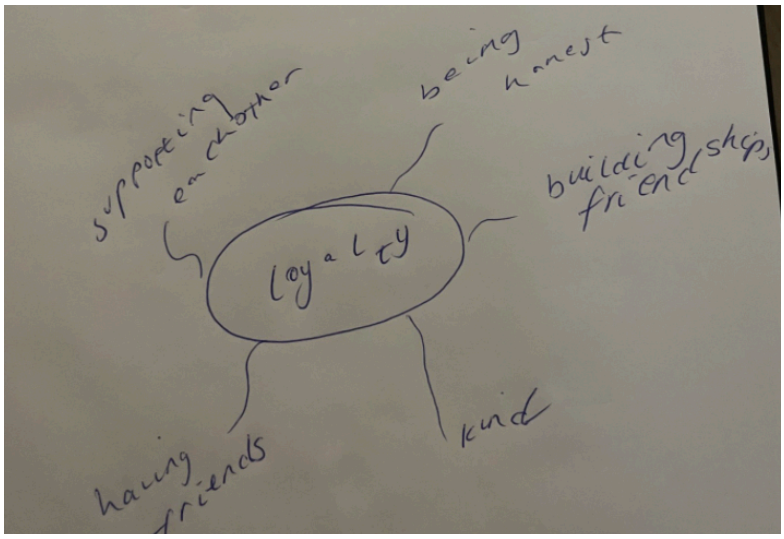


Figure 21. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Loyalty) – Participant 17



In relation to the virtue ‘loyalty’, participant 17’s pre-lesson conceptualisation of loyalty seems straightforward, for the most part simply relating to social interactions with other people. Given the inclusion of ‘being kind’ and ‘having friends’, it seems that the child understands the concept of loyalty in terms of simple friendly behaviour and having friendships. Here, then, the participant’s idea of loyalty seems to relate to the most basic elements – kindness as a way of maintaining friendships. This description suggests a basic sense of the concept of loyalty, where they are mainly being asked to think of this virtue as being good friends in themselves, perhaps by not backstabbing or being trustworthy in its simplest form. Following the intervention, however, participant 17’s thinking about loyalty has developed to include additional comments: In particular, phrases such as ‘supporting each other’ and ‘building friendships’ are included, suggesting that loyalty is part of a two-way relationship. The findings from the collective group seemed to mirror similar responses, reinforcing that children understood loyalty as a trait to encourage the formation and maintenance of relationships.

Rather than considering loyalty as a fixed attribute, participant 17 thinks of it as an active process involving effort and sacrifice to strengthen social bonds. This represents a more developed understanding of the contribution that loyalty makes to the long-term development of social relationships. The idea of ‘supporting each other’ assigns more meaning to a give-and-take process and having a more emotional bond. Lastly, the inclusion of ‘being honest’ in the context of loyalty is particularly interesting since it reflects an understanding that loyalty also involves not only honesty and integrity, but that honesty has a reciprocal structure to these relationships – that the context of friendship, loyalty or support actually matters. The link between honesty and loyalty reflects a radical shift in how this participant understands

loyalty, not just as a complex virtue involving trustworthiness and respecting friends, but also involving ethical behaviour in the context of building friendships.

4.4.1.5 Courage

Figure 22. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 15

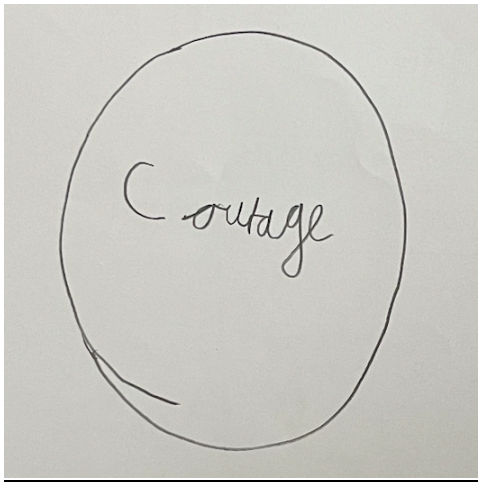
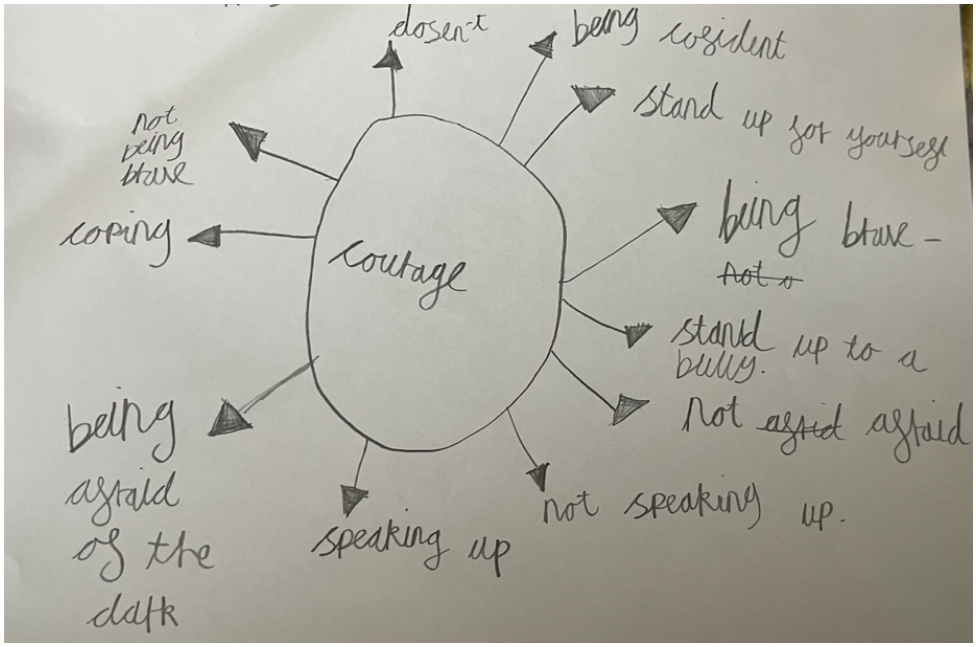


Figure 23. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 15



Participant 15 demonstrated a notable transformation in their comprehension of courage from pre- to post-lesson. Initially, the participant did not place any labels underneath courage, indicating a lack of understanding of what courage meant and that the concept was too abstract, or that they had not been exposed to the word before. Conversely, the participant may have had an internal idea of courage but experienced some difficulty articulating their thoughts. After the lesson, however, a visible change in the child's interpretation and description of courage occurs. Examples of the child conceptualising courage include 'being confident', 'stand up for yourself', and 'being brave'. This collection of answers indicates the student's new definition of courage as an actionable virtue that requires confidence in oneself and confronting challenging situations. The inclusion of 'stand up to a bully' and 'speaking up' specifically highlights the student's recognition of courage within relational contexts and social circumstances. Courage here is viewed as being able to overcome environmental distress or opposing forces: The presence of the phrases 'not scared' and 'being terrified of the dark' demonstrates a grasp of courage as the absence of fear as well as the presence of fear and the ability to face it. Despite this progression, some repetition remains in the comments made, indicating evidence of continuing cognitive development.

Figure 24. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 16

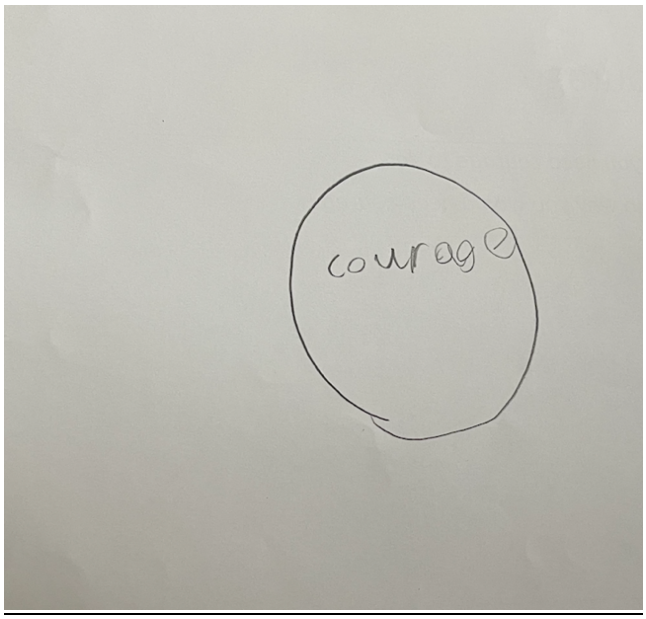
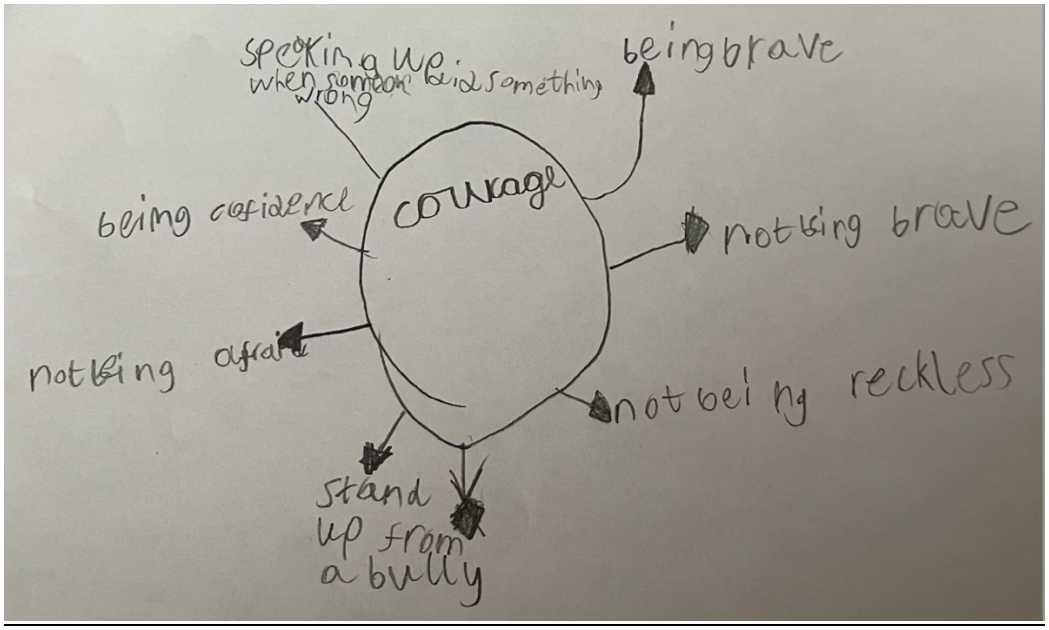


Figure 25. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 16



Similar to participant 15, in the pre-lesson mind-map, participant 16 indicated that they did not understand or were unable to provide examples of courage, leaving no expressions. This

lack of initial response shows that the student could have had some difficulty understanding the concept of courage, or a lack of vocabulary to explain it. Furthermore, these similarities between participants 15 and 16 suggest that not all students were familiar with courage as a character strength or did not have the language to express what it means. However, after the lesson, the comprehension and expression of courage by participant 16 improved. The participant's new account encompasses a set of behaviours and ways of thinking associated with courage. For example, the child referenced several actions that would require courage, such as 'stand up to a bully' indicating a form of physical courage involving facing danger or threats to protect oneself or others. In addition, the expression 'speaking up when someone does something wrong' understands courage as the ability to speak up when necessary and standing against wrongdoing, reflecting a commitment to justice and integrity. Lastly, the inclusion of 'not being reckless' implies that the child is beginning to comprehend an important distinction between thoughtless and thoughtful action: that being courageous is not just about taking any kind of risk but taking careful risks. Here, the child grasps that actioning courage has the potential to put one at risk and that considering and weighing up the possible effects of one's actions is necessary. The side-by-side comparison between the two mind-maps is particularly illuminating because it implies that courage, in its complexity, can appear different to different children. It can also look different to the same child in different kinds of situations.

4.4.1.6 Humility

Figure 26. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Humility) – Participant 1

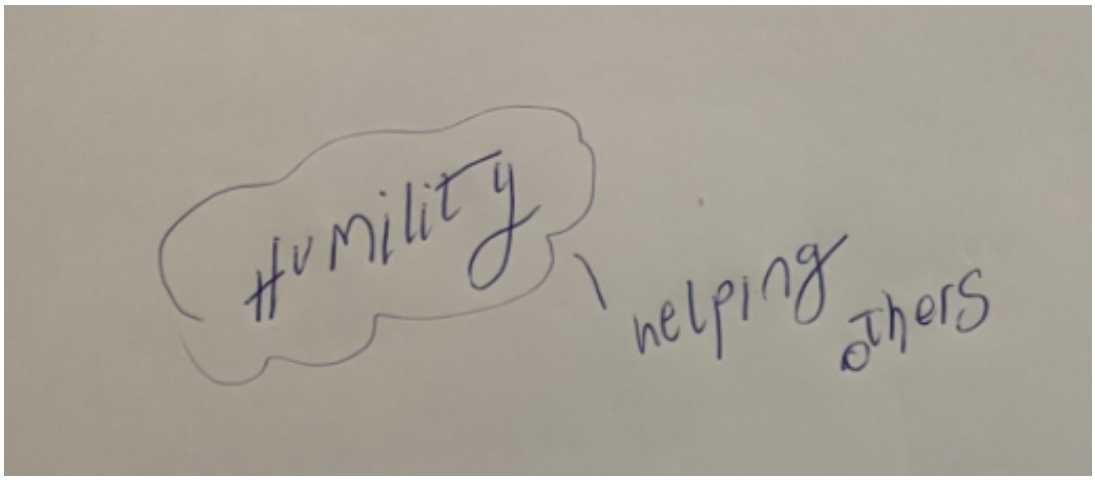
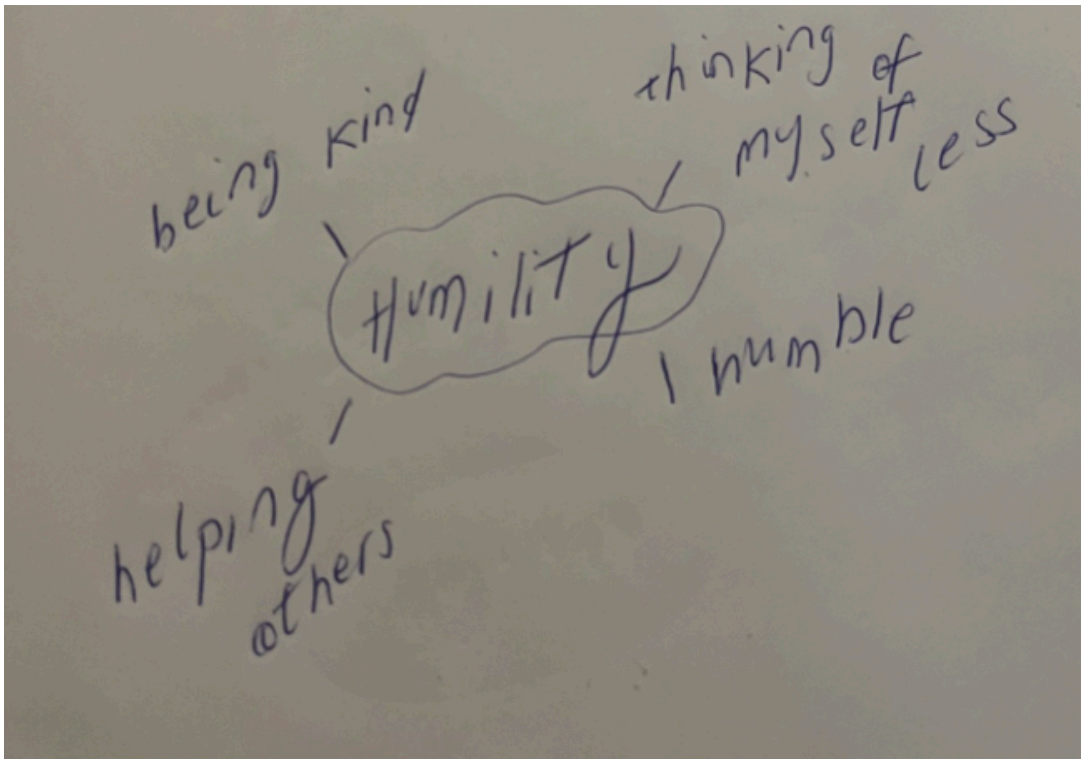


Figure 27. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Humility) – Participant 1



In the pre-lesson mind-map, participant 1 showed a limited understanding of what humility means or entails ('helping others'). This is important because it suggests that the child

conceptualised the virtue as outward-looking. Thinking of humility in terms of helping others is one way of trying to characterise the virtue in terms of the service or assistance that those who are humble may offer other people. While this is undoubtedly an important feature of humility, it focuses exclusively on the humble person's actions, rather than the internal states that may inspire or motivate them. However, after the lesson, participant 1's conceptualisation of humility seems to have moved from a service-oriented view of humility to one that is expressed through 'kindness' and being 'humble'. Although not clearly expressed or developed, the child connects humility with being intrinsically kind. Arguably the most important expression is 'thinking of myself less', as it captures the essence of humility as a form of self-awareness accompanied by an attitude geared away from one's own ego. This is an important shift in the findings and highlights that the child understood that humility is about more than just what we do or say. It is also a way of thinking, an attitude that, at its core, values other people and places their importance above one's own. However, the collective result from the group suggests that this virtue generally followed a different pattern compared to other virtues. This suggests that the children showed more difficulty than progress in their understanding of humility and emphasises the need for additional or alternative approaches to teaching this particular virtue.

4.5 Main Study: Overall Pre- and Post-Intervention Analysis by Virtue – School B (Non-Virtue-Focused)

I now move on to applying the same, qualitative-focused interpretation of the participants' conceptualisations to School B.

Participant No	Gratitude Pre-overall	Gratitude Post-overall	Kindness Pre-overall	Kindness Post-overall	Courage Pre-overall	Courage Post-overall	Loyalty Pre-overall	Loyalty Post-overall	Honesty Pre-overall	Honesty Post-overall	Humility Pre-overall	Humility Post-overall	Pre-overall Scores	Post-overall Scores
1	3	7	3	6	1	4	0	3	1	5	0	2	**8**	**27**
2	2	6	3	6	1	5	1	4	2	11	0	4	**9**	**33**
3	2	5	2	2	0	4	0	3	1	3	0	2	**5**	**19**
4	2	5	3	6	1	6	1	5	3	11	0	5	**7**	**38**
5	2	6	2	3	1	4	0	3	1	4	0	3	**6**	**23**
6*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	**0**	**0**
7	4	6	4	10	2	6	3	5	4	9	1	4	**18**	**34**
8*	1	4	1	3	0	3	0	2	1	4	0	2	**3**	**18**
9	3	7	2	5	1	4	2	5	2	4	0	4	**10**	**29**
10	2	6	3	4	0	4	1	4	3	7	0	3	**9**	**28**
11*	1	3	1	4	0	3	0	4	2	3	0	2	**4**	**19**
12	3	8	2	7	1	4	2	4	2	8	1	3	**11**	**34**
13	3	8	3	9	0	4	2	6	4	6	0	3	**12**	**36**
14	3	7	4	8	1	3	1	4	3	7	0	1	**12**	**30**
15	2	4	2	5	1	2	1	2	2	5	0	1	**8**	**19**
16	1	5	3	7	0	4	1	3	2	3	0	2	**7**	**23**
17	3	6	2	5	1	6	1	5	2	6	0	1	**9**	**29**
18*	1	4	1	5	0	3	0	3	1	1	0	0	**3**	**16**
19	3	5	3	6	1	4	1	3	2	4	1	1	**11**	**23**
20	2	5	3	7	1	6	2	5	3	9	0	2	**11**	**34**
21	1	6	3	8	0	3	1	3	3	7	0	1	**8**	**28**
22	4	7	4	7	1	4	2	5	4	8	0	2	**15**	**32**
23	2	5	3	6	1	3	1	3	2	6	0	2	**9**	**26**
24	1	4	1	6	0	5	0	4	3	6	0	1	**5**	**25**

Table 20. Comparative Analysis of Overall Pre- and Post-Intervention Scores by Virtue (School B)

Table 20 highlights the findings from the 24 School B participants and offers insights into the children's understanding of virtues. The pre-intervention scores for gratitude, kindness, honesty, courage and loyalty indicated that some children had a basic grasp of these virtues. However, in a similar fashion to School A, humility presented a different trend with only two participants showing a minimal understanding (scoring 1), while the remaining participants did not articulate any understanding (scoring 0). This may indicate that the intervention

supported children in beginning to grasp humility, although the depth of expressions were more limited in comparison to the other virtues.

Perhaps the most significant finding is that the participants differed in how much each participant's understanding shifted. While many of the participants demonstrated progress in their descriptions and interpretations across a variety of virtues, others improved less substantially. This difference signifies the role of individual differences – such as personality traits and levels of initial engagement in shaping how children learn about virtues. It also suggests that a variety of written and verbal activities may be needed to meet the needs of diverse populations. Among the six virtues, gratitude, kindness and honesty were the areas in which the participants showed the most pronounced qualitative development. For example, 23 out of 24 of the participants showed an enriching understanding of gratitude with only participant 6 (an outlier) scoring 0, who did not take part in the study. Individual examples, such as participant 1's progression from describing gratitude as 'being thankful' (pre-lesson) to a more detailed articulation involving feelings of happiness and interpersonal connections (post-lesson). Similarly, participant 10 expanded their expressions of gratitude from basic acknowledgments to linking it with specific actions and relationships. These findings suggest that the intervention facilitated richer, more nuanced interpretations of virtues, particularly gratitude, kindness and honesty.

The findings for courage, loyalty and humility were more mixed and saw lower overall increases in comparison gratitude, kindness and honesty. For courage, the participants generally increased from 0 or 1 to 3 or 4, indicating a positive, but subtler change. The overall increases were typically lower, with only participants 4, 7 and 20 scoring 6 post-intervention. The results for loyalty reflect a similar pattern with more mixed overall

increases. For example, participants generally increased from 0, 1 or 2 to 3, 4, and 5, with only participant 13 moving from 2 to 6. Conversely, the results for humility diverge from the overall trend found across the other virtues. Most participants started with a score of 0 reflecting an absence of knowledge or understanding of the virtue entirely, with 3 participants scoring 1. After the intervention, the scores remain relatively low with most participants scoring between 1 and 3. A few participants scored higher, for example participant 4 went from 0 to 4 and participant's 2, 7 and 9 scored 4 post intervention.

Moreover, participants 8, 11 and 18 had moderate learning difficulties, the extent of their improvement is nonetheless encouraging; it suggests not only that the virtue-focused intervention can be adapted for learners with diverse needs, but that it may also be effective for them. For example, participants 8 and 11 had moderate learning difficulties but improved across all the virtues. This highlights that the intervention helped even those who initially struggled to understand and talk about moral virtues. These outcomes highlight that the intervention met their learning needs and improved their understanding of virtues, to different degrees.

4.5.1 Analysis by Virtue: School B

In this section, I explore the findings of the study in the context of each virtue for School B to qualitatively analyse how the intervention developed children's virtue literacy.

4.5.1.1 *Gratitude*

Figure 28. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Gratitude) – Participant 2

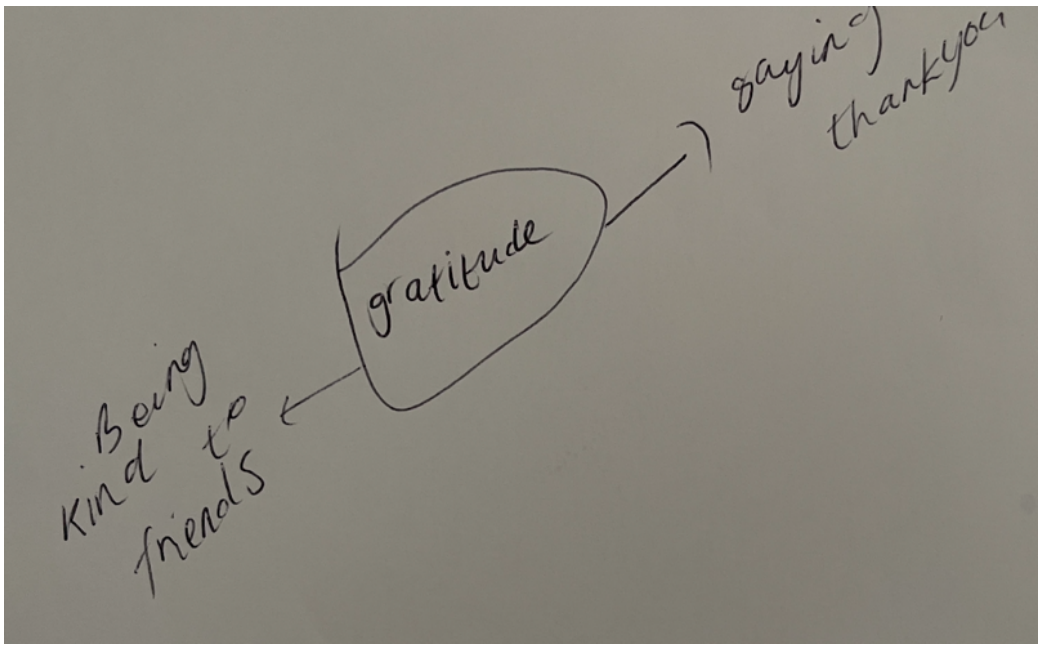
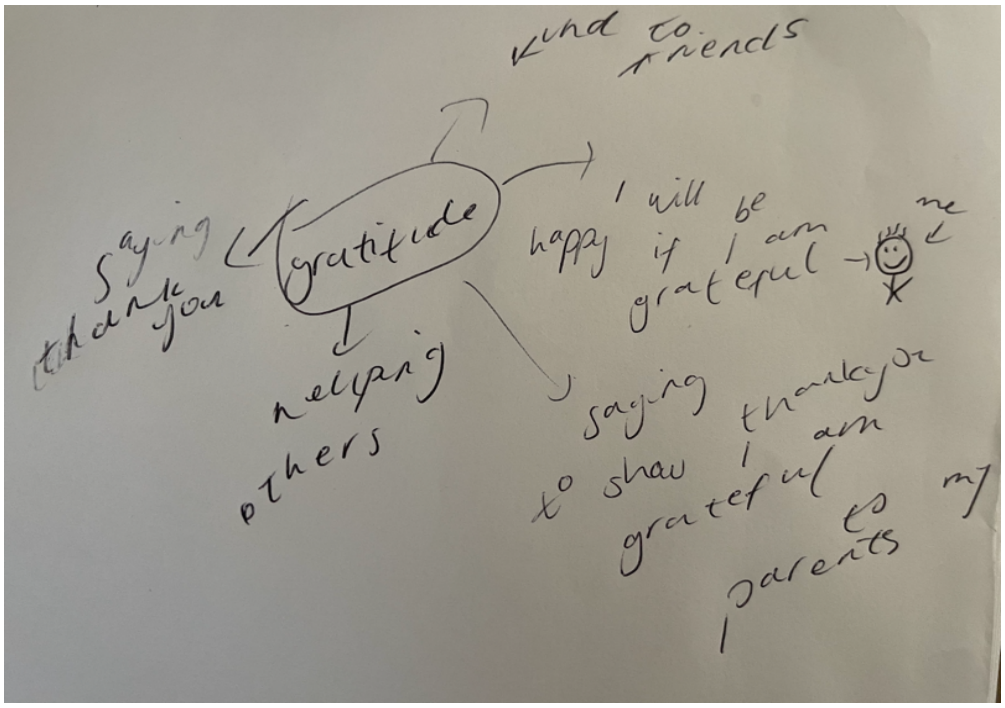


Figure 29. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Gratitude) – Participant 2



The pre-lesson mind-map for participant 2 highlights a progression from score of 2-6. First, it is evident that prior to receiving the lesson, the only knowledge and understanding of gratitude was expressed in two utterances: ‘thank you’ and ‘being kind to friends’. These expressions represent the initial knowledge of participant 2, suggesting a simplistic understanding of gratitude as a social convention that is focused on polite gestures rather than a broader moral virtue. However, the post-intervention mind-map reveals encouraging changes in the understanding of gratitude after receiving the lesson: the utterance ‘I will be happy if I am grateful much’ arguably represents a deeper realisation of the psychological benefits associated with gratitude. Similar trends were found across the collective group, highlighting that the lesson developed the idea that gratitude is not merely a form of external gesture but rather a mindset or attitude that can enhance personal wellbeing.

Additionally, after the lesson, expressions such as ‘helping others’ and ‘not asking for more’ now feature in participant 2’s mind-map. Both suggest an expansion in their understanding of gratitude to embrace more altruistic and empathetic dimensions. Additionally, the utterance ‘helping others’ implies connections between gratitude and acts of kindness in the sense that one way of expressing gratitude is by offering others assistance. In another example, ‘not asking for more’ suggests an appreciation of the affordances of what one has compared to an attitude of entitlement or desiring more. These qualitative changes indicate the success of the lesson in facilitating a more profound and comprehensive understanding of gratitude: The participant’s understanding has now evolved from a mere focus on the external expressions of thanks (mediated by acts of saying ‘thank you’) to a broader realisation of gratitude comprising of emotional wellbeing, acts of kindness, and contentment.

4.5.1.2 *Kindness*

The improvement in post-lesson descriptions, such as those observed in relation to the concept of kindness, emphasises that the children are becoming more adept at recognising instances to exhibit these virtues within their social circles.

Figure 30. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Kindness) – Participant 9

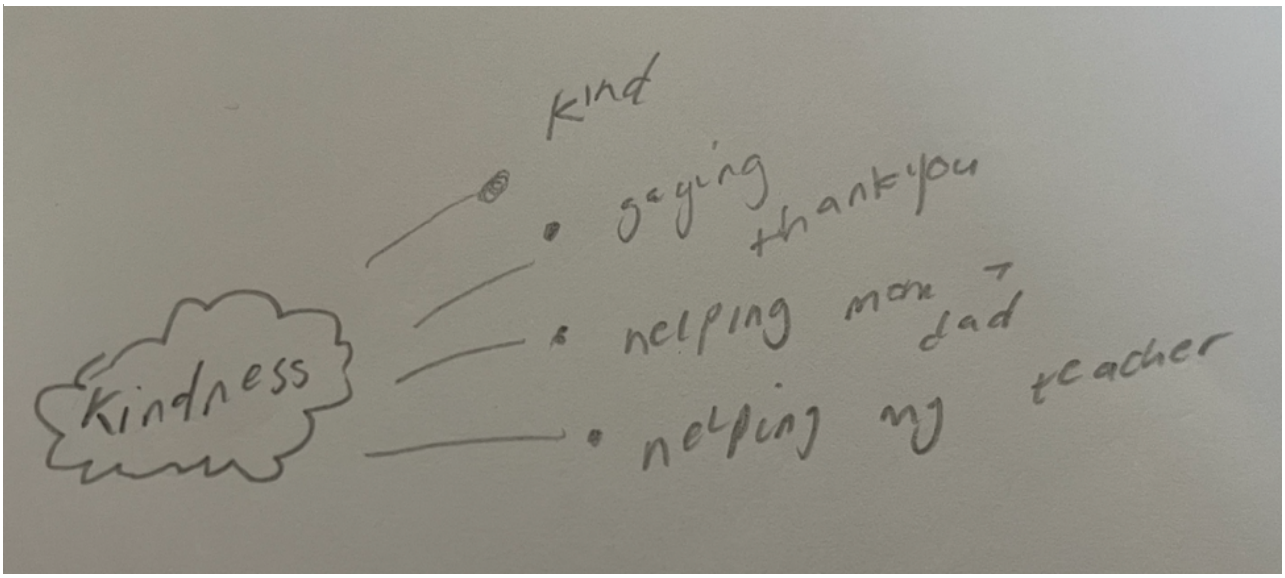
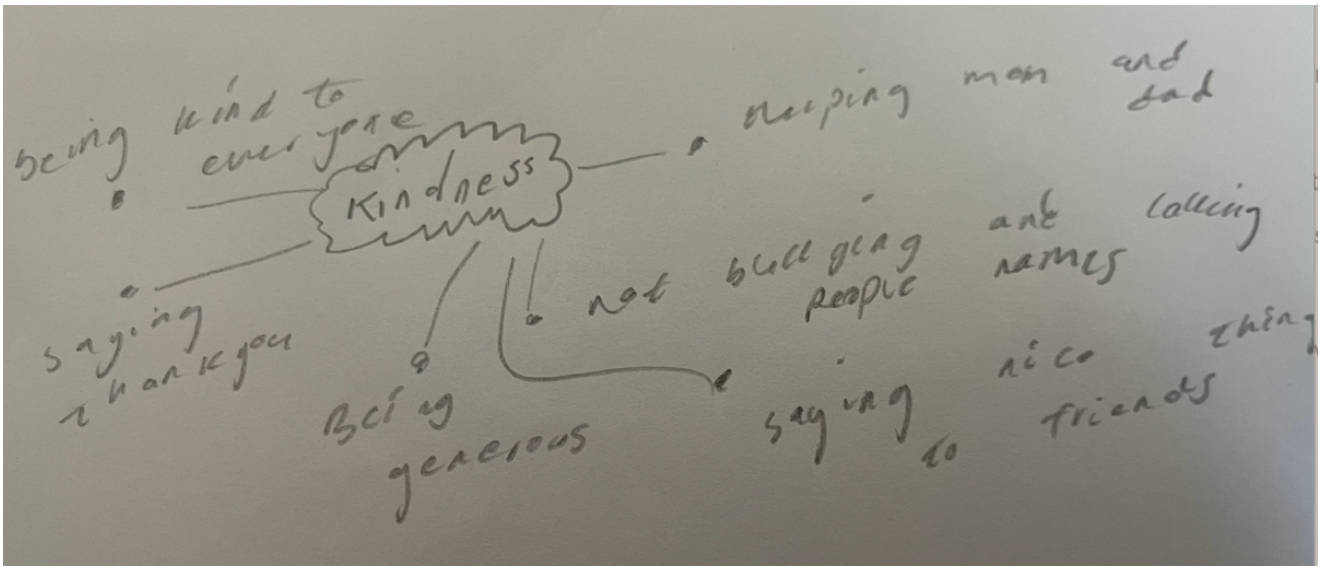


Figure 31. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Kindness) – Participant 9



Initially, participant 9 had a very basic understanding of what kindness means prior to the lesson and scored 3. This was evident in the child's mind-map statements, where straightforward examples of kind behaviours were noted, such as 'being kind', 'saying thank you' and 'helping my mum and dad'. The child's understanding of kindness, at this point, is mostly action-based – which is a positive start and reflected the collective groups understanding. Initially, they understood kind behaviours as a reflection of the sort of kind actions that are drawn from their real-life experiences. In addition, kindness is still very much understood as something they do for other people or that other people do for them, which highlights an awareness of the sort of behaviours that would be considered kind. These are typical ideas that children at this age may have; more importantly, they represent the kind of behaviour that children in this age range are expected to learn, emulate and practise from an early stage.

However, the post-lesson score for participant 9 increased to 7 as they articulated their understanding of kindness to include 'being kind to everybody' and 'not bullying people or calling people names'. They also retained their pre-lesson ideas about 'saying nice things to friends', 'saying thank you' and 'helping mum and dad'. Inserting behaviours such as bullying or name-calling into the list of what kindness is not adds depth to the student's understanding of kindness as not only doing good things but also avoiding doing bad things. The mind-map depicted in Figure 31 also signifies an expansion in participant 9's understanding of kindness as not limited to her family, but broadened to her circle of friends, as reflected in her inclusion of 'saying nice things to friends'. This further reinforces the notion that participant 9's ability to understand kindness in the context of wider relationships had been enhanced by the intervention. Indeed, it is important to note that this student was

not alone in including antisocial behaviours in their understanding of what kindness is not: it was an apparent pattern that emerged from the data whereby multiple students added behaviours like ‘bullying’ and ‘name-calling’ to this list.

4.5.1.3 Honesty

The analysis of the pre- and post-lesson mind-maps regarding the virtue of honesty among the participants revealed interesting insights into the development of this important character trait. It is noteworthy that the majority of participants exhibited growth in their scores by two or more points, indicating an enhanced ability to discern when honest behaviour may be required in social contexts. The pre-lesson findings shows that most of the children’s conception of honesty was centred on two fundamental ideas: ‘not lying’ and ‘telling the truth’ (see Figure 32). These concepts are indeed fundamental elements of honest as a starting point.

Figure 32. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Honesty) – Participant 23

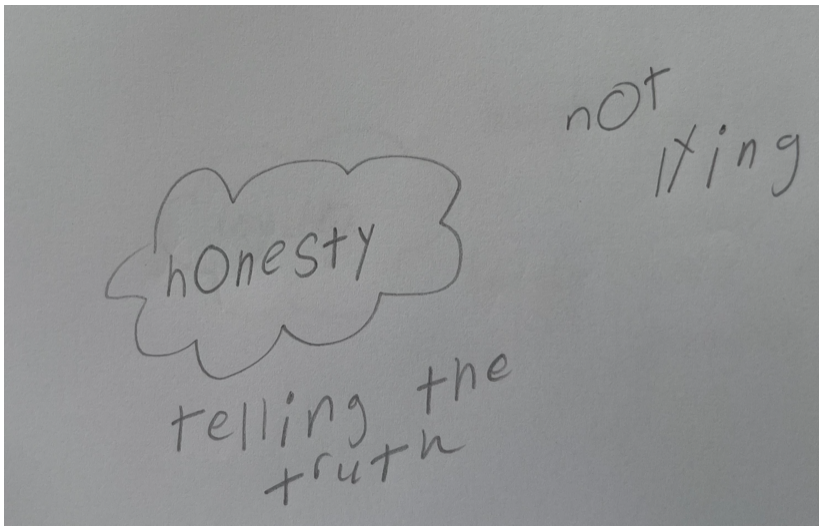
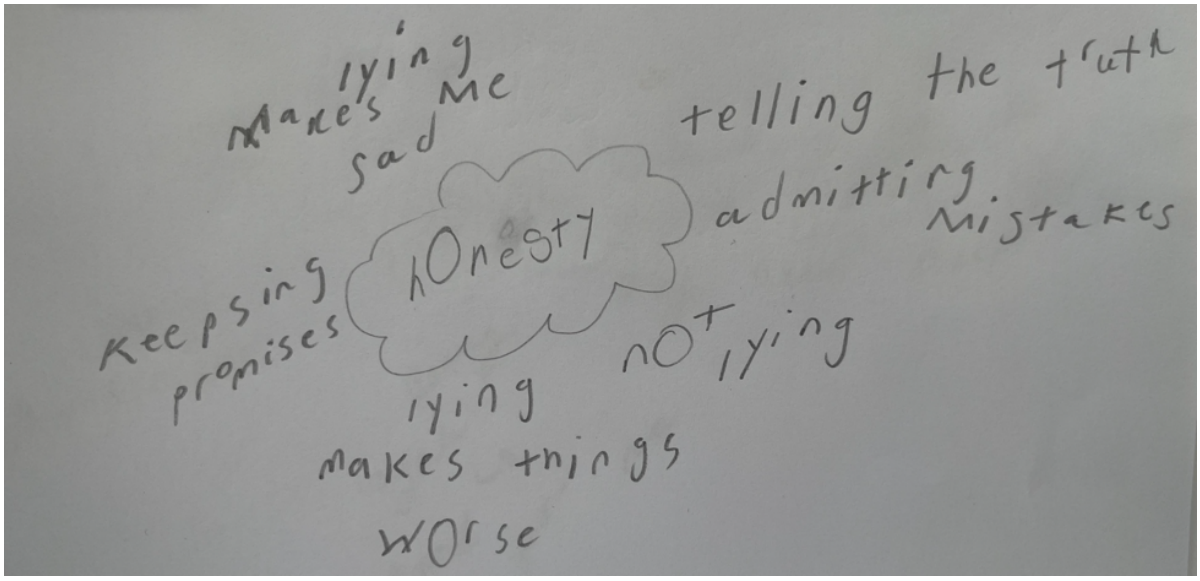


Figure 33: Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Honesty) – Participant 23



The pre- and post-lesson scores for participant 23 changed from 2 to 6. Prior to the lesson, the child made two simple comments: (again) ‘telling the truth’ and ‘not lying’. This initial understanding reflects a grasp of the most basic and overt expressions of the virtue without considering its other important dimensions or manifestations. However, the same participant added a few more items to their post-lesson mind-map, which showcases a better, more insightful grasp of the virtue. These additional aspects – ‘admitting mistakes’, ‘lying makes things worse’, ‘keeping promises’ and ‘lying will make me sad’ – all highlight other, important dimensions of honesty and signifies an enhanced understanding of the virtue’s moral dimension. More specifically, the inclusion of admitting mistakes shows that the child now views honesty as a requirement not only to avoid falsehoods and tell the truth, but also to have the courage to acknowledge the truth about one’s own errors and to take the necessary steps to correct them. This finding highlights the growth of intellectual humility compared to its initial absence in the pre-lesson mind-map. It also highlights an awareness that any

attempt to practise honesty will fail if one is unwilling to recognise the shortcomings in one's actions.

Moreover, the expression 'lying makes things worse' reveals the emergence of a moral-emotional response to dishonesty; it tells us that telling the truth – embarrassing or inconvenient though this may be at the time – is associated with positive long-term outcomes, for oneself included. This stands as evidence for a more developed sense that something happens to oneself and to others as a result of one's actions. Lastly, the addition of 'keeping promises' adds responsibility and dependability to the core of honesty. This could reflect a shift in conceptualising honesty from a list of actions that a child can do or avoid ('keeping promises', 'never telling lies') to the foundation for a broader commitment upon which someone can be trusted to act consistently.

4.5.1.4 Loyalty

The analysis of the pre- and post-lesson mind-maps regarding the virtue of loyalty showed greater variance in the scores, and that they did not develop as much as other virtues.

Figure 34. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Loyalty) – Participant 4

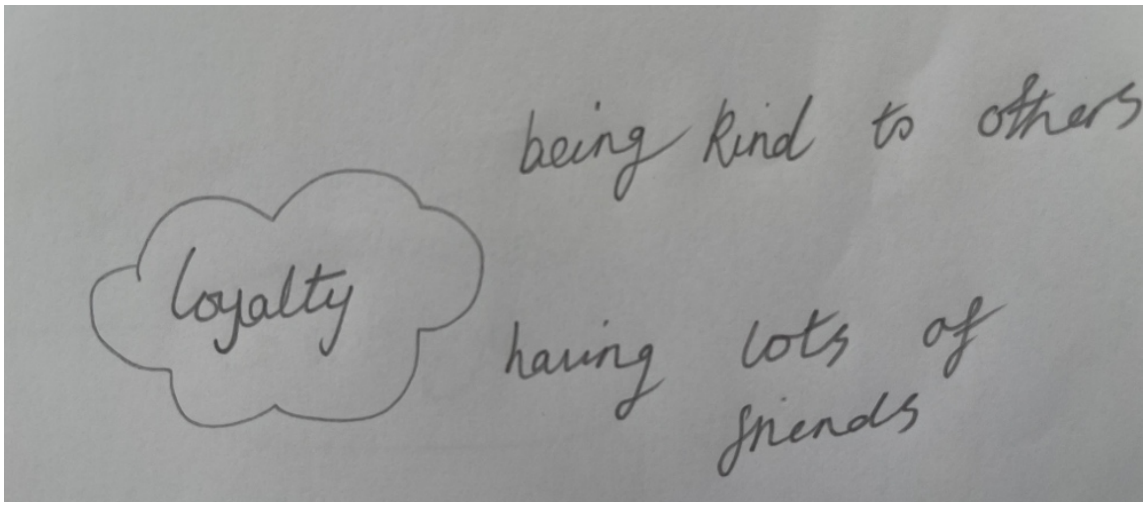
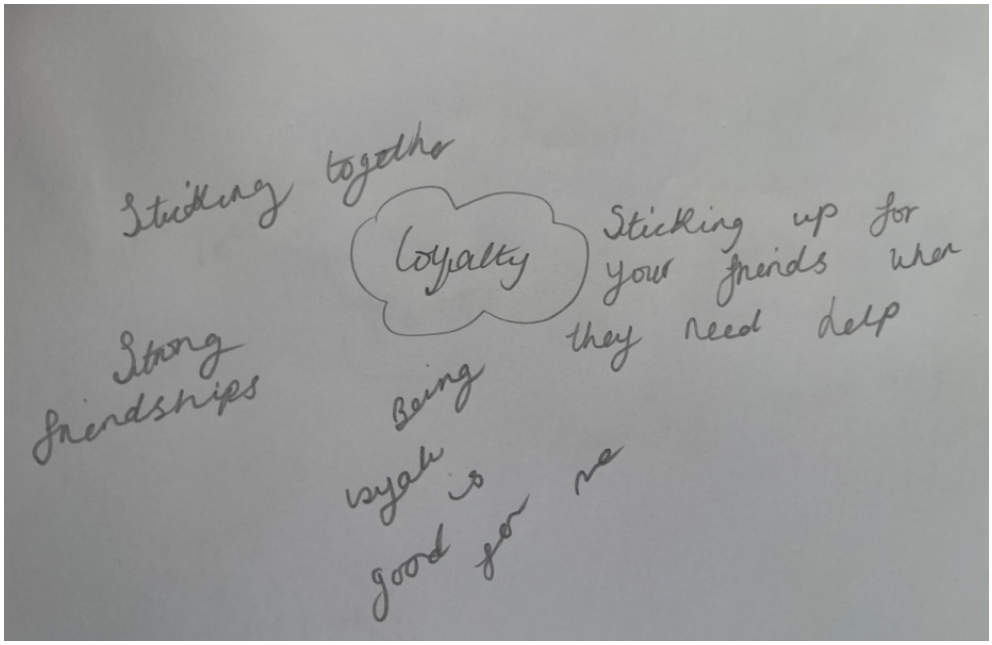


Figure 35. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Loyalty) – Participant 4



For loyalty, participant 4's understanding of this virtue shifted from a pre-lesson score of 1 to a post-intervention score of 5. Here, the participant initially understands loyalty in terms of an association with being kind to others or having a certain number of friends. After the lesson, the concept of loyalty becomes much clearer, with specific examples given that demonstrate its value in specific circumstances. The post-lesson mind-map suggests that from the examples provided, the child has made the connection between loyalty and the sort of situations where being loyal is necessary, such as 'sticking up for friends' when they are in trouble. This gives the child a much more concrete understanding of what loyalty entails. Furthermore, in the statement 'being loyal is good for me', the child now sees loyalty as not just a positive for others but also for oneself; it is now something beneficial in terms of building stronger relationships that will, in turn, bring personal benefits, the most important of which are feelings of safety and belonging. In essence, the child has begun constructing a personal understanding of loyalty.

4.5.1.5 *Courage*

Overall, the data shows that the participants showed a small increase in courage scores after the lesson. This suggests that intervention slightly improved how they view courage as a virtue.

Figure 36. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 1

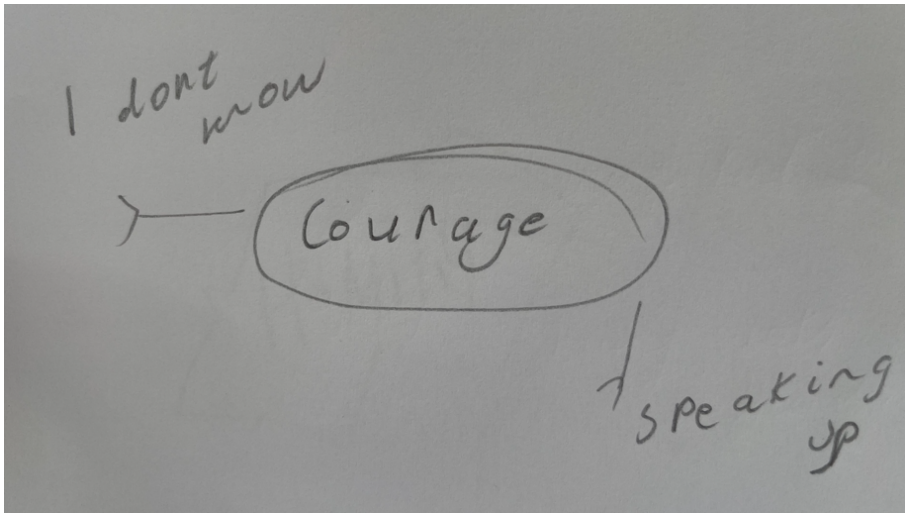
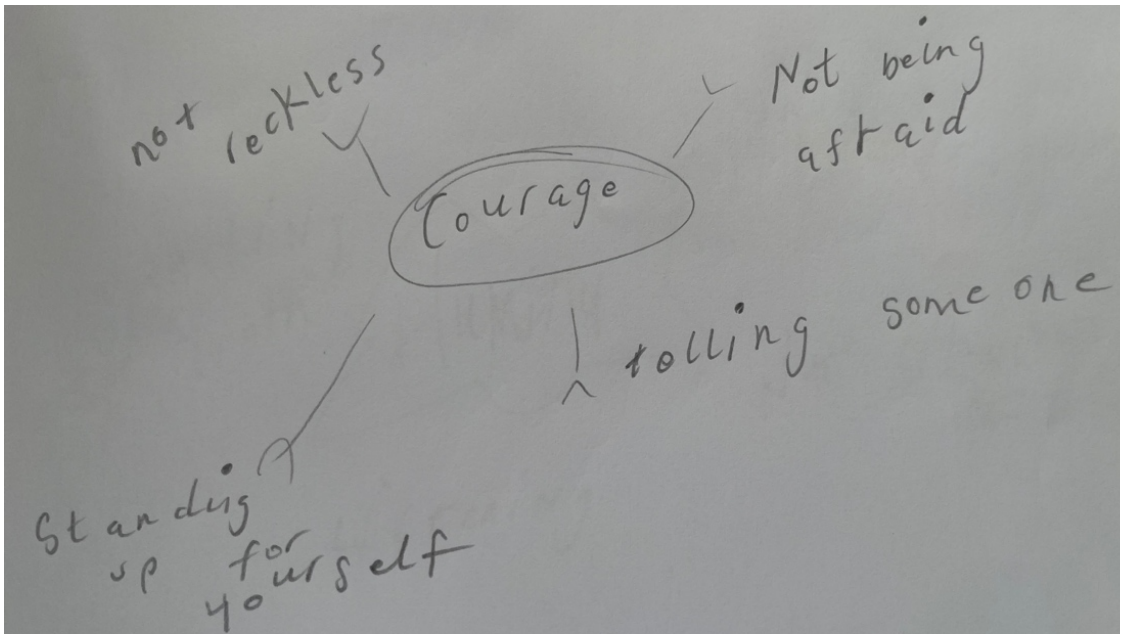


Figure 37. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 1



More closely, the analysis of courage reveals some interesting but more subtle changes in comparison to the other virtues so far. Participant 1's pre-intervention mind-map score for courage was 1, increasing to 4 post-lesson. This suggests a development in the child's understanding of courage, as their progression is evident from their change of responses. Prior to the intervention, the participant mentioned 'speaking up' and 'I don't know', signalling an unclear grasp of what courage means or consists of; in other words, the participant is uncertain what types of actions or characters can be counted as courageous. However, in the post-lesson mind-map, the inclusion of 'not being afraid' and 'telling someone' shows that there still seems to be the suggestion that courage has something to do (emotionally) with 'standing up for yourself' or being unafraid to do so. Nonetheless, this moves from a specific action to a general attitude or state of mind, reflecting a deeper comprehension of the concept. This, therefore, is a more meaningful, clearer, and more practically informed idea of courage than their initial answer. This shift points to the child progressing from vagueness and arguably not knowing what courage means to a specification of certain actions that are exemplary of the virtue. Finally, the inclusion of 'not reckless' demonstrates that the child has understood that courage is a balanced character quality, not just a mindlessly impulsive one. Rather, courageous individuals carefully consider their actions and avoid recklessness. This is an interesting finding and indicates that the participants who included similar phrases have learned that the virtue courage, in particular, requires precisely this sort of balanced, sensitive consideration.

Figure 38. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 19

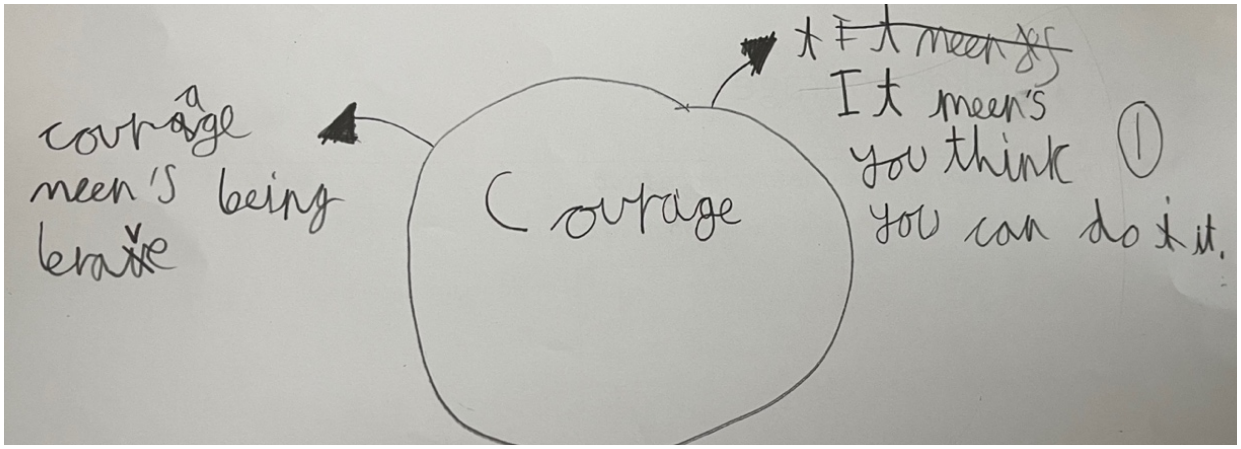
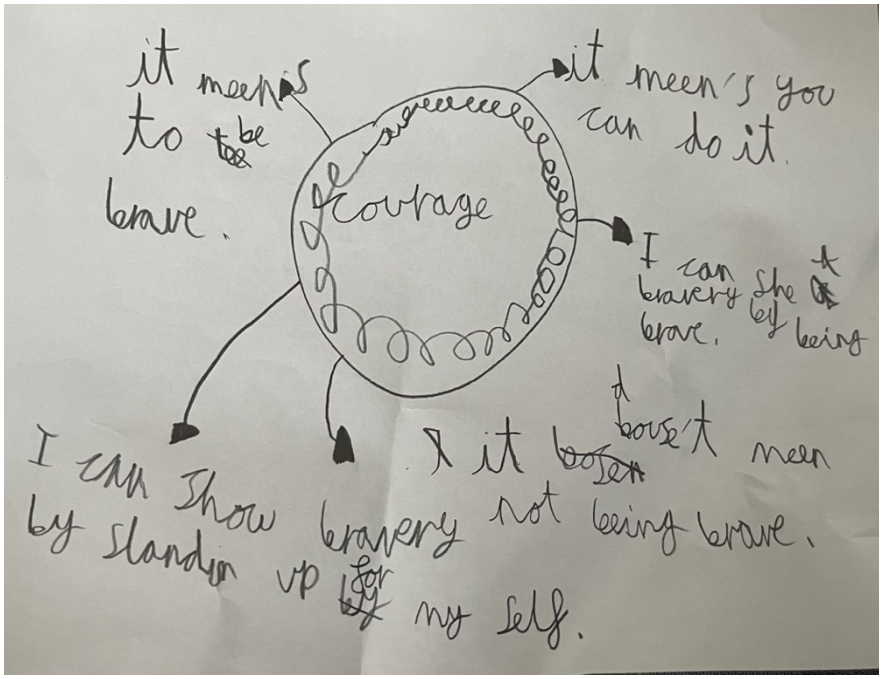


Figure 39. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Courage) – Participant 19



Similar to participant 1, participant 19's mind-maps also reveal development in their understanding of courage, as evidenced by their scores moving from 1 to 4 in the pre- and post-lesson mind-maps. Pre-intervention, the participant moved from quite a superficial understanding of bravery: for example, 'courage means being brave' and 'it means you think

you can do it'. Although these suggest were repeated in the post-lesson mind-maps, the participant understood courage to be a general sense of bravery and self-belief. While both relate to courage, they lack depth and indicate a superficial understanding of the virtue. However, post-intervention, it can be observed that the same participant's responses included action-based expressions. The statement, 'it means to be brave; I can show bravery by standing up for myself' reflects a transition from theoretical understanding about courage towards a more actionable one. The participant now associates courage with specific behaviours like self-advocacy and personal resilience. The addition of 'it doesn't mean not being brave' is also important; here, the participant explains that courage is not merely the absence of fear and hesitation but requires a positive willingness to be courageous.

4.5.1.6 Humility

The pre-lesson scores for humility were notably lower, with a significant number of participants scoring 0 (i.e., not having the knowledge or understanding to write anything of significance, if at all). This suggests a relative unfamiliarity or perhaps a lack of emphasis on this virtue in their prior educational or social upbringing.

Figure 40. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Humility) – Participant 13

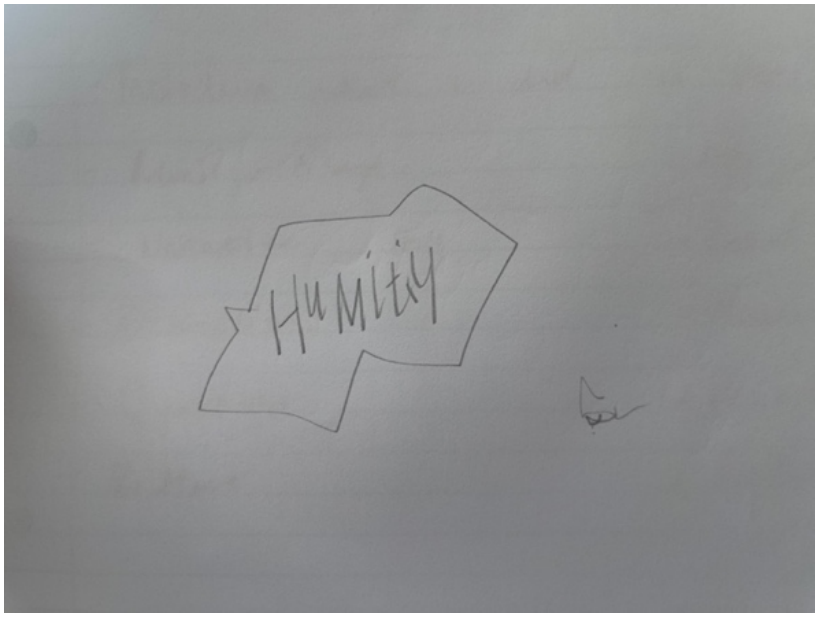
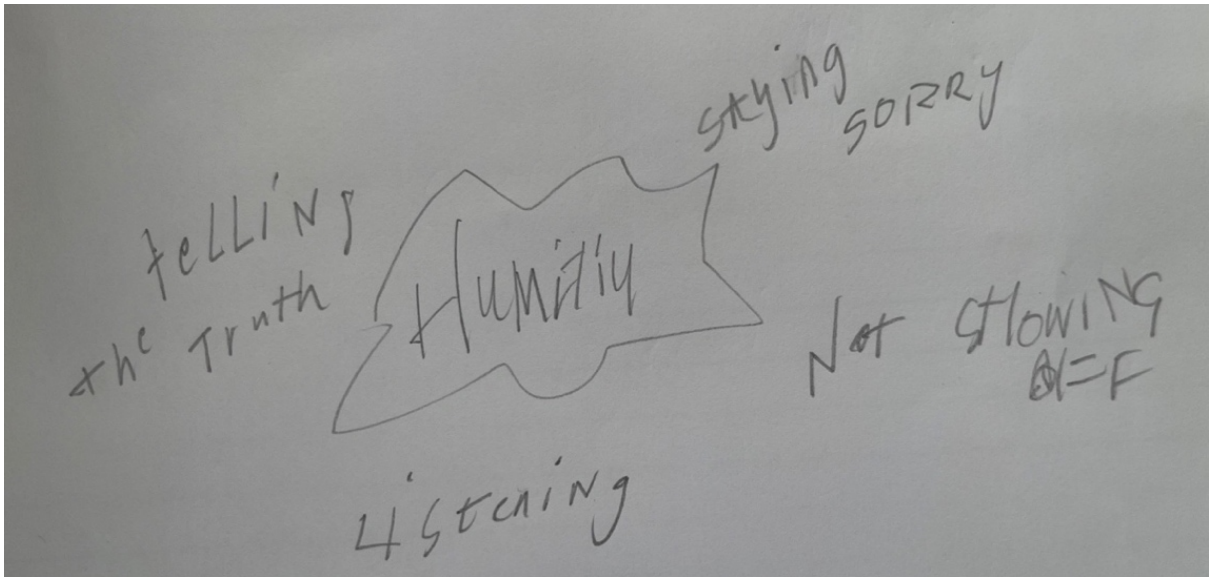


Figure 41. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Humility) – Participant 13



Regarding humility, participant 13 moved from a pre-lesson score of 0 to a post-lesson score of 3, which suggests a subtle yet important change in their understanding of humility between the beginning and end of the intervention. The initial mind-map was left blank, clearly

indicating a lack of knowledge or awareness of the word or its meanings. However, after the lesson, the same child includes ‘not showing off’ to describe not flaunting what one has; in this way, the child shows an appreciation for the significance of a social dimension of boasting, and that bragging damages relationships and social harmony. Additionally, the inclusion of ‘saying sorry’ highlights the role of admitting mistakes and accepting responsibility, thus showing an awareness of humility as a factor in reconciliation for mending relations.

Figure 42. Pre-Lesson Mind-Map (Humility) – Participant 24

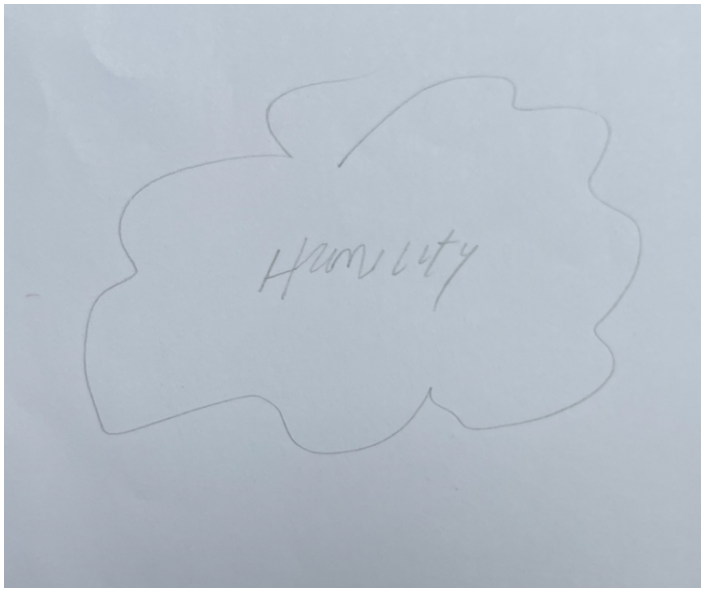
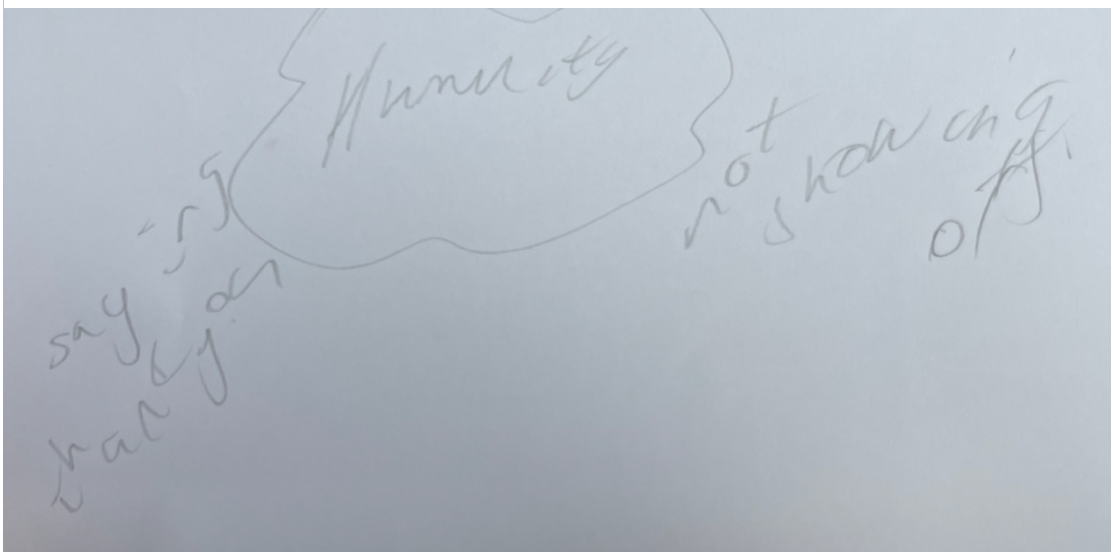


Figure 43. Post-Lesson Mind-Map (Humility) – Participant 24



Following a similar trend for the virtue of humility, the overall group's responses highlight the complexity of developing virtue literacy in more abstract virtues such as humility. For example, prior to the lesson, participant 24 expressed no ideas about what humility could mean. After the lesson, the participant developed from not writing anything to adding 'not showing off' and 'saying thank you', which reflects a small step in their understanding of humility. Overall, the less depth of conceptualisations for humility generally could in fact demonstrate the subtle – and sometimes difficult – process of understanding virtues.

4.6 The Differences in Children's Conceptualisations of Moral Virtues across Schools A and B

This section presents the differences in how children from School A and School B conceptualise virtues, drawing on data collected from their mind maps. The emphasis here is on describing the observed differences in virtue literacy components after the intervention lessons, based on the student's expressions of virtues. Overall, the findings highlight slight

variations in the children's responses and engagement with virtues within these distinct educational contexts. In particular, the findings I interpret and describe play particular attention to the differences found, since there is not enough scope in this study to fully explore the similarities across the two contexts. However, where differences are absent, any interesting similarities are alluded to.

It is important to note that, these interpretations are not definitive but explorative and therefore still subject to further research. Rather than focusing on measurable differences of outcomes of the two schools, the emphasis here lies in interpreting the children's voices and experiences to better understand how they make sense of the virtues they learnt during the intervention and applied these to their daily lives. With that said, in chapter 5, I explore whether changes at the educational level could better support character education, offering a nuanced perspective on how curricula, teaching practices and school environments might shape - or fail to shape for various reasons - children's understanding and conceptualisations of virtues across diverse contexts.

Knowledge & Understanding

The knowledge & understanding component was the most improved component and the children's ability to define, explain and provide examples relating to their own understanding was evident across both schools. While it should be acknowledged that the responses were similar, there were slight differences in the understanding and specificity of responses across the virtues between the two contexts.

In School A, the children would often provide conceptualisations of the virtues that reflected a deeper engagement with the meaning and application of virtues. However, this differed across the virtues. Some of the examples included:

- *Kindness: 'when you let someone join in your game".*
- *Gratitude: 'is saying thank you when someone helps you, even for small things".*
- *Honest: 'telling the truth even when you're scared because it's the right thing to do".*
- *Humility: 'not showing off'.*

It is clear that each example demonstrates unique aspects of the children's understanding, showing how they connect virtues to everyday social interactions and emotional awareness – apart from the virtue humility which is described with less depth. For kindness - allowing someone to join a game reflects an understanding of kindness as a proactive and relational behaviour. For gratitude - the mention of 'small things' indicates an appreciation for acts that might otherwise go unnoticed, suggesting a more insightful view of the virtue. However, for humility, the descriptions became more scarce and less rich. The responses reflected an external understanding of humility, primarily about what not to do, without expressing other aspects such as recognising one's limitations. Additionally, the children in School A demonstrated a stronger relational understanding of virtues. Some of the examples included:

- *Loyalty: 'is sticking with your friend, even if other people don't want to play with them'.*
- *Courage: 'telling the teacher if someone is bullying you'.*

These responses highlighted the children's ability to consider the social and emotional implications of virtues, situating them within their real-life contexts. The responses regarding loyalty and courage from children in School A demonstrate an important ability to connect virtues to social and emotional contexts, reflecting a more nuanced and relational

understanding of moral concepts. For instance, for courage, reporting bullying indicates an awareness of the need to intervene in harmful situations. The child perceives courage as a proactive virtue that requires taking action to address injustice. In addition, for loyalty, by choosing to stick with their friend, the child demonstrates empathy, understanding that abandonment could emotionally harm their friend. This highlights that the children can begin to consider the feelings and needs of others in moral decision-making.

However, the responses from children in School B reflect a more practical and action-oriented approach to defining virtues. Some of the examples included:

- *Kindness: 'sharing your lunch with someone who doesn't have any'.*
- *Gratitude: 'saying thank you when someone gives you a present'.*
- *Honesty: 'not lying so you don't get into trouble'.*

The emphasis on actions like sharing or saying 'thank you' suggests that children in school B associate virtues with their visible results rather than the intentions or emotions behind the actions. For kindness, giving to a friend in need, whilst demonstrating generosity, is framed as a transactional behaviour focused on fulfilling a visible deficit (e.g., no lunch) rather than addressing broader relational aspects, such as recognising the recipient's emotional state. For gratitude - the child understands gratitude as an expected social response to receiving a gift. Similarly, for honesty, avoiding punishment rather than an intrinsic commitment to truthfulness or integrity is highlighted.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that the knowledge and understanding component showed meaningful improvement across both schools, with children demonstrating an enhanced ability to define and explain virtues. While responses shared similarities, subtle differences were evident between the schools. In School A, the children frequently gave more

relational and emotional based examples, relating qualities like loyalty and kindness to emotional health and social harmony. On the other hand, School B's conceptualisations tended to concentrate on actionable tasks and tangible results, such staying out of trouble or taking care of urgent requirements.

Perception

Children's ability to perceive virtues in themselves, others, and everyday situations improved across both schools. The findings showed similarities in how children identified virtues, with only slight differences in the depth and complexity of their perceptions.

In School A, children demonstrated an awareness of virtues in relational and situational contexts, often linking virtues to interactions with others. Some of the examples included:

- *Kindness: 'when you see someone sitting by themselves and you invite them to play."*
- *Courage: 'helping someone who's being bullied even if it's scary'.*
- *Loyalty: 'sticking with your friend even when they're upset, and other people don't want to play with them'.*

These examples reflect the children's ability to identify when a virtue may be required in specific social scenarios. With the participants ages in mind (7-8 years), they are often drawn from personal experiences in school, playground, or home interactions. For example, by situating kindness in a playground context, the response shows how the child perceives when, in an everyday interaction kindness may be required, reinforcing their relevance in promoting peer relationships. For courage, the child perceives bullying as a scenario demanding intervention, despite personal fear or risk. For loyalty, the example shows that the child

perceives loyalty being required when others exclude their friend, highlighting their understanding of loyalty as a virtue that requires consistency and support in friendships.

In School B, children similarly demonstrated an ability to recognise virtues as positive behaviours, but their responses were predominantly focused on individual actions and practical outcomes, with less emphasis on relational or emotional dimensions. Some of the examples included:

- *Honesty: 'telling the truth so it doesn't get bigger and get in trouble'.*
- *Courage: 'not being reckless'.*
- *Gratitude: 'helping my mom with cleaning'.*

In contrast to School A, these examples demonstrate a different perspective on moral principles, reflecting a more self-centred and concrete interpretation of virtues. For honesty, the child identifies the morally relevant feature of the situation - truth-telling, as a way to avoid escalating problems. This demonstrates an awareness of how dishonesty can compound issues and create negative outcomes. For courage, the child identifies recklessness as the morally salient feature of a situation, framing courage as a behaviour that involves exercising caution and avoiding unnecessary danger. Lastly, for gratitude, the response suggests a perception of gratitude being linked to helping with chores. This demonstrated that 'giving back' to someone who has helped them is required.

In summary, the children in School A were slightly more likely to recognise and express the relational and situational aspects of moral scenarios, despite the fact that both groups were able to recognise when a specific virtue would be necessary in light of their social contexts.

Children at School B, on the other hand, had a simpler and more concrete view of virtues and tended to concentrate more on individual behaviours and practical results.

Reasoning

Virtue reasoning, as outlined in this study, involves the capacity to reason about the best way to demonstrate individual virtues in specific situations. This constitutive function focuses on understanding how virtues can be applied in practical contexts, rather than resolving conflicts between virtues. The findings indicated that children in both schools demonstrated growth in virtue reasoning, though this development was less pronounced compared to perception and knowledge and understanding.

In School A, children's reasoning about virtues included references to social and emotional considerations. Some of the examples included:

- *Honesty: 'it's important because if you lie, people won't trust you anymore."*
- *Kindness: 'helping someone when they're sad because it makes them feel better and you feel good too'.*
- *Courage: 'doing the right thing even when you're scared'.*

These responses illustrate an emerging ability to think about virtues in terms of their relational influence and emotional consequences, showing a level of moral reasoning beyond immediate action. For honesty, the child's response reflects an understanding of the consequences of dishonesty on relationships, highlighting the role of honesty in maintaining trust. For kindness, the child recognises the mutual emotional benefits of kindness and that an act of kindness promotes emotional benefits for both giver and receiver. Lastly, for courage, the child expresses that the virtue requires thoughtful consideration of the right course of action in challenging scenarios that may give rise to the emotion fear. These responses

suggest that children in school A are beginning to engage with virtues at a deeper level, reasoning not only about their actions but also about the relational and emotional implications of those actions.

However, in School B, the children also demonstrated reasoning about virtues, though their examples tended to focus more on immediate or practical benefits. Some of the examples included:

- *Honesty: 'you don't get in trouble when you tell the truth'.*
- *Kindness: 'if you be kind to others, you will be happy'.*
- *Courage: 'being brave and strong'.*

While these responses show an understanding of why virtues are important, they often emphasised self-focused or consequence-based reasoning rather than broader moral or relational implications. For honesty, the child expresses avoiding negative consequences when one is honest rather than as a relational principle of honesty for strengthening relationships. For kindness, the child recognises that the virtue can be best shown to improve their own individual emotional state but does not explore how it makes the recipient feel. Lastly, for courage, the child emphasises overcoming fear to achieve a personal goal rather than considering courage morally.

For more abstract virtues like humility and loyalty, reasoning varied across the schools. In School A, children reasoned about humility and loyalty in relational terms:

- *Humility: 'not showing off or bragging to people who have less'.*
- *Loyalty: 'having friends forever and helping them'*

For humility, the child mentions 'people who have less' which highlights an awareness of social inequities and the potential for humility to prevent feelings of inadequacy in others.

For loyalty, the idea of 'having friends forever' suggests that the child perceives loyalty as a lasting virtue that contributes to stable and supportive relationships.

In contrast for School B**,** reasoning about these virtues was simpler and focused on observable behaviours:

- *Humility: 'saying sorry'.*
- *Loyalty: 'being nice to your best friend so they stay your friend'.*

For humility, the child reduces humility to a single action – apologising - which, while valuable, does not fully capture the other important dimensions of the virtue and therefore conceptualises humility with less depth. For loyalty, the child focuses on being 'nice' as a means to maintain friendship which suggests a transactional view of loyalty, where actions are motivated by the desire to secure personal benefits (e.g., keeping a friend). Overall, while children in both schools demonstrated an ability to reason about virtues, responses in school A were more likely to include relational and emotional dimensions, whereas those in school B emphasised practical or consequence-based reasoning.

Reflection

Virtue reflection, as defined in this study, refers to the children's capacity to consider and reflect on the significance of virtues to their own lives and behaviour in terms of what is good, right, virtuous or moral. Children's reflections on virtues, while present, were limited in scope and often lacked personal examples of how virtues had been applied in their own

lives. Instead, their reflections focused on the meaning of virtues and what they had learned about them during the intervention.

In School A, the children's reflections were more focused on the significance of virtues in promoting positive relationships. Some of the examples included:

- *Kindness: 'it makes other people feel happy'.*
- *Gratitude: 'grateful for my home'.*
- *Honesty: 'Being honest makes people trust you and want to be your friend'.*

These responses suggest that children in School A were reflecting on the broader implications of virtues rather than providing specific, personal examples of how they had used them. For kindness, the child reflects on how the virtue positively impacts others emotional state but does not connect it specifically to a personal experience or action, thus, offering a generic perspective. For gratitude, the child reflects on a more direct aspect of their life they are grateful for – their home. Whilst the response indicates an awareness of expressing gratitude, it does not extend beyond. Lastly, for honesty, the child's reflection, similar to other reflections, does not include specific examples of how honesty has been applied in the child's life.

In School B, reflections were similarly centred on the general importance of virtues, with minimal direct or explicit references to their personal reflections on how they have enacted the virtue or how it contributes to their own moral identity (the type of person they want to become). Some of the examples included:

- *Kindness: 'don't make people sad'.*
- *Gratitude: 'I am grateful for my parents'.*
- *Honesty: 'helps you not get in trouble'.*

For kindness, the reflection highlights kindness as a behaviour aimed at preventing negative emotions in others but does not explore a specific example taken from their own experience, lacking deeper contemplation of the significance of the virtue to the child. For gratitude, the child recognises the significance of their parents – significant figures in their life – however, does not explore further any specific actions or situations that has inspired the feelings of gratitude. Lastly, for honesty, the child reflects on the importance of being honest, but from a limited perspective of not getting trouble, rather than connecting it to the type of virtue they want to embody for more moral and personal reasons.

In summary, the children in both schools appeared to focus more on expressing what they had learned about the virtues from the lesson, often connecting their value to their social worlds and peers or relatives, rather than reflecting on specific instances of applying these virtues themselves and considering them in the context of who they aspire to be. These findings indicate that while children were able to articulate the meaning and importance of virtues, opportunities for deeper, personal reflection on how and why the virtues had been applied in their lives were minimal across both schools. Interestingly, reflections pertaining to the type of moral agent they would want to become were also deficient.

Overall Summary: The Key Insights

To conclude the findings, there were indeed slight differences in the way the children conceptualised the virtues, although this variation appeared to reflect differences in focus and depth rather than completely distinct understandings. That is to say, children in both schools demonstrated growth in their ability to define, perceive, reason about and reflect on virtues – despite this growth mainly differing in depth depending on the virtue. Interestingly, these

differences also suggested that the children's conceptualisations were shaped by their environments to some extent, particularly in how they applied virtues to social or personal contexts. Moreover, a potential contributing factor to School A's slightly more nuanced interpretations compared to School B might be linked to differences in daily practices, which appeared to place greater emphasis on character education. As a final remark, it is important to interpret these findings cautiously, as the observed variations may also be influenced by individual or developmental factors beyond the scope of this study which is explored further in chapter 5.

4.7 Focus Group Findings

In this section, I present the findings collected from the pre- and post-intervention focus groups regarding how participants engaged with and expressed their understanding of the six virtues and applied them to the three predetermined themes: understanding of virtues, application to real-life scenarios and decision-making processes. Additionally, one emergent theme was identified through the coding process: challenges in applying virtue.

The primary objectives of the focus groups were twofold. The first was to explore how participants articulated and demonstrated their understanding of the virtues in relation to the predetermined themes. This provided insight into how the intervention supported children in connecting their theoretical learning with real, everyday situations. The second was to investigate whether an alternative pedagogical method offered opportunities for children to express and reflect on what they have learned about the virtues. In this way, the focus groups helped to uncover how the intervention helped the children discuss and make sense of their learning. It is worth noting, however, that all the findings from the focus group transcripts

were carefully chosen from the original sets of data to illustrate the key points. The purpose here was not to present the data in its entirety, but to put forth certain findings that best helped in answering the research questions.

Table 23 summarises the main themes for further discussion below, where the findings presented are contextualised based on the focus groups prior to and after the intervention in both schools. I then conclude the section with a comparison of findings from both schools and key findings overall.

Key Theme Under Exploration	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention
Understanding of Virtues	Gauged children's baseline understanding of virtues.	Assessed any developments or changes in their comprehension of virtues.
Application to Real-Life Scenarios	Evaluated how children applied virtues in everyday situations.	Observed any improvements or changes in their ability to relate virtues to real-life contexts.
Decision-Making Processes	Investigated children's initial decision-making strategies.	Explored whether the intervention introduced new ways of thinking and making decisions, particularly in challenging situations.
Challenges in Applying Virtue	This theme emerged from data during analysis.	Identified difficulties or conflicts children faced when trying to apply virtues, such as peer pressure or fear of negative consequences.

Table 21. Summary of Focus Group Themes

4.7.1 Explanation of Transcript Collation

In the transcripts presented in this section, I collate the pre- and post-intervention focus group responses side-by-side in order to provide a more clear and descriptive exploration of the children's reflections before and after the intervention. I choose this method to allow for a more interpretive analysis of the shifts and developments in their responses. Here, my intention was to present the transcripts in such a way that the reader could easily observe the changes and developments across the three previously mentioned themes.

The transcripts were organised into three main sections as follows:

1- **Pre-Understanding of Virtue** – This section highlights the children's responses prior to the intervention, exploring their initial understanding in relation to the question posed by the facilitator.
2- **Post-Understanding of Virtue** – This section explores the ways in which the children's understanding has (or has not) changed after the intervention.
3- **Facilitator's Questioning** – This section foregrounds the inclusion of the questions posed by the facilitator during the focus groups.

To briefly summarise, the overall findings indicate that the intervention helped to support and encourage depth in the children's understanding of virtues and in articulating what they had learned during the lessons, particularly in contrast to their reflections before the intervention. The responses from the pre- and post-focus groups for both School A and School B are explored and described below to provide insight into these developments.

4.7.2 School A: Focus Group Findings

For School A, the results from the focus groups at School A demonstrated that the virtue-based intervention helped to foreground the virtues, enabling the children to consider and understand how different virtues can be relevant in different situations. The groups also explored and discussed the relevance of virtuous behaviours to real-life scenarios and encouraged the children to make decisions that were not only self-serving but also ethically sound and fair. Together, these developments suggest that explicit virtue education using focus groups can support meaningful engagement with aspects of young children's character and support the development of the different virtue literacy components. I now shift to providing examples from the transcripts to offer a more meaningful interpretation of the children's development across the four themes.

Transcript 1. Understanding of Virtue

Facilitator: Good afternoon, everyone! Today, we're going to talk about what it means to be a good person. Let's start with the first set of questions.

Pre- understanding of Virtue:

Facilitator: What do you think it means to be a good person?

Child 1 (C1): Being nice to others and sharing toys. I think being good is when you don't do bad things.
Child 2 (C2): Yeah, like not hitting and saying sorry when you do something wrong.
Child 3 (C3): I think being good is helping people and not being mean.
Child 4 (C4): Sharing snacks! And not lying.

Post- understanding of Virtue:

Facilitator: Welcome everyone, it's nice to have you all here and I hope you have enjoyed all our lessons on the different virtues. After our lessons, did you learn about any new virtues? How do you think virtues help us become better people?

Child 1 (C1): We learned about honesty. It's when you tell the truth even if it's hard. I think it helps us be better because people can trust us.
Child 2 (C2): I learned about gratitude. It's saying thank you and not moaning when things don't your way and helping others.
Child 3 (C3): Kindness is a virtue we learned. It's like being nice to everyone, not just friends. It makes us better by making friends with everyone.
Child 4 (C4): Yeah, and helping each other. Like being compassionate. That's a virtue too.

The moral development of the virtue-focused intervention is evident in the pre- and post-intervention responses shown in Figure 1, which clearly contrasts the children's understanding of virtues before and after the intervention. Prior to the intervention, the children responded to the question posed by the facilitator 'What do you think it means to be a good person?' with simple references to basic and observable actions. The responses include sharing, being good, not lying and being nice to others, to name a few. These initial

responses indicate that they associated goodness with simplistic and often socially acceptable behaviours influenced by the social rules learned from authority figures at home and school.

However, after the intervention, the children's responses become more specific as they reference the virtues, indicating a clear shift in their use of moral vocabulary. For example, C1 states how honesty is when someone tells the truth despite it being difficult. This highlights how the child associates the idea of being a good person with the trait of honesty and recognises that being truthful not only builds trust, but is also the right thing to do. Another example of progression comes from C3, who references that kindness is a virtue that 'makes us better'. Here, the child recognises that practising a virtue like kindness not only helps others but also leads to personal growth by enhancing one's own goodness – or moral character. Overall, the children did not just refrain from using examples that avoid negative behaviours in their post-intervention responses; they understood the lesson well enough to put it into a moral context. This highlights the intervention's success in engaging in positive, empathetic and supportive understanding of the virtues – an important qualitative change that suggests the potential for significant moral development and understanding.

Transcript 2. Application of Virtue

Pre- application of Virtue:

Facilitator: Can you think of a time when you demonstrated a virtue, like kindness or honesty? What did you do and how did it make you feel?

Child 1 (C1): I shared my favourite crayons with a friend.
Child 2 (C2): I told my mom I broke a cup. It made me a bit scared, but she wasn't mad.
Child 3 (C3): I helped my little sister tie her shoes.

Child 4 (C4): I didn't join in when others were being mean to the new kid the other day.

Post-application of Virtue:

Facilitator: After our lessons, can you think of a time when you applied one of the virtues you learned to a real-life situation? What did you do and how did it make you feel?

Child 1 (C1): yesterday, I told the teacher that my friend was shy and didn't want to ask for help, but she really needed help and then when I told the teacher and my friend said thank you, I felt like a good friend.
Child 2 (C2): in football today, I waited for my turn to kick the ball even when other children were pushing each other.
Child 3 (C3): I shared my snack with someone who forgot theirs. It made me feel kind and compassionate.

Transcript 2, which demonstrates how the children acquired practical application of taught virtues through the virtue-focused intervention, highlights further positive progress. Before the intervention, the children's responses to the facilitator's question 'Can you think of a time when you demonstrated a virtue like kindness or honesty?' mainly included 'sharing crayons', 'told my mum' and avoiding being mean when others were saying mean things to other kids. These examples, although relevant to kindness and honesty, are still somewhat simplistic, focusing on immediate actions. However, after the intervention, the children's responses progressed into more empathetic, thoughtful and often emotional considerations. For example, C3 states, 'I shared my snack with someone who forgot theirs. It made me feel

kind and compassionate'. This shift is particularly interesting for two reasons. First, the child not only alludes to performing a kind action but also connected emotionally with the peer who forgot their snack, developing a sense of empathy. Second, the virtue of compassion was not one of the moral virtues explicitly taught in the intervention. This highlights the interconnected nature of virtues beyond the specific virtues learned in the lessons. Here, the child 'caught' – either indirectly or directly from the lesson or outside the lesson – that compassion relates to kindness and was able to connect the two together.

Transcript 3. Decision-Making Process

Pre-Decision-making process:

Facilitator: Can you think of a time when you had to make a tough decision? What did you do and why?

Child 3 (C3): I told the truth about eating the last yogurt even though I got told off.
Child 4 (C4): My mom asked me to clean up after myself and I really wanted to go on the iPad, but I picked cleaning because it made my mom and dad happy, and my room was tidy as well.

Post- Decision-making process:

Facilitator: How do you decide what to do now when you have a difficult decision to make?

Child 1 (C1): We learned to think about how our choices affect other people.

Facilitator: can you give me an example?

Child 1 (C1): Yeah, like if I am making fun of someone then that person is going to be sad.
Child 2 (C2): Yeah, we talked about being honest to others and not lying even when it's hard.
Child 4 (C4): I told my mom I learned about being grateful for the things in life like family and friends. So sometimes I just have to be thankful instead of moaning.

Transcript 3 shows the progress of the children's decision-making processes in their focus group responses, highlighting how they think about making tough decisions. Prior to the

intervention, the children's approach seemed to be based on immediate consequences and obedience to authority figures such as parents. For example, C3 decides to tell the truth despite the consequences of being told off by their parents and recognises the difficulty in doing so. Similarly, C4 alludes to choosing to clean up to avoid their parents being annoyed, highlighting a desire to please authority figures. However, after the intervention, the children's responses develop into considering how the decisions made can affect others' emotional states. For example, C1 alludes to a consequence of bullying as the cost of upsetting someone, contributing to their emotional distress. This highlights an understanding of how the emotional consequences of one's actions can have an effect on others (and the consequences of those effects). Another interesting finding can be seen in C4's response 'sometimes I just have to be thankful instead of moaning', which captures the child's capacity for constructive affective self-regulation – that is, they have developed the ability to see and counterbalance the emotion of complaining by reflecting on gratitude. Unlike the pre-intervention responses, which focus mainly on pleasing others, these post-intervention changes highlight a more empathetic understanding of decision-making, one that extends the self and considers others' feelings. In addition, the mention of expressing gratitude shows an awareness of self-reflecting on how they think and feel, and that expressing gratitude moves beyond merely saying thank you towards a personal value that helps develop happiness.

Transcript 4. Challenges in Applying Virtue

Pre- challenges in applying virtue:

Facilitator: It sounds like you all felt good after doing something kind or honest. Does anyone think it's sometimes hard to do those things?

Child 2 (C2): when you think you'll get in trouble for telling the truth.
Child 1 (C1): Yeah, like, um, I didn't tell on my friend when they did something wrong because I didn't want them to get in trouble.

Post- challenges in applying virtue:

Child 2 (C2): In football today, I waited for my turn to kick the ball even when other children were pushing each other.

Facilitator: It sounds like you all did a great job using the virtues. Does anyone think it's sometimes hard to do those things?

Child 3 (C3): Yeah, sometimes. Like when others are not being nice, it's hard to be the only one who is.
Child 2 (C2): Or when you think that an adult like a teacher will tell your mom and you will get in trouble.

Transcript 4 shows that before the intervention, the children showed difficulties in applying the virtues, particularly in social situations. For example, C2 feared getting into trouble for telling the truth, while C1 hesitated to tell on a friend, highlighting a struggle between honesty and maintaining relationships. This indicated a conflict between doing the right thing and preserving social harmony, underpinned by a fear of authority. After the intervention, however, C2 demonstrated patience and fairness by waiting for their turn during football, reflecting an improvement in applying virtues such as self-control in real situations. Despite still acknowledging the difficulty of acting kindly when others are not, both C2 and C3 exhibited deeper moral reflections, showing a more thoughtful approach to balancing the virtues and social challenges.

4.7.3 School B: Focus Group Findings

Overall, similar to School A, the results from the focus groups at School B demonstrate that the virtue-focused intervention: (a) emphasised the virtues and helped children understand how different virtues can be relevant to consider in different situations, (b) explored the relevance of virtuous behaviours to real-life scenarios, and (c) encouraged the children to make decisions that were not only self-serving but also intrinsically desirable.

Transcript 5. Understanding of Virtue

Pre-Understanding of Virtue:

Facilitator: Good afternoon, everyone! Today, we're going to talk about what it means to be a good person. Let's start with the first set of questions.

Facilitator: What do you think it means to be a good person?

Child 1 (C1): Listening to the teacher.
Child 2 (C2): Yes, or helping mom and dad clean up.

Post-Understanding of Virtue:

Facilitator: After our lessons, did you learn anything new about how to become better people?

Child 3 (C3): Honesty is important. It helps us become better by being truthful and trustworthy.
Child 4 (C4): We learned about gratitude. It's being thankful for what we have. It helps us become better by making us appreciate everything around us.

Transcript 5 demonstrates an improvement between the pre- and post-intervention responses in how the children understand the virtues. For example, C1's response to the facilitator on what it means to be a good person associates listening to the teacher as an important factor. Here, the child connotes being good with actions that they are instructed to perform by an

authority figure such as a teacher. In a similar vein, C2 mentions helping parents. Both these examples highlight the children's prior association of being a good person with adhering to rules or tasks set by authority figures, thus tying 'good' to 'obedience'. In comparison, after the intervention, the children's understanding of how the role of virtues help someone become a good person are slightly clearer and more developed. For example, C3 identifies that honesty is important and contributes to building trust, highlighting its importance in relational contexts such as with friends or family. In addition, the explicit inclusion of learning about gratitude in the intervention – and highlighting an appreciation for what they have – indicates a more active and reflective state of gratitude rather than a mere feeling.

Transcript 6. Application of Virtue

Pre- Application of Virtue:

Facilitator: Can you think of a time when you were honest or kind? What did you do and how did it make you feel?

Child 4 (C4): I can't think of one.
Child 2 (C2): I gave my friend a pencil because she lost hers.

Post- Application of Virtue:

Facilitator: After our lessons, can you think of a time when you applied one of the virtues you learned to a real-life situation? What did you do and how did it make you feel?

Child 3 (C3): I was honest about making a mistake at home and my mom said it was ok. And it made me feel happy.
Child 2 (C2): I was grateful to my mom for making my favourite food, pizza.
Child 4 (C4): I was grateful to my teacher for helping me understand maths.

Transcript 6 highlights that pre-intervention, the children struggled to provide examples of honest or kind behaviour. Apart from C2, who reported giving a pencil to a friend who had lost theirs, the children struggled to access the question, were shy or could not think of examples. However, after the intervention, C4 (who previously could not think of an example) alludes to feeling grateful for their teacher who helped them overcome a challenge in maths. In this example, the child acknowledges the role of the teacher in supporting them in their academic struggles. Similarly, C3 (who previously abstained from commenting) gives an example of being honest about making a mistake at home and how that act contributed to their emotional happiness. Here, the child extends their understanding beyond the classroom, potentially contributing to how to behave at home.

Transcript 7. Decision-Making Process

Pre- Decision-making process:

Facilitator: Can you think of a time when you had to make a tough decision? What did you do and why?

Child 1 (C1): don't know.
Child 3 (3): sometimes I have to decide if I want to be someone friend. And if they do something, then I might not be their friend.

Post- Decision-making process:

Facilitator: How do you decide what to do now when you have a difficult decision to make?

Child 1 (C1): sometimes you have to tell the truth even when its hard or if you will get told off.
Child 2 (C2): I learnt that being kind even if you don't like someone is good for me because if I'm nasty then I won't feel good about it and it could happen to me one day.
Child 3 (C3): yeah, if I don't like what someone does to me then I just ignore them. And if I like my friends then I can be kind and grateful for the things they do.

Transcript 7 indicates slightly more limited changes in the children's responses in comparison to the other themes. Prior to the intervention, C1 expressed that they could not think of an example where they had to make a tough decision, while C3 stated that when considering who to befriend, they considered their actions, ultimately setting personal standards of behaviour and allowing those observations to guide their decision-making process. This is an interesting finding and suggests a positive pre-understanding of decision-making using a value system that considers and compares the value systems of others. However, after the intervention, the children use similar examples to the pre-intervention focus groups but slightly expand on them. For example, C2 (who previously remained silent) reflects on the virtue of kindness and its benefits to the self and others. Recognising the value of kindness both for social harmony and for one's own peace of mind, C2 acknowledges a principle of reciprocity – more specifically, if you treat others well, they will likely treat you well in return.

Transcript 8. Challenges Applying Virtue

Pre- Challenges in applying virtue:

Facilitator: Can you think of a time when you had to make a tough decision? What did you do and why?

Child 3 (C3): Sometimes I have to decide if I want to be someone's friend. And if they do something mean, then I might not be their friend.

Facilitator: That's a tricky situation. How do you decide if they're still your friend?
Child 3 (C3): I think about if they usually are nice or not. If they are, then maybe I forgive them.

Post- Challenges in applying virtue:

Facilitator: Can you think of a situation where applying kindness or honesty was hard?

Child 4 (C4): Sometimes, I don't know if I should play with someone if they've been mean before.
Child 1 (C1): But maybe they're just having a bad day. I try to give them another chance.

Transcript 8 highlights that prior to the intervention, the children expressed challenges in applying the virtues, especially when faced with difficult social situations. For instance, C3 struggled with the decision of whether to remain friends with someone who had been unkind. Interestingly, after the intervention, a similar response was provided by C4, highlighting the same challenges that children face in coping with social situations, and the difficulties in applying the right virtue in the right circumstance. Importantly, however, C4 articulated a more reflective approach to the situation: They suggested that the person may have been 'having a bad day' and may need 'another chance', indicating a shift towards empathy and forgiveness, both qualities nurtured by the intervention.

Summary of Focus Group Findings

To summarise, the findings highlight that the focus groups in both Schools A and B helped inspire children to reflect on and then discuss the meaning of virtues in more thoughtful and morally conducive ways. Prior to the intervention, the children across both schools frequently used simple language, discussing virtues in relation to either following 1) social norms or 2) listening to authority figures. However, after the intervention the children expressed more considerate and broader conceptualisations, connecting their answers to knowledge they had learnt from the intervention and more importantly, linking that understanding to emotional and relational aspects derived from their social worlds. For instance, after the intervention, the children were able to allude to specific virtues, such as honesty, gratitude and kindness, and how they were used in real-life scenarios with increased empathy and reflective thinking. Furthermore, minor variations were evident in the ways that the children responded to the questions post-intervention in relation to the four themes. For example, in School A, the children articulated a more elaborate understanding of the virtues and their larger ethical implications, often connecting the virtues to larger concepts, such as kindness being related to compassion. In contrast, the children in School B paid greater attention to the short-term social advantages of virtues, such as trust and appreciation, with less emphasis on deeper moral implications; while their virtue reasoning also developed, their examples were simpler and less nuanced than those from School A. This exemplifies that although the two groups both benefited from the intervention, the extent to which this led to the pupils understanding and applying the virtues differed.

More interestingly, the children at both schools revealed that they had taken what they had learned about virtues from either home or school and described instances of putting it into action. This is evident through the examples used by the children as they referenced the use of virtues to guide them in a range of different situations and learned how to apply the virtues in meaningful ways. This is a significant and interesting finding that highlights the potential for such guided discussions and questions to help shape children's understanding of virtues, but more importantly, provide them opportunities to express how such knowledge informs their interactions and therefore actions. Taken together, the findings shed light on the important role focus groups can play in CE and they can in fact be an incredibly helpful pedagogical tool – especially when structured for the developmental and cognitive needs of this age group. In this way, the focus groups demonstrated their educational relevance in promoting a space for reflective thinking and encouraging pre-phronetic related skills. This is particularly significant and points to a pedagogical advantage that focus groups may have over mind-maps, reinforcing that dialogic methods may be crucial in assisting children in connecting knowledge to action.

Overall Summary of Findings

To end this chapter, I provide a summary of the findings and how through an interpretive lens, I explored the nuanced ways children engaged with and conceptualised virtues as part of their development of virtue literacy and character. The key themes emerging from the findings are outlined below.

Developing Conceptualisations

The findings from both schools indicated that the mind-maps and focus groups offered a window into how the children conceptualised the virtues they were learning from the lessons and more importantly connecting them to their day-to-day lives and broader social worlds. For example, the post-intervention mind-maps across the schools reflected more depth, meaning and dynamic representations of the virtues – often including relational and emotional dimensions such as linking gratitude to positive emotions and family. However, another important finding was that the more complex virtues such as humility and loyalty were conceptualised less meaningfully across both schools and children struggled to grasp more insightful reflections that went beyond either synonymous or superficial descriptions.

Differences across Schools

The findings from the data also revealed slight differences between the two schools. Nonetheless, the findings indicate how different school context may play a role in shaping children's thinking about moral concepts. For instance, in School A, the children's understanding was slightly more meaningful and alluded to more examples of relational and emotional dimensions, whereas, in School B, fewer responses did the same. In addition, another important finding was that the more complex and abstract virtues such as humility and loyalty were conceptualised less meaningfully across both schools.

Focus Group Voices

Across both schools, the findings indicated that the focus groups provided a meaningful space for the children to articulate their understanding of virtues with the help of age appropriate

and scaffolded questioning. Most importantly, the children were able to better connect their knowledge of virtues to their real day-to-day lives and discuss how they made decisions, including any challenges in doing so – reflecting that younger children can engage in such conversations with the help of scaffolded Socratic questioning.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

In Chapter 4, I presented the findings of my research after conducting a six-week virtue-focused intervention developing six moral virtues. In this chapter, I shift the focus to analysing these findings and contextualising the results within the broader landscape of moral philosophy, psychology and existing educational theories. While there have been significant, mainly philosophical, developments in understandings about the conceptual nature of the components of character and virtue (see, for example, Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022; Peterson & Kristjánsson, 2024) - the empirical evidence has been scarcer, specifically in relation to teaching pedagogies that work and how they can inform cultivating CE. In response, the present discussion adds new qualitative insights about how virtue literacy may be taught to 7–8 year-olds in the UK.

The central question for this discussion is to explore how my findings align with, differ from, or add to the existing research. This part of the thesis offers the space for interpreting the results in relation to the literature as a means of exploring the deeper meanings and wider implications of the virtue-focused interventions on the development of children's virtue literacy skills across primary settings in the UK. To conclude this chapter, I provide a short section with overall conclusions, reflections and limitations. Overall, the findings of the study are helpful for those interested in the question 'Can virtue be taught?' – one that is rooted in ancient philosophical debates and that remains highly relevant in modern education and societies. Although the results do not give definitive answers to the research questions, they do shed light on two important areas: (1) how the four components of virtue (knowledge and

understanding, perception, reasoning, reflection) may be taught through explicit teaching and targeted interventions, and (2) which virtues are easier to teach, and why. This discussion also illuminates some of the challenges that both students and educators may encounter along the way, adding nuance to understanding the practicalities of teaching virtues.

5.2 The Role of a Virtue-Focused Intervention on Virtue Literacy

RQ1: ***What role does an explicit virtue-focused intervention have in supporting the development of virtue literacy among 7–8-year-old children?***

This section evaluates the findings on whether the explicit intervention supported the development of virtue literacy among the children involved. I begin by exploring how the intervention influenced the four components of virtue literacy (knowledge and understanding, perception, reasoning and reflection). These four components are integral components for moral education and for laying the foundation for developing *phronesis* later in life, as I argued in Chapter 2.

Knowledge & Understanding

Knowledge here refers to the acquisition of information about virtues and the ability to communicate what honesty, kindness and gratitude are/mean. Understanding goes further than knowledge; it refers to knowing why virtues are important and what they mean in different contexts. The question of whether a virtue-focused intervention would improve 7-8 year-old children's virtue literacy can be interpreted by exploring the outcomes observed in Schools A and B. Overall, the findings suggest that all four components of virtue literacy

were better developed through the intervention. However, not all the virtues or components of virtue literacy developed equally; some developed more than others.

In both schools, the largest increase was observed in the knowledge and understanding component. This indicates that the intervention was particularly effective in helping the children grasp the meanings of virtues and their relevance. By clarifying the meaning of the virtues, the children were provided with the tools to better understand them. This aligns with Vasalou (2012), who emphasises the mastery of virtue language as one of the most fundamental elements of virtuous conduct. My findings also align with a similar study conducted on developing knowledge and understanding of virtue terms, the Knightly Virtues project, which found that the children in the study appeared to better understand the meaning of virtue terms such as courage, gratitude, self-discipline, love and service. However, the children comprised an older age group (9–11), whereas this study focused on 7–8 year-olds. This age difference is significant, as it suggests that younger children can also learn from and develop their understanding of a range of virtues. Moreover, by examining a wider spectrum of moral virtues with a younger cohort, my findings offer a closer look at the initial stages of virtue knowledge and understanding development, identifying which virtues children are more likely to understand in comparison to those that require further scaffolding.

Moreover, the ability to articulate and understand the virtues as observed in the changes in ‘knowledge and understanding’, is far from being unconsciously learned, and suggests that children instead need to be taught explicitly what they mean, specifically, if the goal is for them to be able enact them. The findings also suggest that the children were developing the capacity to grasp the practical and moral implications of the virtues. For both Plato and Aristotle, complete knowledge of virtue is not strictly cognitive, but also affective and

conative (Longa, 2023). The findings, then, provide further support for the argument that explicit moral education helps children not only understand the basic concepts of the virtues, but also develop the capacity to understand how the virtues may look and feel like in action (Longa, 2023). In addition, the study's findings demonstrate that although the children developed a richer language and understanding of virtues, it is a further step to know how to recognise such intentions and then to translate these into action – a key and longstanding issue in character education and moral psychology more generally (Kristjánsson et al., 2021). In other words, knowing about the virtues and being able to talk about them does not lead to virtuous behaviour.

Full knowledge of virtue, as Jonas and Nakazawa (2021) note, involves more than just cognitive understanding; it requires the desire to act virtuously and the strength to follow through. The less developed component of knowledge and understanding in some of the virtues here, such as loyalty and humility, reflects the need for experiences that build emotional and practical engagement with those virtues – beyond just theoretical knowledge (Jonas & Nakazawa, 2021). Rather, in some cases, it is important to allow the children to engage with the concepts in the context of social and emotional practice with others. For instance, the very abstract nature of humility, which involves a sense of self-awareness and giving way to the needs of others, presents a particular challenge for young children, whose understanding of such concepts is still developing. It also needs to be acknowledged that humility, which I discuss later in section 5.3.2, is not a common virtue that is systematically encouraged or practised in the society in which the children are growing up (the UK), making it a more challenging virtue to teach as children struggle to understand virtues that are not promoted or practised. This correlates with the concept of the social environment to which

children are exposed, which in turn influences the development or lack of specific character traits (Thompson, 2016).

Moreover, the less extensive improvements observed for courage, loyalty and humility helped to illustrate the challenges involved in developing the virtue literacy of those more complex and less promoted traits among young children. By their nature, these virtues require both a cognitive understanding and an emotional awareness, which are still at the developmental stage for 7–8 year-olds. Nevertheless, the social and cultural contexts in which children experience such developmental changes will impact this relationship. For example, the virtue of courage requires not merely physical bravery but also moral courage – the ability to 'stand up for what's right, even when it's difficult or unpopular' (Damon, 2004, p. 12). Developing this moral courage element in children requires the understanding that courage involves more than just physical bravery; it also involves navigating complex social relationships and peer groups. Recognising when courage needs to be exercised, by whom, and how it needs to be balanced against prudence and empathy requires a moral sophistication that is beyond the developmental reach of most young children, who are only just starting to navigate the wider implications of their actions in their social worlds. Similarly, loyalty involves judgments relating to allegiance and support. Often, these require a balancing of an individual's values and expectations with those of others. For a young child, these balancing acts can be challenging, not least when they involve conflicting judgments of virtue. Loyalty may start out in simpler forms, such as steadfastness in a friendship, but it can quickly become more complex, such as maintaining loyalty to a friend while also upholding more abstract virtues like honesty or justice towards others (Shao et al., 2024).

In summary, my findings on developing the K&U component of virtue literacy support the existing literature (Arthur et al., 2014, 2017; Pike et al., 2021), which suggests that explicit moral education does, in fact, enhance children's understanding of virtues. This alignment with previous research demonstrates the potential of incorporating virtue-focused interventions that focus on developing children's capacity to understand what virtues mean in their most fundamental form. However, my findings also suggest that such interventions are not uniformly effective across all virtues; in fact, developing knowledge and understanding of more abstract virtues like humility, courage and loyalty, as discussed later in section 5.3.2, did not see as much improvement as the more 'straightforward' virtues. This highlights that not all virtues can be taught equally and effectively using the same pedagogical approaches, suggesting that more scaffolding or refinement may be required for more abstract virtues that the children have less experience in and exposure to.

Perception

The next most prominent improvement was in the virtue perception. The improvement of development of perception across both School A and School B following the virtue-focused intervention illustrates an important aspect of the children's moral development. Although significant, the improvement in perception scores was not as pronounced as the enhancement of the knowledge and understanding component of virtue literacy. In part, the distinction between the development of perception and K&U reflects the different aspects of moral cognition and their developmental changes in young children. Both knowledge and understanding are more cognitive and hence more directly teachable – one can teach the definitions of virtues, showcase examples of acts of kindness, or discuss with learners what honesty means in different circumstances. As a result, these components are likelier to

develop first and are easier to improve in school simply because they lend themselves to direct instruction. Perception, on the other hand, involves being able to spot when and how to apply one's knowledge and understanding of virtues to a given situation. This skill is more about detecting the features of a situation that are morally salient – the features that call for a response informed by virtue. This aspect arguably takes longer to develop because it requires more than just knowing about virtues; it involves learning how to apply knowledge and understanding effectively in real-life scenarios. It also involves developing sensitivity to context and the details of social interactions and relationships, which makes it a more complex skill to nurture, especially for children aged 7–8.

Nevertheless, the improvement reflects what the cognitive-developmental approach suggests about the importance of socio-contextual learning in helping children recognise human virtues, thus contributing to pro-social behaviour (Lind, 2023). In other words, children learn these virtues not just by being told how to act or what these things are, but by enacting them in their interactions with other people every day. The score increases here reflect a greater ability among the children to perceive and recognise when a specific virtuous response is required from oneself and others. For example, the children became better able to detect instances of honesty, kindness and gratitude in their daily exchanges with family members and classmates and noted them on their mind-maps, indicating that the intervention helped them to become 'sensitised' to the moral aspects of their home and school contexts.

In most cases, this process often starts with the child's development of what is known as a 'moral sense' (Limone & Toto, 2022). Here, many psychologists agree that a 'moral sense' can be defined as the inherent or early-acquired capacity that allows individuals to discern right from wrong and elicit emotional responses to moral concepts. Undoubtedly, moral sense

is important in terms of establishing a basic emotional response and understanding that will be further developed throughout one's lifetime. Moreover, children develop this 'moral sense' through and within their relationships. Effective social interaction, especially with the child's parent or caregiver, is crucial in the development of morality in children; the moral senses of children evolve based on the relationships they build around them. Children are then able to socially interact with individuals who will help to build upon their moral development. They can, for instance, improve their moral senses by interacting with parents or caregivers to help build their moral foundations. In this way, caregivers are viewed as the 'best builders' of children's moral senses and morality (Limone & Toto, 2022).

Dorough (2011) claims, the human moral sense is never static and is always in a state of development. Thus, human moral development means an ongoing growth in our ability to improve, morally speaking - or as Cherry (2021) puts it, moral development is a lifelong process. Moral senses required to improve moral perception continually develops in response to social interactions and the vast range of environmental factors. That being said, the children's cultural backgrounds and their underlying intuitive responses can play a major role in how they perceive and interpret moral situations, perhaps accounting for the fact that this aspect of moral judgment is slower to develop than the more cognitively straightforward acquisition of knowledge and understanding. Contemporary research shows that people tend to be better at noticing things with moral dimensions (Gantman & Bavel, 2015). That is, when we hear about or experience things that have moral valence – things that are right or wrong – our brains pay more attention than they would to non-moral content. This heightened attention to moral dimensions helps determine how we decide right from wrong. In other words, when it comes to the ways in which we discriminate between right and wrong, being

good at noticing moral things ‘primes’ our brains and our behaviour. The moral sense, then, is fundamental in terms of the children’s link to moral perception, especially when considering how moral perception could develop. If moral sense defines the basic capacity to feel and understand moral principles, moral perception refers to the ability to recognise and interpret specific situations in moral terms. Since, as mentioned earlier, the moral sense is cultivated when the child is with other people, it provides the foundational understanding needed to be able to perceive moral properties across various contexts.

The findings pertaining to the children’s developed ability to perceive the identified virtues support the existing literature that suggests that children learn to perceive virtues not only through explicit instruction, but also from observing and interacting with their social environment (including online; see Harrison et al., 2020). In their preliminary lesson with 11–14 year-olds, Harrison et al. (2020) highlight how character education can be useful for both enhancing perception and reasoning. However, no research exists specifically on the development of virtue perception in relation to the six moral virtues selected among children aged 7–8 years. For this reason, the present findings fill a gap in the literature by illuminating how children’s ability to perceive and respond to instances of virtue-related behaviour in their day-to-day lives improves as a result of a virtue-focused intervention. The findings further support the notion that virtue-focused interventions can be a useful way of supporting children as young as seven to develop their moral perception, including how it can be enhanced via a range of pedagogical methods.

Overall, the development of perception in this study reflects the fact that while it is important to teach children about virtues, it is more helpful for educators to focus their efforts on helping children to perceive and interpret moral situations effectively. This is because

children's ability to perceive the morally salient features of a situation demands further practice, experience and effort to develop. Moving forward, research seeking to promote virtue perception should create learning experiences that go beyond directly teaching lessons on virtues, and to engage children's underlying emotional and intuitive understanding, in addition to integrating wider social and interpersonal dimensions to help them apply their moral sensitivities to real-life situations.

Reasoning

As I described in Chapter 2, virtue reasoning as outlined in this thesis comprises the capacity to reason about the best way to show individual virtues (constitutive function), rather than the more complex *phronetic* ability involved in resolving conflicts between virtues (integrative function). This process requires children to reflect on which virtue should be shown and to potentially consider reasons as to why and how. As such, moral reasoning includes being able to recognise the difference between one's own needs and desires and other-centred reasons for why it is appropriate to behave morally. Consistent with this, evidence from previous research has considered arguments that express both reflective self-regarding (e.g., fairness) and other-oriented (e.g., altruistic, empathic) aspects of morality as overt moral reasons (Malti et al., 2009). That said, the increases in virtue reasoning scores were the third-most developed component of virtue literacy. While not as significant as K&U and perception, the findings are consistent with contemporary research on moral development, which suggests that moral reasoning is a complex capacity to develop since it is influenced by a variety of different factors, including parenting (Hinnant et al., 2013), media (Krcmar, 2012; Dennis & Harrison, 2021), culture (Zhang et al., 2013) and socio-economic factors (Caravita et al.,

2012), to name a few. These factors may reveal that moral reasoning is not shaped in isolation or solely through educational interventions; rather, it is shaped by a variety of influences outside of education and schooling. In addition, recent research has found that primary school teachers often focus on the K&U element of virtue literacy (Johnson-Laird et al., 2019; Watts, 2023). This is an interesting finding and points towards a pedagogical pitfall in engaging children with reasoning and reflection from an educator's perspective.

The development in reasoning observed at Schools A and B reflect slight growth but also highlight the challenges that children encounter while learning how to reason through the virtues at this age. Part of this may be explained by evaluating various cognitive, developmental and educational factors. First, virtue reasoning often involves abstract thinking, empathy and the consideration of multiple perspectives, consequences and outcomes. Second, virtue reasoning also requires a level of self-awareness to achieve some aspects of the latter. For instance, self-awareness is required to predict and understand the consequences of one's actions. These skills are often higher-order cognitive skills and can impact how children develop reasoning capacities. Take being honest or loyal, for instance, both of which require knowing aspects of others and considering how a virtue may affect another person. Therefore, to reason more accurately about honesty or loyalty, children need to acquire more than just an understanding of the virtues, but also the ability to think through a complex variety of different social dynamics, including (but not limited to) the processes by which friendships form, how conflicts arise, or how people influence each other. Children must also be taught to engage in ethical practices (i.e., why honesty or courage is good); if the reason why is not taught, the children will not develop the processes of reasoning to understand the virtue in question or its importance.

Importantly, such judgments are not overly influenced by culture, but instead serve as a framework for how children come to understand their lived experiences, such as elements of their social lives (Helwig & Turiel, 2002; Turiel, 2018). This is further supported by Davidson, Turiel and Black (1983), who suggest that until approximately the age of seven, moral judgment seems focused primarily on welfare concerns and avoiding harm and is most typically associated with direct visible transgressions. The authors argue that most young children are unable to make moral judgments concerning the needs of more than one person because they cannot fully understand fairness as reciprocity. Educational context is another consideration here – that is, children can be taught the definitions and examples of the virtues, but learning to apply them to real-world or hypothetical situations is another thing entirely. In many educational environments, moral reasoning is never explicitly taught or practised in any intentional way. In this light, Fowers (2024) and others (Rest, 1986) argue that moral reasoning is only one component of moral functioning; we must also add moral motivation and character to arrive at a fuller view of moral development.

Moreover, the subtle increases for reasoning suggest some growth in the children's ability to think through when and how to action a virtue. At both Schools A and B, the children began to demonstrate a growing sense of moral reasoning, usually centred on consequences and emotions. For instance, when some of the children reflected on the virtue of kindness, they alluded to 'not bullying' or 'saying mean things'. In some cases, they talked about the negative emotions associated with certain behaviours in relation to the virtues, such as 'sadness' when lying or unhappiness if not grateful for what one has. The children mostly saw bullying as something that led to feelings of guilt, shame or fear of being caught, and being dishonest as making others feel mistrust or disappointment. They could also voice their

concerns about such outcomes and did so by reasoning almost exclusively about the short-term consequences of their actions and how they personally felt about them, as opposed to thinking about broader matters of justice or considering other people's feelings or lives. This suggests that, although children at this age are beginning to see the emotional consequences of their actions, they are still thinking in largely egocentric, self-interested and self-avoiding ways (using Kohlberg's terms).Yet, it also suggests that while the children were developing their reasoning about virtues, this aspect of virtue literacy was perhaps more difficult to develop and may require more time and maturation to grow in a productive way. This idea of reasoning taking longer to develop is supported by Mammen et al. (2019), who suggest that children gradually develop their understanding of reasoning and moral understanding through being exposed to social interactions and cognitively growing as a result.

In summary, the finding that moral reasoning was more difficult to develop and, perhaps critically, needed more time to develop and mature, supports the notion in the existing literature that suggests that children proceed gradually towards the ability to form moral judgments, while emphasising the important role of social factors and interactions in refining moral reasoning over time. In addition, the findings highlight the need to place more emphasis on developing moral reasoning skills in CE interventions, with more scaffolded approaches for the teacher who is a key facilitator to encourage such skills – since the use of narrative stories alone does not provide what is required for children to develop in this domain. In essence, future research should explore effective ways to promote moral reasoning in children to help advance this aspect of virtue literacy. Notably, moral reasoning at this stage will most likely lay the foundations for – and possibly predict – the development of *phronesis* during adolescence and adult life (Sherman, 1989).

Reflection

Moral reflection is a process in which one evaluates moral beliefs, values and behaviour in light of what is considered virtuous or moral. Here, the virtue reflection scores appeared to be the component of virtue literacy that was least developed in the study across both schools. This could be an indication of the developmental stage and cognitive capacities of the children in this age group: The children (aged 7–8) were able to develop their understanding, perception and (minimal) reasoning about virtues, but they were less responsive or able to reflect deeply on their behaviours and moral states after the intervention lesson for each virtue. This could be an indication that the intervention was significantly less effective in helping children deeply reflect on their own behaviours and internal moral states.

The limited changes in reflections could also echo the existing research, which shows that mature reflective thinking takes time to develop in children. Developmental research shows that reflective thinking abilities progress with age and vary depending on a child's developmental stage and ability to grasp language (Zelazo, 2004). This gradual progression may mean that young children like 7–8 year-olds, who completed this study, may naturally show slower changes in their reflective capacities. In addition to research by Zelazo (2004) and Blasi (1983), this aligns with the idea that younger children are in the early stages of developing cognitive skills, particularly those related to reflection, introspection and the formation of the moral 'sense of self' (Blasi, 1983, 1993). This initial self-awareness, typically emerging around the second year of life, undergoes significant changes through childhood (Mascolo & Fischer, 2007). Around the age of 7, children begin to recognise interpretive diversity, that is, they begin to understand that the same event or detail can be interpreted differently by a variety of individuals (Lalonde & Chandler, 2002). This

increasing recognition of other people's perspectives allows the child to be even more in tune with the nature of interpersonal relationships in social situations (Astington & Hughes, 2013). Such a finding also serves as an example of the slowly developing reflective orientation towards the moral self in childhood, providing a reason for why a six-week intervention might not be long enough in terms of developmental time to fully exert its effect on the moral reflective capacities of these children.

Moreover, there are multiple processes to self-reflect, critically evaluate, and reason about actions and thoughts, and to consider the ethical and moral implications of self-perceived behaviours, attitudes and emotions. The development of this more cognitive sense of morality and a moral identity usually occurs much later in childhood and is dependent on healthy, positive relationships between parents and children. Studies on child–parent relations and allowing for reflection versus punishment show that children's behaviour and moral development are highly influenced by the nature of such relationships (Lanjekar et al., 2022). Children who have positive parent–child relationships (e.g., warmth, responsiveness and mutual respect) are more likely to reflect on and self-regulate their behaviour, understand the implications of their behaviours (e.g., the thoughts and feelings of others, as well as their own), and develop a moral sense. Children are also more likely to reflect on their behaviours if adults provide reflection opportunities rather than punishment when children do something wrong. Mirroring a child's feelings (e.g., when they are happy, sad, grumpy, etc.) has been shown to enhance emotional intelligence, problem-solving skills and positive social interactions in children (Gottman, 2001; Sprenger, 2020). Allowing children to reflect on their actions rather than punishing them for doing something wrong (e.g., 'Why do you think you did that? – how do you think that made x feel?') helps children identify the consequences

of their behaviours, develop empathy for others, and internalise moral values. Furthermore, research has shown that reflective parenting and teacher techniques promote children's ability to self-regulate, self-reflect and form a positive sense of self (Ackerwold et al., 2020; Jaramillo et al., 2017).

With regard to the teacher's role in developing virtue literacy, a correlation emerges between the limited reflections observed in my research and Watts's (2023) finding that primary school teachers tend not to organise story-based character education around the process of reflection on and deliberation about the virtues. This shows that while teachers may invite students to identify, describe and discuss characters in relation to their actions or the plot of the story, that is where it stops, rather than placing more emphasis on the children to engage in moral reflection and deliberation about the story scenarios. Building upon Watts (2023) findings, the role of teachers in promoting virtue reflection should not be underestimated and this critical skill is potentially contingent on how the teacher prioritises it when teaching virtues and virtue literacy. More importantly, the study's findings provide further support to my initial argument (presented in Chapter 2) that reflection should be included in the definition of virtue literacy to help advance pedagogical approaches in CE. Since the children found it difficult to reflect on their own behaviour and moral states, this reinforces, not counteracts, the need for the explicit – and likely extended – teaching of reflective practice as part of the set of skills considered for children to develop virtue literacy.

Overall, the limited changes for virtue reflection observed in this study could be due to the intervention's short length, given that reflective moral thinking develops gradually (Zelazo, 2004). It is most likely that a combination of both cognitive and emotional skills is required for children to be able to reflect more personally on the role of virtues, including self-

awareness, perspective-taking and more crucially the capacity to assess one's own actions and adjust them to improve their character, all of which are still emerging in children. In essence, children are required to have developed in several areas for such skills to mature and are shaped by both individual experiences and guided teaching. In this way, reflective thinking requires more than just knowledge, it also calls for emotional involvement and social sensitivity, which children learn by intentional practice and frequent exposure to a variety of situations. Take for example a child learning about kindness in a classroom setting whereby they might be able to understand that sharing is kind; however, developing the introspective thinking requires more nuance. The child would have to relate the act of sharing to another person's feelings, why it supports healthy relationships and how it aligns with their own beliefs and who they want to become. Therefore, to achieve reflective thinking, one needs to be emotionally attuned, understand the social dynamics of the situation and be conscious of the virtue of kindness. Essentially, the process and skills that children would be expected to undertake reinforces the challenges of trying to support and develop reflective thinking, particularly in younger children.

Building on the above, the intervention’s relatively short duration may not have provided sufficient opportunities for children to engage deeply with these processes or to internalise reflective practices. Furthermore, without explicit scaffolding or structured activities designed to encourage reflection, children may find it challenging to connect moral concepts to their personal experiences or broader ethical considerations. My findings highlight the importance of targeted interventions and scaffolding in helping to facilitate this process. This could potentially bring reflective thinking to the forefront of moral education, accommodating a more scaffolded approach for younger children to engage with: for

example, modelling how to reflect through more structured questions, incorporating additional reflection activities like journaling, and so on. The principle here is that children learn what reflections could look like and engage in regular activities that encourage reflective virtue thinking. Such approaches could help younger children begin to develop reflective skills earlier, even if full proficiency may not be expected until later in adolescence. This approach supports contemporary educational strategies that promote the use of repeated practice and scaffolding (Hammond, 2001; Hiebert, 2006). In this way, children can build the capacity to understand the role of reflection in becoming more virtue-literate and construct the moral self (aligning with Darnel, Gulliford & Kristjánsson's blueprint function of *phronesis*). As a final remark, a longer intervention may be needed to develop specific reflection skills and to show significant changes in the reflections on the mind-maps. The activities and materials are required to be refined further through scaffolding to better suit the developmental stage of the participants and more accessible to young children in general.

5.3 Differences in Virtue Literacy Development Across Two School Settings

RQ2: ***How do children's conceptualisations of moral virtues differ between two different school contexts, one with a virtue-focused ethos and one without?***

Having worked as a teacher in a variety of different schools, I have witnessed first-hand the vast differences between them. From this experience, I have come to believe that advancing character education requires teaching children in a more explicit manner. Often, this cannot be achieved through changing the school culture alone, but rather by delivering more targeted, sequential and structured interventions. In this sense, whilst interventions can serve as tools or first steps for this change, they must be part of a larger, continuous effort to ensure

that the values they promote are continuously reinforced and incorporated into daily school life. Such targeted approaches can address students' wide-ranging needs and help with character development in more intentional and relatable ways. This research question, therefore, allowed me to explore how the children's conceptualisations of moral virtues differed between two different school contexts, one with a virtue-focused ethos and one without. Accordingly, the findings for this research question are important for two reasons. First, it allows those interested in CE to understand whether school culture, ethos and daily practices contribute to the children's ability to develop higher conceptualisations of virtue literacy. Second, it provides insight into how my approach to CE can provide some flexibility in various contexts, as explicit interventions may be able to support the development of virtue literacy even when the school environment does not necessarily expose children to virtue practices.

This section is divided into two parts. The first part seeks to explore the extent to which each school's approach to education, such as its culture and practices may help explain the differences in virtue literacy development between Schools A and B. The second part explores why similarities and differences in the development of the various moral virtues were observed.

5.3.1 Differences in Virtue Literacy Development Across School Settings

From the findings, it can be interpreted that the explicit virtue-focused intervention may have supported the development of virtue literacy across both schools for all six moral virtues. Although some subtle differences in the virtue literacy findings were found between the two schools, these variations were not sufficiently large to draw definite conclusions about the

effect of the relevant CE practices. Despite the fact that School A showed relatively deeper conceptualisations than School B in most of the virtues, the differences were in fact modest. For instance, the observed differences for virtues such as gratitude, kindness, honesty and courage were relatively small and the largest difference, for humility, remained limited. As such, these small differences suggest that what is going on at School A that promotes virtue education is possibly not significantly different from the standard curriculum in School B. It is also possible that other factors influenced these outcomes. For instance, it is possible that aspects of the curriculum, prior exposure to moral discussions at home, or other social and environmental factors also played a role in shaping children's virtue literacy development. As such, these findings need to be interpreted with caution, as they may reflect a range of influences beyond the explicit character education ethos of School A. For instance, it is possible that aspects of the curriculum, prior exposure to moral discussions at home, or other social and environmental factors also played a role in shaping children's virtue literacy development.

Although CE practices may have played an implicit role in the development of virtue literacy among children from School A, if School B's results were not significantly different, then pursuing a CE ethos may not be justifiable unless the practices are fit-for-purpose. Do schools interested in character education need a more structured approach by implementing tailored interventions to specific age groups? This is a critical question if the field of character education is to move forward, especially in a productive and effective way. Therefore, I suggest that, even within schools that actively seek to cultivate virtues, it may be necessary to consider additional ways to ensure that students are enhancing their virtue

literacy development, as opposed to relying heavily on more implicit strategies, such as those 'caught' from school culture and ethos.

School climate and culture are important for achieving positive results in schools. Research shows that they not only help improve academic performance (Daily et al., 2019), but also enhance student wellbeing (Leurent et al., 2021; Lombardi et al., 2019). Lickona (2012) claims that creating a positive moral culture in schools is essential and can be achieved through leadership, school-wide discipline, and making time for moral deliberation among students. That said, less research has been conducted specifically focusing on the role of school culture and day-to-day practices in the development of virtue literacy (or moral development) of pupils. This is because the study of how a school's culture affects moral development presents methodological challenges, particularly as the nature of school environments vary and are inherently complex. Indeed, research on school culture suggests that the diverse range of school culture components (includes prevailing values, norms and daily practices) emerge from – and are shaped by – broader societal contexts, making it difficult to isolate the cultural factors that affect students' moral development (Cohen, 2006; Thapa et al., 2013). This is further supported by the idea that culture is fluid and moral development develops over time or in stages, gradually increasing in sophistication as children grow older and gain more experience.

For these reasons, there is no single solution or 'silver bullet' that can overcome all the obstacles to the practice of character education in schools, and there is no 'one best model' for CE; interventions are strongly dependent on the specific context of the school, and the culture in the school strongly influences the aspects of character that the school emphasises (Watts & Kristjánsson, 2022). Seider (2012, p. 23) argues that 'the transplantation of

character education programmes from one school to another without regard to the particular culture of the receiving school is often ineffective'. A particular intervention that works well in one setting may not work at all in another. This is predominately the reason why, instead of trying to find a quantitative way to measure the culture of the school, I focused on analysing pupil responses qualitatively to understand whether the practices of the school were explicitly referenced or merely alluded to. While this can never provide a definitive measure of the culture of the school, it is in line with the concerns of scholars such as Creswell and Poth (2018), who argue that qualitative methods are suited to social environments such as schools. By examining pupil responses, the study was able to provide some insight into how young children interpret moral concepts, as well as how they connect those concepts to their immediate environments, which can help to shed light on their moral reasoning development without claiming to measure the cultural elements of the school.

The findings from this research have several overlaps with the existing literature. The first is that they support the idea that virtue-focused interventions can influence how children think about and understand virtues, echoing Johnson et al., (2022) and Brown et al. (2023). However, the small differences observed between the two schools here may seem unexpected considering that previous research highlights how different approaches to education (i.e., school culture) can impact student success, specifically in CE (Seider, 2012). The initial assumption would be that a school employing an active CE strategy would perform significantly better than the school not implementing CE. The empirical investigation inspired a deeper understanding of one of the important issues with CE – that is, the presence versus absence of a virtue-based curriculum may not be as important as how it is delivered, and whether the intervention is tailored to the age of that group. This may explain why the

virtue literacy developments were not significantly different between the schools, despite the emphasis on character being so different. Additionally, broader investigation demonstrates that other factors can contribute substantially to outcomes – not only educational pedagogies. These might include the socioeconomic nature of the school, the distribution of resources and so forth (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2017).

It is worth mentioning that my study did not include an ethnographic study of School A (i.e., how the explicit emphasis on CE was operationalised or practised). It is possible that the school did not 'walk its talk' – that is, what they claim to do in operational terms may not align with what they are actually doing, and that their focus on CE may not be as effective as it is perceived to be. Therefore, more research on the actual CE practices of the school (emphasising empirical research and validation) is encouraged so that we can further understand what character education looks like in actual practice at similar schools and understand its effects – if any – on the moral development of their children. On another important note, the results suggest that perhaps the most important question in any form of character education is less about the presence of CE – or 'sought' or 'caught' methods – and more about whether it is accessible to the different cognitive and social needs of its pupils. That is, the intervention itself may need to reflect the needs and differences of pupils at different stages in their development. However, while this study did not include any formal ethnographic research, personal experience working at the school for three years provides a form of independent evidence that the CE ethos may have not been implemented in practice. Some examples of my experience include the use of 'virtue booklets', which were given to all students and staff to use in lessons. However, in practice, the teachers (myself included) questioned their purpose, found them difficult to fit into lesson time, and noticed that the

children also did not understand their purpose. While it is possible that some teachers may have used them during lessons, the common consensus was that the booklets had little CE value and were used instead as a means of enforcing equipment expectations (i.e., students needed to place the booklet on their desks and would be penalised if not).

To summarise, the considerations described above point to the necessity of exercising caution when interpreting the findings, I present in this thesis. I propose that to fully understand how schools practise CE in everyday reality, systematic observations and assessments of its implementation are necessary, particularly when attempting to advance CE in more purposeful ways. It is therefore imperative to consider these findings as suggestive rather than definitive, highlighting the difficulty in pinpointing the precise effects of educational practices on virtue literacy. As such, future research may need to approach the implementation of CE programmes in a more intentional way, using research to support the cognitive, emotional and social development needs of the diverse age groups found in schools.

5.3.2 Differences in the Development of Individual Virtues

It is important to consider the extent to which each of the moral virtues developed in the children across both schools to help understand the variability in how different virtues are understood and internalised, particularly for 7–8 year-olds. Interpreting such differences can help offer a valuable lens for researchers and educators to understand the ways in which children at this developmental stage engage with and understand specific virtues include the challenges they may face. By identifying which virtues are more easily understood and which present greater challenges, educators can tailor character education (CE) interventions more

effectively. In this way, my findings can help provide a more nuanced exploration to inform future pedagogical approaches, promoting educators to design interventions that are more responsive to developmental stages and learning contexts.

The differences in development across the six moral virtues are discussed below; the existing research on each virtue that corroborates or contradicts these findings is also considered. From a psychological perspective, this investigation of virtue development is consistent with the research on the cognitive processes underlying moral and practical reasoning. It addresses two important aspects of adaptive development: the need for accurate perception and understanding of moral contexts for successful social functioning, and the cognitive processes required to solve practical – often moral – problems effectively. This dual focus highlights the complex nature of moral education, which is filled with the additional challenges of trying to cultivate multiple virtues and the pedagogical means in which to do so. Rather than attempting to draw definitive conclusions, as I describe in chapter 3 (methods), my analysis is interpretive and exploratory, focusing on how children's moral knowledge is shaped by the complex interactions between cognitive, emotional and social development.

To begin, I first elaborate on how each virtue is represented in my findings and then build upon the latest research on that virtue to date (see Chapter 2). In this way, I provide a deeper understanding of how each virtue may have been influenced by the intervention. This includes qualitatively analysing the children’s cognitive understanding of each virtue, such as the co-occurring words used to describe their thoughts, actions or emotions. This approach keeps the discussion firmly grounded in the empirical data, while still affording a deeper and more interpretive perspective on how virtue education can support the moral development of children.

As a general overview, the study revealed a subtle discrepancy in the degree to which different virtues were developed, highlighting that some virtues were developed more effectively than others. This finding is consistent with the literature that observes moral development being deeply influenced and shaped by cultural contexts (Trommsdorff, 2020; Chatterjee & Kumar, 2023). It could also explain why the moral virtues focused on in CE are likelier to be those that conform to the cultural norms and values within a given society, and for this reason are likelier to be reinforced – both at home and at school. This may ultimately explain why certain virtues were enhanced more in this study than others.

Kindness

The virtue of kindness was the highest scoring virtue for School A (148) and the second highest for School B (135), indicating a subtle difference. In the study, the pre- to post-intervention transition in the student responses reflects a developmental shift in their understanding of the virtue of kindness and prosocial behaviours. Before the intervention, the children's responses alluded to simple acts of kindness, for example, ‘be kind’, ‘help someone’ and ‘let people to join your game’. Such phrases are primarily directed at prosocial behaviours and inclusivity. Following the intervention, the responses became more sophisticated and expansive to include phrases such as ‘you can show respect’, ‘doing community service’ and ‘doing good leadership’. The mention of ‘doing good leadership’ and ‘doing good community service’ is evident of development in the understanding that kindness moves beyond interpersonal relations to include leadership qualities. In addition, the inclusion of respect as an expression of kindness is important and is seen as a form of kind emotion (Malti et al., 2020). The inclusion of both active and passive forms of kindness indicates that children can develop a wider repertoire of prosocial behaviours; indeed,

children as young as five have been shown to evidence signs of this ability (Fehr et al., 2008; Olson & Spelke, 2008; Hay, 2009; Moore, 2009; Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2015; Laible & Karahuta, 2015; Martin & Olson, 2015; Lavelle et al., 2017). However, the role of explicit interventions can help enhance this development further, as seen in the findings here.

Furthermore, the mention of kindness orientated towards the self in utterances such as 'I should take care of myself' extends kindness to encompass acts of self-care. The connection between self-reflection and the kind of practice directed at the self ('I should treat myself kindly') is significant: The children will be more likely to cultivate the skills to contentedly attend to their own wellbeing, and to take steps to preserve it. Self-reflection can be the path to noticing what we need from others, and to recognising in ourselves what we need from ourselves. This is a potentially new contribution to the literature on developing kindness in children (specifically 7–8 year-olds) and highlights the role of explicit interventions in developing a type of introspective capacity that is essential for personal growth and an 'increasing understanding of the sameness between the self and others' (Malti, 2021, p. 640).

Moreover, the post-intervention mind-map responses show that the participants were moving towards a thematic focus around the avoidance of bullying-related behaviour: 'not bullying and calling people names' and 'saying nice things to my friends'. These findings align with the findings of Binfet and Gaertner (2015) that many schools-based prosocial behaviour interventions (not centring on bullying) emphasise the suppression of bullying-related behaviour as an indicator of the intervention's success. The argument is that the more often children act kindly to others, the less likely they are to bully others, so the interventions reduce bullying by focusing on increasing kindness. This finding and the emergence of the thematic focus on bullying-related actions indicates that children are increasingly recognising

kindness as a virtue of social significance. This resonates with the research by Malti and Colasante (2024), who claim that cultivating kindness helps people be more emotionally connected with others, adding that empathy is central in developing kindness since it helps people understand and respond to others' experiences and needs.

How, then, do we develop the virtue of kindness? From any developmental, psychological or educational perspective, kindness is one of the most tangible and observable traits in young children. From a developmental perspective, it is a virtue that children can grasp and practise easily at this age. This is mainly because kindness is an action-oriented virtue and is therefore observable and easy to emulate, for instance, behaviours such as sharing, helping others or through verbal expressions, all of which 7–8 year-old children can cognitively understand and practically apply. Such findings align with more contemporary research by Malti (2021), who supports the idea that kindness in children is not innate, but rather, kindness develops through the child's interactions with others which is also influenced by their culture.

Furthermore, the pre- and post-intervention mind-maps reveal some qualitative changes that highlight children developing their understanding of kindness to encompass more meaningful and empathetic considerations. In particular, the findings from this study show that the children did indeed develop their understanding of the virtue kindness to reflect the broader, relational qualities of kindness identified by Gulliford and Roberts (2018), namely the 'allocentric quintet', or the set of virtues that constitute 'intelligent caring about people': generosity, compassion, gratitude, forgiveness and humility (p. 223). This study therefore builds upon and adds to the research on children's kindness. The results showed that children aged 7–8 were able to recognise that kindness was not just tied to moral politeness norms or to routine conformity, but to the empathic concern for self and other. This consideration of

the self in relation to kindness is a new insight, specifically for children, and shows that they can understand kindness not just outwardly but also inwardly – a crucial tenet of enhancing their wellbeing.

Overall, while this study was conducted with 7–8 year-olds, with acknowledged room for refinement and future research, the findings nonetheless highlight that such interventions can make a difference in children's conceptualisation of kindness – in the direction that moves children's responses from the simple and superficial to a more meaningful, outwardly and inwardly directed understanding of kindness. Future studies should focus on elaborating the self-reflective aspect of children's prosocial behaviour, particularly on how cultivating children's self-directedness can help them develop a self-reflective orientation towards kindness through targeted interventions. Such insights will illuminate how children's wishes to extend kindness to others may stem from their willingness to notice their own needs, desires and feelings, along with those of others.

Gratitude

The virtue of gratitude emerged as the second most enhanced virtue in both schools, suggesting that both also experienced positive developments in the virtue of gratitude: School A (143) and School B (132). The children's development of the virtue moved from its most simple definition to a more concrete understanding. For example, the mind-maps from the pre-intervention of both schools consisted of more verbal expressions of gratitude, such as 'saying thank you' or 'saying please', portraying a simple understanding of gratitude. Such expressions reflect the socialised and language development observed in children as young as 18 months; here, the children recognised and gave thanks in reaction to the benefactor's

actions. These simple expressions of gratitude are the basic starting point in understanding gratitude, representing the first step in appreciating the fact that one benefits from the actions of another (Baumgarten-Tramer, 1938). However, the children's understanding of virtue expressions moved post-intervention across both schools to more concrete expressions of gratitude. In this stage, and in knowing 'what gratitude is', the children not only knew that it is an expression of 'simply saying thank you' or 'saying please', but they also knew that gratitude is a willingness and motivation to return something of worth. For example, post-intervention, the children expressed their gratitude by offering something of value in return, such as 'be grateful by tidying up' by offering to help their parents, who would appreciate their help and have some free time as a result. This move from expressions of verbal gratitude to expressions of concrete gratitude is important because it shows a deeper understanding of gratitude, similar to the developmental trajectory of Baumgarten-Tramer's pioneering work (1938), as well as subsequent research (Freitas et al., 2011; Tudge et al., 2015).

Furthermore, children's understanding of gratitude moved beyond the expression of gratitude in reaction to the actions of the benefactor and involved an emotional dimension. For instance, their post-intervention expressions included various emotions - 'feeling happy', 'feeling delighted', 'feeling good', relationships - 'family', 'sisters', 'mum and dad', daily comforts - 'my toys', 'my room', 'food' and actions -'helping tidy up'. In addition, the participants moved to a deeper expression of gratitude, as they knew what gratitude was beyond the appreciation of favours. Post-intervention, the children expressed gratitude for expressions of feeling good, happiness, family and sisterhood, which shows a move from an appreciation of simple expressions of gratitude to expressions of gratitude involving interpersonal relationships and daily comforts. The descriptions of gratitude align with

Emmons et al. (2019), who conceptualise gratitude as a trait (mood): People who have a grateful character tend to view the world in a way that leads to an appreciation of the positive aspects of life. Gratitude is not only about politeness, therefore, but about positive affect that benefits other people and their relationships. By the end of the intervention, the children knew that there were members of their family who did things for them that they could not do for themselves. This contribution to the development of gratitude in children is new and important as it demonstrates that children aged 7-8 are understanding gratitude as an orientation towards life that involves multiple components, including positive affect, interpersonal relationships and daily comforts.

Furthermore, in their post-intervention responses on gratitude, the children began to think about and express gratitude for the good health of others and the importance of selflessness. This is significant because it shows a deepened awareness of the participants' understanding of gratitude as an interpersonal virtue – one that involves recognising what others do and giving back. More specifically, some participants expressed giving to or volunteering for charity, which involves giving one's money, time or effort to do things for others without receiving anything in return. Other participants mentioned 'not being selfish' and 'thinking about others and what they do for you'. This is interesting because it shows a deepened awareness of gratitude as an interpersonal virtue that connotes with volunteering and philanthropy. This further supports the idea that the children are beginning to connect their understanding of gratitude as a life orientation, hence the desire to give back. In essence, the lesson on gratitude created an awareness among the children that people in society often give up their time to do things that would benefit others. Such responses are important because they show a deeper awareness of gratitude as an attitude involving humility and being

selfless. Gratitude here involves not only being aware of what others do for them, but also not taking others for granted.

More general observations of the data highlighted the emergence of an intriguing pattern: Examples of humility appeared considerably more frequently in the gratitude mind-maps than in the humility mind-maps. This suggests that the children may have found it easier to conceptualise humility through actions associated with gratitude, which is more concrete and relatable to their life experiences, rather than understanding humility as an abstract quality or standalone virtue. For example, one participant expressed 'helping others' in the sense that gratitude involves doing things for others who need help and recognising their value. When children link these behaviours to an orientation towards acknowledging the contribution and value of others, it expands their understanding of how the social world operates. Gratitude helps develop an awareness of the good and the blessings in our lives, while humility raises awareness of one's own limitations and the necessity of connectedness with others. This connection both deepens gratitude and also introduces children to the fundamental principles of humility.

The development of gratitude has been shown to promote the development of humility in adults because gratitude increases the valuing of others (Algoe & Haidt, 2009), which in turn reduces focus on oneself (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Tangney, 2000). However, this development has not yet been explicitly researched in children aged 7–8. This finding, then, highlights that the gratitude lesson contributed to the children's understanding of humility (the least enhanced virtue after the intervention) and helped to illuminate the 'unity' of virtues that together form the 'allocentric quintet' (Gulliford & Roberts, 2018, p. 223). Specifically, children can variously develop the capacity to view virtues or their

characteristics as interdependent. Given that this reciprocal relationship was enhanced by the intervention and formed part of the children's cognitive development, it seems that gratitude can be a helpful, practical tool for the development of humility – a virtue that children may find too abstract or difficult to grasp directly (see section 5.3.2). By learning about gratitude, the children may also be learning about humility; these kinds of approaches could represent a crucial part of supporting children's virtue development more generally. Likewise, this highlights a useful pedagogical strategy that supports the teaching of one virtue while naturally supporting the growth of another – despite it not being explicit. This finding becomes essential if we are to come to terms with how virtues function holistically as an integrated moral system, particularly as they are being formed during childhood. This is also a crucial step in helping us understand how the virtues come together in developing a child's character and their capacity for *phronesis* later in life.

This range of differences highlight the complexity of how gratitude both develops and is expressed by children. Research by Hinnant et al. (2013) has shown that by the age of five, most children understand that being given a benefit makes someone feel good, and that they often attribute those good feelings to the person who gave them the benefit and their actions. The researchers also found that a five-year-old's capacity for gratitude could be predicted by their ability at age three to recognise and describe various emotions, as well as their ability at three and four years-old to comprehend what someone else may be thinking. The developmental aspect of gratitude in children thus appears to involve a mix of behavioural and cognitive components that unfold across early childhood and represent a critical aspect of how gratitude is expressed (Hussong et al., 2019). Consistent with these developmental differences, Morgan, Gulliford and Kristjánsson (2017) also noted variation in children's

definition and expression of gratitude: Their post-intervention sample contained a mix of the simpler expressions of gratitude found in the 11 and 12 year-olds at the outset of their study (thanks, thank you, kind, smile) and more developed expressions such as selfless, generous, thoughtful and grateful. Therefore, although a clear progression was evident in the development of gratitude among both the 7–8 year-olds in this study and the 11–12 year-olds in Morgan, Guilliford and Kristjánsson (2017), it was only a few participants who showed evidence of having grasped connective gratitude. Although the age groups may differ, both show developmental progress towards a more sophisticated understanding of gratitude, indicating that, as children continue to mature, they will better understand gratitude and better articulate it in expressions of thankfulness that are broader and more reflective. A further example of this comes from the study by Tudge et al. (2015), which describes the developmental progression of understanding gratitude and the need for intervention and promotion efforts among children aged 7–14.

Finally, the research shows that young children can be taught to express gratitude (for example, saying ‘thank you’ when they receive a gift) as an aspect of the socialisation process (Hinnant et al., 2013). Acquiring the politeness norms associated with gratitude expression is one thing, however; it is relatively easy to teach these rules and be able to identify them in children, especially as they enter school. The development of a theory of mind allows children to understand that a benefactor feels good or is happy and to understand that a benefactor acts intentionally (Tomasello, 2019). However, the work of Morgan, Gulliford and Carr, (2015) raises concerns about gratitude intervention efforts for two main reasons. First, if gratitude is encouraged as an excessive virtue, rather than a balanced, golden-mean virtue, then it will be excessive and can become dangerous (e.g., in Stockholm

syndrome, where a victim develops feelings of gratitude towards their captors). As such, it is important for educators teaching gratitude to teach it in a way that encourages a balanced understanding of gratitude, not one that is excessive or directed towards harmful relationships. Second, when gratitude is treated instrumentally — as a means to an end rather than a genuine moral virtue — it may result in unintended negative consequences. They argue to avoid harm, gratitude interventions efforts must recognise gratitude's intrinsic worth, as Claudia Card (1988) posits. In her view, gratitude is not valuable because of what it leads to or because it improves our relationships with others; it is valuable simply because it is a good thing. In short, if we deem gratitude worthy in its own right, gratitude expression would have to be limited to those instances in which gratitude is truly genuine, and gratitude interventions need to reflect this complexity accordingly.

To summarise, the research findings add two new insights to the research on gratitude among 7–8 year-olds. The first is how instruction in one virtue (gratitude) can – without explicit teaching – stimulate the development of another (humility). This finding indicates that the virtues are indeed clustered together, and how improving children's understanding of gratitude is one avenue through which children can comprehend humility. This is an important finding for character education pedagogy since it suggests that encouraging the more straightforward virtues such as gratitude could be a productive method for cultivating the more abstract virtues that younger children cognitively struggle to grasp.

The second insight is that children aged 7–8 can begin to understand gratitude as a life orientation rather than merely expressing thanks upon receiving a gift or as a form of social politeness. This more developed conceptualisation of what it means to be grateful indicates that children can begin to recognise and appreciate how gratitude extends beyond the

immediate exchange of thanks, to an ongoing cycle of recognising the value of others and offering acts of generosity and kindness. This is an important finding and highlights how the intervention helped facilitate a broader understanding of gratitude that takes into account the consequences of decisions and more importantly the interconnectedness of one's life. Finally, given that the children did not show much development in terms of connective gratitude, perhaps the intervention focused too much on explicit verbal and concrete expressions of gratitude and not enough on connective gratitude. In future research, interventions should promote a deeper experience of gratitude – especially connective gratitude – and acknowledge individual differences that may contribute to children's experiences and expressions of gratitude.

Honesty

The most significant post-intervention scores were assigned to honesty (School B: 140; School A: 130; difference of 10 points) and included responses such as 'If you don't tell the truth, things will get worse', 'telling the truth helps things get better' and 'telling lies only leads to more lies'. In these examples, the children are beginning to recognise the inherent benefits of honesty, which supports Miller's (2021) conclusion that honesty contributes to positive outcomes and relationships. In another similar example, a participant writes that 'a lie can get bigger', which indicates an awareness that dishonesty can escalate, leading to further lies or making situations worse. Together, the examples suggest that the children have understood the risks of dishonesty and the benefits of honesty. In particular, understanding the negative consequences of being dishonest is important for children to grasp, because deceptive behaviours emerge for the first time at age 2–3 (Evans & Lee, 2013; Newton, Reddy & Bull, 2000; Talwar & Lee, 2002), typically involving hiding transgressions

(Newton et al., 2000; Wilson et al., 2003), and increase in sophistication with age (Evans & Lee, 2013; Lewis et al., 1989; Polak & Harris, 1999; Talwar et al., 2007; Talwar & Lee, 2008; Williams et al., 2014). While the earliest lies are often antisocial and arise from a child's desire to protect themselves or acquire something, younger children (primary age) begin to engage in prosocial lying – when lies are told to protect the feelings of another person.

Moreover, research has shown that, by late childhood, adults' ability to detect when a child is lying starts to decrease (Leach et al., 2004; McCarthy & Lee, 2009). Thus, notable correlations have been observed between antisocial lying – defined as lying in one's own interests – and a variety of conduct problems, delinquency and other problem behaviours in adolescence (Gervais et al., 2000; Ostrov et al., 2008). My research findings support this essential need for early intervention as well as the importance of doing so. This is because the children showed a growing understanding of honesty post-intervention – one in which they appear to be aware of the negative effects of lying on their relationships, situations or own wellbeing. The inclusion of all these elements in the children's post-intervention mind-maps suggests that their capacity to reflect upon the broader scope of this virtue had indeed increased. Additionally, my findings also support those of Talwar et al. (2004, p. 5), who found that children who 'valued truthfulness were more likely to tell the truth after promising to do so'. Here, the emotional elements that were referenced in the responses (e.g., 'lying will make me sad', 'lying will make me unhappy') suggest that the children have begun to connect honesty to their own emotional wellbeing.

The children's apparent development in their feelings towards being honest suggests that they are beginning to experience lying as an emotionally driven moral event: for instance, some

referenced feeling bad or sad when they were not honest. This suggests that children are moving beyond a mere cognitive moral understanding (the ability to determine what is true or false) and beginning to understand their emotions related to (dis)honest decisions. This development aligns with scholars who argue for virtuous traits having intrinsic value as opposed to mere extrinsic value (Adams, 2008). More importantly, my findings support the research on the role of emotion in developing virtue (Kristjánsson, 2018; Kim et al., 2024). For example, Kim et al.'s (2024) study explores how emotion regulation encompasses not only positive emotions but also negative ones, and how the emotion-regulation process entails the recognition of the circumstances that lead to these emotions as well as an identification of what these emotions are. When children link how they feel with how they act, they demonstrate that they are beginning to develop an understanding of what it means to be virtuous. Overall, in addition to learning that telling lies is wrong and unacceptable, children must learn and internalise the values of telling the truth for their conceptual understanding of honesty to be translated into behaviour (Tong & Talwar, 2021).

The improvement in honesty among the children's conceptualisations, as evidenced by my findings, highlights the development of their cognitive, emotional and ethical understanding. The growth in their perceptions of the consequences of lying and the value of keeping promises also suggests that they are beginning the process of incorporating honesty into their moral identities, understanding that it is becoming part of how they should act, which in turn shapes the person they aspire to become. Nonetheless, the findings from this study show that the more children learn about the good things that come from honesty, the more they come to value its moral and emotional value, as shown by their prominent references to lying having negative consequences and their greater appreciation of the benefits of truth-telling. These

findings are mirrored in Lee et al.'s (2014) study, which found that reading children aged 3–7 a moral story about the positive aspects of truth-telling (e.g., George Washington and the Cherry Tree, in which the hero is praised verbally for truth-telling), compared with a control story or stories about the negative aspects of lying, resulted in lower rates of lie-telling.

The developmental stages of lie-telling in children have been linked to their cognitive development. Specifically, children become better able to tell and maintain lies as their theory-of-mind and executive functioning skills develop (Evans & Lee, 2013; Ma et al., 2015; Polak & Harris, 1999; Talwar et al., 2007; Talwar & Lee, 2008). Talwar and Lee (2008) propose a developmental model of lying, suggesting that at age 7–8 (the same age group as this study), children begin to reach the 'tertiary lies stage', in which they are able to maintain consistency between their initial lie and follow-up statements. In other words, between the ages of seven and eight, children become more sophisticated in their lying abilities. At this same age, their lies become harder to detect, as they are able to maintain their lies across questions. In relation to this study, the findings provide a different view of the developmental path to honesty as children's basic cognitive abilities (specifically, theory-of-mind and executive-function abilities) advance. Previous research has concentrated mostly on how these cognitive developments allow children to become better at lying – that is, at fabricating, maintaining and utilising lies (Lee, 2013; Talwar & Crossman, 2011; Talwar et al., 2016). Unlike these studies, which highlight that children are able to lie because their developing cognitive faculties grant them the capacity to do so, the virtue-based intervention utilised in this study helped children not only to become aware of the negative consequences of lying, but also to grasp the beneficial consequences of honesty in their interpersonal relationships and emotional wellbeing. This finding reveals the role of moral education in

helping children internalise honesty as an important moral and emotional quality. Taken together, my research findings demonstrate that moral education can be a significant tool in cultivating honesty. The implications of my research are twofold. First, it has shown that targeted forms of intervention can be used to teach the moral virtue of honesty, allowing children's cognitive capacity to work in conjunction with their emotional motivation to do the right thing. Second, its synthesis with the existing literature suggests that virtue-focused education has a place in early childhood as an effective way to cultivate important moral and emotional qualities associated with honesty.

Overall, the findings of the study pertaining to honesty demonstrate that children improved their understanding by considering the social and emotional consequences of lying and the value of promise-making, as reflected in the post-intervention mind-maps. As such, the emerging understanding of the consequences of dishonesty, as reflected in the interpretation of lying's escalation, is consistent with findings from developmental research on the emergence and sophistication of deceptive behaviours (Evans & Lee, 2013; Williams et al., 2014). In addition, some of the development in the children's perceptions of the emotional aspects of honesty highlights the emerging recognition that good things may happen as a consequence of being truthful (and bad things as a consequence of being dishonest). This finding diverges from other studies conducted on honesty in children, which mostly explore how children develop their ability to lie. While this study provides examples of some positive developments in children's judgments about honesty, future research could further explore children's perceptions of the emotional dimensions and consequences of honesty and dishonesty in relation to their decision-making.

Loyalty

The post-intervention loyalty scores revealed a difference of nine points (School A: 94; School B: 85). The loyalty mind-maps completed prior to and at the end of the intervention provide intriguing and potentially useful questions about how the virtue of loyalty develops in children, as well as the potential challenges involved. Prior to the intervention, the children's mind-maps mostly reflected minimal to no comments and included responses such as 'standing up for friends', which reflected a general and basic understanding of loyalty, and 'having lots of friends', which seemed to equate the idea of loyalty with popularity. These conceptualisations of loyalty reflected what they had understood about the virtue before participating in the intervention. After the intervention, a subtle shift in the children's expressions of loyalty was observed. For example, their post-intervention responses reflected an appreciation for loyalty. Here, the children point to actions as a way of understanding loyalty, specifically sticking up for friends when they need help and recognising its personal rewards, such as deeper friendships and a sense of fulfilment. This shift in conceptualisations of loyalty after the intervention implies that targeted interventions can influence how children think about this virtue, which can further deepen their understanding of it. However, the findings more generally reveal an interesting pattern across the participants' understanding of loyalty across both schools: that is, they struggled to develop an understanding of loyalty beyond simple expressions relating to standing up for friends and family. This suggests that loyalty was understood through interactions with friends and family and provides a context for children to think of loyalty as an important quality in meaningful and supportive relationships. These findings confirm that children's understanding of loyalty develops through their social interactions (Flanagan & Pykett, 2024). However, as Liberman and Shaw

(2019) claim, earlier research may have overlooked children's ability to understand the complex nature of loyalty; newer research suggests that children as young as three or four recognise that loyalty is an aspect of relationship-building. For example, they expect sharing to be more common among friends than among strangers (Olson & Spelke, 2008), and 4–6 year-olds can use patterns of sharing to infer friendships (Liberman & Shaw, 2017). Furthermore, children aged five also tend to favour those people who are loyal to their own group (Misch et al., 2014).

Another interesting pattern, this time in the kindness mind-maps, revealed that as children expressed their understanding of kind behaviour, they also simultaneously displayed some behaviours demonstrating loyalty. These included acts of helping, words of affirmation, sharing and generosity, and emotional support. Similar to how instances of humility were commonly found within expressions of gratitude, aspects of kindness were frequently intertwined with expressions of loyalty, suggesting that these virtues are not isolated but are mutually reinforcing within the children's developing moral framework. In addition to examples of kindness co-occurring with loyalty, the children's honesty mind-maps also revealed some loyalty-related behaviours, including telling the truth, considering the feelings of others, and dishonesty breaking trust. Interestingly, these examples were not included in the original loyalty mind-maps, which may indicate that children begin to understand what loyalty entails in terms of positive behaviours – for instance, support or companionship – rather than in terms of the less obvious ethical implications that honesty may have on the maintenance of such relationships. This leaves honesty-related behaviours absent from the loyalty maps and suggests that children remain cognitively unable to notice how honesty is at the root of and provides a foundation for building and maintaining loyal relationships. That is

to say, although the children are learning the relationships between these virtues implicitly, room is also left for educating them to recognise, more explicitly, the place that honesty and kindness hold as important components of loyalty. These findings point to a complex interdependence between clusters of virtues (e.g., honesty, loyalty and kindness) that have not been explored in the literature to date.

The exploration of different virtues, such as honesty, kindness and gratitude, is an emerging trend in child development research. Although some studies have explored loyalty, it is still not the major focus in child development research – for several potential reasons. First, loyalty is a complex virtue and unlike the virtues of honesty or kindness, loyalty involves a subtle behaviour and attitude, meaning that it can be difficult to accurately measure and observe in young children. This could make it a challenge to define and measure in different populations, especially children who are at a sensitive stage in their cognitive and socio-emotional development. This may explain the lack of research into the development of loyalty in children. Of the studies that have attempted to explore the virtue within the larger context of moral and social development, Misch et al. (2016) have explored how children aged 4–5 show loyalty to their group by keeping group secrets. Other studies have also explored how the moral reasoning of children (Valtin & Watson, 2001) and adolescents (Shao et al., 2024) collides when honesty and loyalty are in conflict.

Moreover, loyalty is learned though the family to which the child belongs, as it is ultimately 'the first experience of being part of a group' (Flanagan & Pykett, 2024, p. 24). In this way, loyalty takes different forms around the world, expressing deeply rooted cultural values. Loyalty in collectivist cultures, such as those in parts of East Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, places the greatest emphasis on one's family, on putting family before all else and

maintaining the family unit (Singelis et al., 1995). Meanwhile, in Western cultures, particularly those in North America and Western Europe, loyalty tends to emphasise loyalty to schools, companies and governments, with loyalty to institutions often seen as crucial to personal and societal advancement (e.g., Putnam's 2001 study on social capital). Meanwhile, in much of South Asia, loyalty to one's group is associated with acting according to long-standing cultural traditions and social conduct, which is central to community life, otherwise known as filial piety (Hwang, 1999). Such cross-cultural observations point to how one's group experiences affect the ways in which they understand and regard loyalty.

Peer relationships and social environments also play an important role in how children aged 7 and above, learn about peer interactions, relationships and peer groups (Rubin et al., 2015). For example, as children learn about the importance of loyalty in friendship, statements that relate to the development of a stronger friendship relationship (such as 'stick up for your friends') become more prevalent, even for 7–8 year-olds. However, children of this age may not fully understand loyalty as older children do. There may be several reasons for this. First, 7–8 year-olds have had fewer life experiences than their older counterparts, so they may not have experienced as many loyalty-related situations. For this reason, their friendships may still be mainly centred around doing activities together and playing. Second, as children develop into adolescents, their cognitive abilities continue to evolve as their social exposure grows, whereby they are better able to understand and practise loyalty in different contexts and have a deeper understanding of the different virtues, like loyalty. This is because recognising loyalty involves children engaging with complex and abstract ideas around trust and commitment, and prioritising collective goals over individual desires, which should call attention to the fact that children are only beginning to develop insights into these concepts

and how to navigate them. For example, children aged 7–8 are forming friendships with their classmates, participating in sports teams, clubs, or extracurricular activities, which provides children with opportunities to develop loyalty to their teammates. In such instances, children learn to work toward the same goals and motivate one another.

In conclusion, the research on the development of loyalty in children is relatively thin, and this important area warrants further study. While some studies have begun to explore loyalty within the broader context of moral and social development, much remains unknown about how children understand and internalise this virtue. The reasons for this include the complexity of the concept, difficulties in defining and measuring loyalty in children, and the role of culture in children's conceptualisation of loyalty. What the existing literature and my results suggest is that it is a central part of children's early social relationships, and that, given the right kind of interventions, children can start to think about this virtue in increasingly abstract and sophisticated ways. The findings also add a new dimension to the literature and close a gap as to how children aged 7–8 understand loyalty. Although the children developed their understanding of what loyalty entails, how loyalty can be actioned was difficult for the children to comprehend due to a lack of sufficient experiences where loyalty is actively exercised. In addition, the findings contribute novel insight into how this virtue develops and is understood through its interaction with some of the other central virtues – honesty and kindness in this case. Such findings highlight both the challenges and opportunities for research to contribute to pedagogy on how virtues can be taught connected to one another, as opposed to separately.

Courage

The post-intervention scores for courage showed the smallest difference (School A: 90; School B: 94; difference of 4 points). The development of courage through the intervention was not as enhanced as other virtues, such as honesty, kindness and gratitude, although a few of the children showed important and notable developments. One child wrote, 'I know Nelson Mandela stood up for his people'. This illustrates the child's understanding of courage in relation to a popular figure who is universally viewed as having courage because he 'stood up' for his people in the face of social exclusion and injustice. In this instance, we can see that the child has developed an understanding of moral courage that is normally developed at around 11–12 years old, as defined by Szagun (1992), when children begin to take the notion of risk into account in their understanding of courage. Here, the child is demonstrating a deeper understanding of courage that goes beyond the simple notion of overcoming a subjective feeling of fear in a particular circumstance. This finding exemplifies how children develop an understanding of virtues from examples situated outside the classroom, highlighting the need for CE teachers to consider broader contextual examples or role models in encouraging virtue literacy. In a few other similar instances, the children developed their understanding of courage as something to be actioned – 'not just when you are afraid', but because it 'means when you see something wrong you tell someone' – emphasising how being brave and courageous is important when speaking up against unethical or inappropriate behaviour. This is an example of courage being morally virtuous, as it demonstrates a sense of moral integrity and social awareness. The child understands that courage is relevant to situations of injustice or wrongdoing and shows that they recognise the importance of standing up for others. Another child writes, 'standing up for people you don't know'; this

child recognises the altruistic nature of courage, highlighting that courage is not only about standing up for ourselves or our close friends but also for those with whom we are not familiar. These are examples of a more evolved understanding of courage, as a few of the children developed empathy and a sense of social responsibility in their responses.

More interestingly, another pattern emerged from the children's post-intervention mind-maps: examples of the children being able to conceptualise the importance of 'not being afraid but not being reckless', showing an application of the golden mean to courage. Aristotle's virtue ethics provides the claim that virtues are the mean between deficiency and excess (recall Chapter 2). Courage, therefore, is the mean between recklessness (excess) and cowardice (deficiency). Adding the 'not reckless' aspect to some of the post-intervention assessments highlights that the children are adopting a more balanced approach to courage. Courage, as understood by the children, requires not being impulsive or reckless; it involves careful deliberation and consideration of what is the principled or right thing to do, even in challenging situations. This type of interpretation signifies a more mature and *phronetic* understanding of courage. *Phronesis*, the Aristotelian concept explained in Chapter 2, refers to the ability to make good moral judgments about often difficult, real-life situations. Yet, given that children aged 7–8 would not, as Aristotle argues, have acquired the fullest development of *phronesis*, simply because they still lack life experience, a more accurate concept for describing this understanding is required. Here, I suggest a 'developmental precursor' or 'foundation' of *phronesis*. During this stage, children should begin to learn the basic elements of a virtue, such as the role of courage in their own moral lives, including learning the deficient and excessive nature of the virtue in question – elements that will be required of them to understand how to apply the virtue in their own choices in the years to

come. This developmental precursor would involve children learning to understand the golden mean of virtues in general (not just courage), and building on what Morgan, Gulliford and Carr (2015) argue should be applied to gratitude, among other virtues. In essence, children should be taught to seek out and better understand the mean between excess and deficiency and what this mean looks like in practice for each virtue. By cultivating these early cognitive capacities, I believe that we can provide some of the conceptual tools that children need for the development of *phronesis* in later life.

Moreover, the shift from zero and low and mid scores in the pre-assessments to several children demonstrating 'not reckless' in the post-assessments indicates mostly not knowing what courage is compared to 'knowing' that courage is a balanced or thoughtful virtue. This shows the potential for children's developing capacity for *phronesis* to discern and apply courage as the appropriate virtue in a particular circumstance. The results from this study of children's concepts of courage – especially in their acknowledgement of courage not being equivalent to recklessness – may be significantly informed by the cultural, social and environmental contexts in which those children are raised and educated. In this light, the results highlight the ways in which a child's moral reasoning may be shaped by their immediate surroundings and social environment. For example, children's concepts of the virtue of courage may be deeply rooted in the cultural narratives, social norms or role models to which they are exposed in their everyday lives. If the children who reflected on the lesson resonated more with the balanced concept of courage as one involving consideration rather than reckless boldness, it may reflect something about the values and examples emphasised not only in that lesson but in their broader cultural and social surroundings, as was the case when the child referenced Nelson Mandela. Although not explicitly referenced as such,

Mandela was probably understood to be courageous, and this example of courage would probably fit from what adults or peers in the child's environment may have described to them as a heroic or moral role model. Similarly, the different conceptions of courage may reflect the children's real-life observations where they see adults or peers making brave yet considered decisions, or from cultural stories and media where heroes are depicted as wise and thoughtful rather than bold and reckless. Such insights can inform children's moral development and support the need for considering and adapting character education to the diverse backgrounds and experiences of children. For CE to be effective, both its strategies and its content need to be adaptive and sensitive to the cultural and social dynamics of the student population. In other words, the inclusion of examples or discussions relevant to the children's cultural and social experiences can enhance their understanding and application of moral concepts such as courage.

The discovery that children as young as 7–8 are beginning to understand the foundation for *phronesis*, a virtue traditionally understood as developing later in childhood and adulthood, is potentially a new insight into character education, philosophy and psychology. It also challenges the notion that practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, develops only in adulthood. Instead, the finding suggests that the seeds of this more meaningful and balanced moral reasoning skill can be sown much earlier than was previously believed – and indeed that the findings may reflect the efficacy of the teaching methods. If the concept of courage, including the more balanced characteristic of not being reckless, was communicated effectively through age-appropriate examples, stories or discussions, this could have helped children to develop a richer understanding of the virtue. This finding not only suggests a potentially new insight into the early cultivation of *phronesis* but also raises questions about differential teaching

approaches for different virtues. Although the intervention focused on a balanced understanding of courage, similar approaches may not have been used to teach the other virtues. This may explain the lack of similar findings across the other virtues. It should also be noted that the explicit teaching of this more meaningful understanding of courage, which was not applied to the other virtues, may have limited the depth of understanding and development across the other virtues taught.

In hindsight, if each virtue had been treated similarly, and a balanced understanding taught – similar to the *phronetic* approach applied to courage – then different insights into the children's moral reasoning and ethical development may have been revealed. Therefore, this finding highlights the need for consistency in teaching virtues. However, it is important to acknowledge that understanding the golden-mean structure of a virtue is very different from having a *phronetic* grasp of it. While having a conceptual understanding is necessary for the development of *phronesis*, it is insufficient on its own. This is because a wide range of exposure to different real-life and often difficult situations in which virtues collide – and learning how to navigate them – is arguably more crucial (Sherman, 1989). Therefore, while this early 'developmental precursor' of *phronetic* courage is promising, it is only the beginning in understanding how children develop the foundation for *phronesis*. Life experiences and continued development are essential for acquiring *phronesis*, as Aristotle and neo-Aristotelian philosophers and psychologists advocate (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024; Fowers et al., 2024).

In addition to moral courage, the children provided examples of physical courage. For example, 'helping someone' was seen as a way to demonstrate physical courage, suggesting children's readiness to intervene in situations where physical help could be needed, despite

the personal risks. Another example was ‘speaking up if I get bullied’, which suggests a proactive response to physical threats or harm. Adults may understand these as examples of physical courage despite not having been explicitly taught this virtue. Adding to the contemporary research on courage, the findings reveal that, while these examples were not explicitly taught, the children understood the notion of physical courage through the examples of their brave actions. As noted by Kelley et al. (2019), the contemporary research on courage finds that the concept is not limited to the moral variety but can also be understood across various situations and contexts, especially in children.

In summary, the existing empirical research, though extremely limited, suggests that younger children describe courage in terms of feeling strong or considering risks, while older children understand courage as an experience of various feelings and mental states. The present findings on the development and cultivation of courage add new and significant insights into the understanding of children’s cognitive development by demonstrating a higher cognitive ability for courage than initially suggested in previous research. While Szagun (1992) outlined a developmental progression of courage across different age groups, the findings here suggest that children as young as 7–8 may understand the altruistic, empathetic and socially responsible aspects of courage traditionally associated with older groups. This suggests that a more advanced understanding of courage may be developing earlier than previously thought. However, this development is contingent on individual differences and the contextual factors that, in addition to character education, can influence children’s moral reasoning and understanding of the virtue. Moving forward, future research should continue to develop a balanced understanding of courage, as this may ultimately lay the foundation for cultivating practical wisdom in children from an early age, which could have positive effects

on their moral reasoning and decision-making in their everyday lives as they grow and mature. Similarly, CE interventions that seek to promote courage should take into account the culturally sensitive approaches to character education that reflect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of young learners. I also emphasise the need for CE interventions to adopt a more expansive view of children's developmental abilities if they are to successfully lay the groundwork for *phronesis*.

Humility

As Worthington et al. (2008) explain, humility can be defined through three core dimensions: accurate self-assessment, including awareness of one's limitations; modest self-presentation; and an interpersonal orientation that values others over oneself. Despite the many insights into humility, the research is scarce on how to teach humility to children, with multiple explanations for this. First, humility as a virtue has been less studied and, perhaps, less funded than other traits (such as kindness and gratitude) in the field of child development. Second, as a virtue, humility is a complex and multifaceted trait – one that can be more difficult to define and measure (Wright et al., 2017, 2018). This is because it incorporates aspects such as self-awareness and recognition of one's limitations; as a result, it may also be more challenging to detect in young children or for them to report on it in measurement tools. Third, philosophers disagree on whether humility consists of an intentional underestimation of one's worth, or merely a refusal to overestimate it (Tangney, 2000), among other conceptual disparities (see Wright et al., 2017). As a result, it can be more challenging to assess in research settings that can be overly formal, where it may be deemed unbeneficial to express such 'invisible' attitudes or behaviours.

Additionally, and reflecting on the UK, cultural factors and societal norms could be responsible for the lack of research on humility. For example, the UK typically adopts a cultural trait that focuses on individualism, where personal success, status and self-reliance often take precedence over virtues like humility that do not contribute to personal and economic gain. In addition, societal norms have increasing sought to promote virtues that serve economic purposes, with schooling mirroring such efforts. Overall, though, humility is an important virtue to promote among children, and the lack of research on this virtue represents an opportunity to better understand how it can be instilled in school settings.

The post-intervention results show that humility developed the least (and by a long shot), showing only a slight development in the children's understanding of this virtue (School A: 30; School B: 52; difference of 22 points). The pre-intervention trend diverges from the trends found across other virtues, whereby participants would tend to have some initial, simple awareness of the virtues meaning. for humility. However, both pre-intervention and post-intervention scores remained relatively similar, with slight improvements across some participants. The positive qualitative changes included expressions such as 'telling the truth', 'saying sorry', 'not flaunting', and 'listening' in the post-intervention data indicates that the children understood the value of truthfulness, responsibility, modesty and empathy. However, post-intervention, changes were observed in the children's perceptions and understanding of humility. The emergence of ideas such as 'telling the truth', 'saying sorry', 'not flaunting', and 'listening' in the post-intervention data indicates that the children understood the value of truthfulness, responsibility and empathy. These responses indicate that the intervention did not promote a clear understanding of the virtue with any significant depth in comparison to the other virtues taught in the intervention. The children's expressions were simple and

lacked any clear connections to how to exhibit humility in real-world encounters, which were clear occurrences across the other virtues. This finding is particularly interesting and adds a new dimension to the literature on children's development of humility.

With this in mind, it is worth noting that the intervention has its limitations, as well as areas where improvements could be made. For example, 'telling the truth' and 'saying sorry' may well be relevant to the virtue humility, but given the children's developmental stage and social context, this response may not necessarily represent the virtue itself. Therefore, given that the virtue of humility is less promoted in the research, the effectiveness of the intervention may be hindered by the children's developmental stage and social environment (Talwar et al., 2015). Therefore, to enhance its effectiveness, it would be essential to tailor the intervention to take into account these individual differences and contextual factors. While the post-intervention results were limited here, the children generally scored higher by a point or two, suggesting significantly lower development in the children's perception and understanding of this virtue compared to others. These lower humility scores can be attributed to the conceptual abstractness of the virtue, which may have made it more challenging for the young children to grasp or internalise compared with more concrete and demonstrable virtues such as kindness and honesty. Another important contributing factor to the lower humility scores may have been the narrative story selected. The fable (lion and the mouse) was, to my knowledge, the only story available for the age group with a connection to the virtue. The story, along with the abstract nature of the virtue itself, may have hindered the children's ability to engage with the virtue humility. The characters, actions or examples may not have resonated with the children's own lives, resulting in gap between the story and the children's familiarity with humility in practical terms. Taken together, teaching humility to

children may emphasise the need for more personalised and reflective approaches in teaching this virtue to meet the needs of the different children. For instance, children may be encouraged if they think about a time when they might need to be humble, such as a scenario where they might need to apologise to a friend and take responsibility for their actions while being considerate of their friend's feelings.

As discussed under gratitude, acts of humility occurred frequently in the gratitude mind-maps. This suggests that, as the children conceptualised gratitude, they also simultaneously displayed an understanding of humility-related traits by viewing it as accompanied by their own acts of selflessness and acknowledgement for others without seeking personal recognition. Given that humility was the most complex of the virtues taught in the study for this age group, this association arguably hints that children may learn humility better in the context of gratitude. The intervention likely aided this connection by implicitly signalling their reciprocal nature: Gratitude involves the outward-oriented orientation that directly gives expression to humility. A grateful agent is one who must look outside themselves and acknowledge the contributions of others. In doing so, gratitude naturally leads to humility by appreciating those contributions without feeling the need to boost one's own status or significance. In this way, gratitude and humility can reinforce one another. The gratitude that enables children to feel thankful towards others can also enable them to feel humble before others. Rather than considering gratitude and humility as separate virtues, then, the findings here suggest that children aged 7–8 can conceptualise more abstract virtues (to which they have less exposure) alongside more concrete ones, which are more regularly reinforced by their environments and social figures.

Furthermore, the trend of different outcomes across the virtues, particularly the children's limited development in humility, could be attributed to the relationship between cognition and socio-cultural reinforcements. Humility may be developed differently or more slowly compared with virtues such as kindness and gratitude that may be more easily observed in children's surroundings and, as a result, reinforce their understanding of these virtues. In addition, humility may be more difficult to observe and therefore less likely to be reinforced. The general finding that the children's humility scores only improved slightly or not at all post-intervention may also be an important consideration for researchers with an interest in character education, as it implies a gap in understanding around the underlying factors that shape the development (or lack thereof) of this virtue. Such recognition is essential if it is to be properly developed in children. That said, a child's development, including moral and character development, is likely to differ across children, and this variance is a natural phenomenon, as development is influenced by a range of biological, psychological and social factors (Rottschaefer, 1998). Some children develop certain virtues quicker than others, and this difference may be more evident in a complex virtue such as humility. Similarly, the development of virtues like humility could be influenced by the same factors. These include the children's cognitive and emotional maturity, which may determine how quickly they internalise or understand virtues.

This societal focus is supported by the research: Twenge and Campbell (2009) highlight an increase in narcissism and self-worth in American culture and decreases in community-focused virtues such as humility. In competitive, success-oriented climates, children's moral development may accentuate more individualistic value systems. This prioritisation may make humility more difficult to develop – and possibly harder to teach. If humility is not a

primary virtue in the culture in which they live, children may not have the opportunity to experience or understand it in their everyday lives (for instance, from caregivers, the media they consume, or the content they learn in school). These factors in addition to the post-intervention findings reveal the challenges to developing strategies to promote humility in children. There are no quick hacks, but meaningful steps can be made, and they can be taken at home and at school – in the primary environments where children learn. As such, humility has to be modelled, encouraged and reinforced, and repeated opportunities must be given for children to reflect upon and practise it in everyday interactions. This involves helping them to develop an 'other orientation' and focusing on recognising other people's efforts and emotions, as well as one's own limitations. It may also mean finding more humble role models. This would represent a deliberate and intentional effort to provide a counter-narrative to the promoted and pervasive cultural narrative – a reflective and contemplative dimension to moral development that is both for others and for the self.

In summary, humility was by far the least developed virtue post-intervention, especially when compared to the others used in this study, such as kindness or gratitude. Yet, it plays a crucial yet underestimated role in children's moral development. Despite its importance for healthy child development, surprisingly little empirical research has focused specifically on how to teach humility to children. The findings of this study provide an important contribution to emerging research on children's humility development by providing evidence that children have difficulty understanding humility. This is because of humility's abstract nature and how it is disconnected from their immediate environment, as opposed to virtues like kindness that are actively connected to and reinforced in their environments. For these reasons, there is a need to explore more contextually relevant approaches to teaching humility, taking into

account parental, school and societal influences. This would be a step towards providing more research on developing humility in children.

Finally, and more significantly, tying humility to more understandable virtues such as gratitude could be helpful; here, the children could better articulate humility through the exercise of gratitude. This pattern of virtues being interconnected, was also a pattern observed across loyalty (where the kindness and honesty mind-maps co-occurred with attributes of loyalty). Future research should continue to explore these natural interconnections between virtues, specifically to further our understanding of how children develop their conceptualisations of virtues.

5.4 Exploring the Pedagogical Methods for Enhancing Virtue Literacy

This part of the discussion examines the role of explicit pedagogical methods in promoting virtue literacy and addresses the RQ3: *To what extent do different pedagogical methods enhance children's development of virtue literacy?* In particular, I explore how the 4R model (including its limitations), Socratic questioning, narrative storytelling, and the focus groups may have contributed to these developments. Each of these approaches has a unique but complementary role in how children come to understand and learn virtues - ultimately contributing to their development of virtue literacy.

There are potentially two main reasons as to why no substantial differences in virtue literacy development were observed across the two schools, despite the fact that School A is a virtue-focused school and School B is not. First, the intervention was tailored to meet the cognitive needs of the age group through a range of narrative stories, tailored Socratic questioning to assist thinking, and focus groups to consolidate the children's learning and help them apply

what they had learnt in a conversational format. Second, the explicit and structured approach using the 4R model may have helped scaffold the learning to meet the children's needs, thereby engaging the children in the learning process. Each of these reasons is discussed in further detail below.

5.4.1 The Role of Socratic Questioning in Engaging Children with Virtues

A key hindrance in CE currently is the lack of pedagogical approaches to teaching virtue related skills and knowledge. This study, therefore, sought to explore the potential benefits of using Socratic questioning as a method for promoting virtue literacy in children. A variety of instructional methods were used in the intervention, with Socratic questioning playing a prominent role. The Socratic approach (see Section 2.3), where thought-provoking questions and questioning rather than telling are used to help children to engage with virtues by thinking more intentionally about what the virtues may entail, how they may be actioned and how they relate to the characters in the story.

In the post-intervention assessments (across mind-maps and focus groups), improvements were observed in the children's ability to define, explain and give examples of a number of virtues, such as honesty, kindness and gratitude. These improvements, especially when evaluating how the students appeared to understand the moral virtues, appeared to include more meaningful depth compared with the pre-intervention assessments, which is of particular interest to the aims of the intervention study, which was to develop children's understanding of six different moral virtues. Furthermore, the Socratic questioning was effective in that the children had opportunities to think about: the characters in the narrative stories and their choices; the consequences behind their choices both physical and emotional;

what virtue was being explored; and how each virtue exists in their own daily lives, at home and at school. Structuring lessons where children were invited to discuss each story – in parts and as a whole – encouraged active participation and made the learning process more interactive and personalised, as each child had the opportunity to voice and explore their own perspectives, while allowing for insights into their thinking, which is supported by Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism, where learning is seen as a socially mediated process where learning takes place in different social and cultural settings, such as schools.

For character educators, the finding suggests that instructional methods that break away from traditional repetition learning and instead invite children into ongoing dialogue and reflection can meaningfully enhance children's conceptualisation and subsequent application of virtue terms. This represents an important finding for CE interventions, as it suggests that teaching virtue terms can be developed further by methods that promote engagement and questioning through dialectical strategies. Put simply, good teaching that promotes dialectical or Socratic questioning can and will create a child-friendly Socratic classroom that better promotes the goals of virtue education. In this way, children can come to better understand the thoughts and reasons behind the conceptual connections of a virtue lexicon. In turn, this should create the circumstances that are suitable for children to develop their own ethical sensibilities and, in time, become the sorts of thoughtful, reflective and ethical members of society who will go on to be influential as adults.

Yet, despite the positive literature pertaining to the use of Socratic questioning, there is an apparent lack of research that explores how Socratic questioning can support the development of virtue literacy in young children. While some studies exploring Socratic questioning

involve the dialogical approach in children aged 10–12 (Daniel et al., 2005), much of the literature involves older children or adolescents (Topping & Trickey, 2007; Murris, 2016). Therefore, the findings of the potential benefits I observe here in children aged 7–8 years, could offer a new and useful perspective regarding the age at which such pedagogical strategies can be suitable and effective. Nonetheless, the absence of a more precise assessment of Socratic questioning is a limitation of the method as it leaves ample room for ambiguity as to the degree of its contribution on the children's conceptualisations. It would be necessary for future research to include more direct assessments of how Socratic questioning is used (by teachers) and received (by students) in CE interventions, especially to come to more reliable conclusions regarding its application and effectiveness.

5.4.2 The Application of the 4R Model in Promoting Virtue Literacy

The 4R model was designed and introduced in the present thesis to provide an easy-to use and accessible pedagogical framework to assist teachers in engaging with character education in the classroom. In the context of this study, the implementation of the 4R model was an integral part of teaching the six moral virtues and provided a better understanding into how it supported the development of both virtue literacy and engagement among children, including its limitations.

First, the 4R model includes a structured progression from reading to recall that provides children with a scaffolded learning experience. This is crucial given that children need to be provided with material that will scaffold them to the next activity. As a result of the scaffolded approach to learning, the 4R model is inclusive and accommodating to diverse learning styles and needs. This is important because offering structure allows children to gain

a better understanding of each virtue. When educators are open to different learning styles, they are able to provide access to exemplary pedagogical methods that their students need and deserve. For instance, in a classroom with children who do not have the same learning style, Tomlinson (2014) advises that the teacher can use different approaches to ensure inclusion and access to learning for students with varying learning needs. In turn, this allows for better understanding of the material both inside and outside of a classroom setting. Interestingly, it is worth noting that both schools that participated in the study had children with special educational needs (SEN) and English as a second language (EAL). While some children with SEN did not perform as well as those with no learning barriers, some positive outcomes did occur for children with EAL and SEN at both schools. This shows that the model is an effective means of creating an inclusive learning approach. Another main strength of the 4R model is its reflective component. As noted, the reflection of virtue was pivotal because it allowed the children to connect their virtue learning with their own lives. This stage is vital for virtue literacy development; without it, the child remains at a theoretical level of understanding without any real experience of its meaningfulness in their day-to-day lives.

While the findings indicated that the model appeared to support the children's understanding and perception of virtues, the reasoning and reflection components of virtue literacy seemed to have developed less prominently. This can be attributed to the fact that while the children were able to explain their reasoning during group discussions, it appears that they had a harder time putting these reflections in writing, rather than verbalising them. This may be due to a variety of reasons, such as the fact that the activity did not explicitly prompt them to record their reflections; the writing exercise may also have been too cognitively taxing given

that the mind-map activity was only allocated 10 minutes. That said, these observations highlight a possible area of improvement when it comes to pedagogy by suggesting the need for explicit instructions or prompts for reflection that would further help children to reflect and articulate their thoughts more thoroughly. Indeed, contemporary research on educational practices highlights the need for explicit directions or prompts for reflection and moral development (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009). As such, the 4R model adopts stages from Kolb's (2014) 'theory of experiential learning' that emphasises reflection as a core component of the learning process. Moreover, the 4R model also adheres to contemporary educational philosophies (e.g., constructivism and social constructivism) that emphasise building learning through stages and the practice of reflection in learning.

Advantages of the 4R Model	Limitations of the 4R Model
Encourages student learning: By implementing the 4R model, students can actively reflect on the material, read the material they were given, review and recall what they learn and recall. Subsequently, students may comprehend better by reflecting on the material, reading it and reviewing what they learnt attempting to improve their knowledge, as repetition can result in better learning the material.	Lengthens the time consumed: The 4R model is more time-consuming than the traditional teaching and learning method, as learners have to read what they were told and reflect on the material given. Also, students have to utilise the time they are given to really understand and reflect on the virtues. This can be challenging for younger learners.
Improves a student's comprehension: Reflecting and reviewing the material can attract learning, especially when learners like reading stories for example. Using the 4R model can increase a student's comprehension in learning something new, as they can read, review, and reflect on their knowledge.	Requires teacher guidance: When using the 4R method, learners can acquire higher levels of knowledge as they must read, review, and reflect on what they learnt while doing so requires a teacher to guide the students, especially younger children.
Develops critical thinking skills: When using the 4R method, learners can develop critical thinking skills, as they will be able to reflect and discuss the topics they are provided. By doing this, the learners will be able to engage in discussions with their peers, developing their own critical thinking skills.	Not suitable for all virtues: The 4R model may not be suitable to teach all virtues, specifically virtues that need more scaffolding and differentiation to meet the needs of children with learning difficulties.
Increases engagement: By using the 4R method, learners can engage actively with the learning process. They would have more time to read, reflect and review the material they have been given, rather than just being passive learners.	It may not reflect a student's learning abilities accurately: By using the 4R method, it will give insights into their understanding of particular virtues in isolation, but not everything about their understanding of other virtues.

Table 22. Overview of Potential Advantages and Limitations of the 4R Model

Table 22 illustrates the possible advantages and limitations of the 4R model for 7–8 year-olds. I compiled this table based on the insights from the intervention study and my teaching experience so that it allows for a balanced reflection on the 4R model. By reflecting on and highlighting its limitations, I hope that the model can be improved upon with further research in order to find best practice in pedagogy that can be suitable for diverse learning needs.

This, in turn, should lead to enhanced engagement for children (notably 7–8 year-olds or younger), thereby improving pedagogical practices with the aim of advancing the field of character education.

Whilst numerous studies have considered the value of CE – such as those conducted by the Jubilee Centre – few provide clear, detailed, structured models that teachers can apply in the classroom when attempting to develop children's virtue literacy. This thesis adds a new 4R model for teaching virtues that helps fill this gap by providing a scaffolded approach – reading, reflecting, reviewing, and recalling – that educators can use to develop their students' virtue literacy. This makes the practice of virtue teaching more accessible for teachers and students.

In Chapter 2, I proposed that the dimension of recall and retention could play an important role in order to develop pedagogical innovations in character education for children. In this study, the explicit inclusion of this element in the 4R model was aimed at creating opportunities for children to remember and reuse their knowledge about virtues while engaged in the intervention. Throughout the intervention itself, the children were reminded and prompted to discuss and consider what they had learned about a certain virtue in the activity after they completed the task, and how their learning connected to what they had learned in previous lessons or earlier on in the same lesson. This aspect was designed to increase the children's memory retrieval. However, since the intervention involved many elements, I was not able to isolate and explore how the students engaged specifically with the element of recall. While it was evidenced that they recalled aspects of the lessons learned by assessing their mind-map responses, the methods I used were insufficient to reveal whether the recall aspect contributed to their long-term memory. This gap separates our understanding

of whether the dimension of recall in the 4R lesson development contributes to student moral development; hence, future research on this component will be needed.

More broadly, it is important to note the main methodological limitation of the 4R model, which is the difficulty in evaluating its direct influence on the development of virtue literacy in an accurate way. For instance, the reason for the less developed responses for the reasoning and reflection components during the mind-map activities could be that written assessment may not be a very reliable tool for capturing the effects of the 4R model. This limitation demonstrates the importance of using more nuanced assessment tools in future studies to better understand the to what extent the model plays a role in virtue literacy development. Furthermore, concentrating on the immediate post-intervention assessments may fail to reflect the long-term influence of the 4R model on students' moral development, specifically as it contains an 'recall' element that mandates a more longitudinal approach such as using follow-up assessments. Such studies would be crucial to solidify whether students can recall what was learned during the intervention, to create a more long-term understanding of the virtues introduced.

5.4.3 The Use of Focus Groups as a Pedagogical Tool

This section evaluates and discusses the role of the focus groups in not only developing children's understanding of moral virtues but also enhancing their ability to apply what they learned about virtues in real-life situations. From here, I reflect on the potential value of the pedagogical method, using these considerations to frame the conclusions I ultimately reach. I suggest here that the focus group intervention was meaningful, identifying four prominent themes relating to the findings, each of which is discussed below: (1) *understanding virtues*;

(2) *application to real-life scenarios*; (3) *decision-making processes*; and (4) *challenges in applying virtue*.

Although attention is increasing on advancing character education, little research – particularly utilising the focus group method – has considered the development of the building blocks to character traits. Therefore, my research included understanding virtues beyond their superficial definitions, applying them in real-life scenarios, and integrating them into decision-making processes. Indeed, focus groups may not have been more widely developed and applied in practical approaches to CE for a number of reasons. For example, the process of conducting focus groups in extremely busy school environments can be a) more difficult to arrange with schools and b) more time-consuming than other forms of data collection, such as surveys or questionnaires. In addition, facilitators of these groups must be capable, sensitive and adaptable to the needs of the age group (specifically younger children). Lastly, focus groups must be planned carefully and involve cultivating an environment that promotes open discussion between the individual participants. These requirements became evident when I adapted the material and pace after the preliminary study findings, which revealed that the children required more scaffolding and teacher-led instruction.

Consequently, traditional CE research has favoured quantitative methods such as surveys and standardised tests over qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups, which can provide deeper insights but are harder to quantify. Focus groups, as opposed to surveys and individual assessments, provide a social space where participants answer Socratic questions, engage in thoughtful discussions, exchange different viewpoints, express individual struggles - each fitting well into the socially constructed nature of the human function and character formation. That is, to truly develop one's character, one must engage in moral discourse,

interpersonal interactions and reflective dialogue. For these reasons, and to better understand whether focus groups are effective in promoting or consolidating moral development, it was important to examine whether and how focus groups helped the children progress across other areas relating to moral development, with a specific focus on embedding them into decision making processes.

5.4.3.1 Understanding of Virtues

The observations of the children's responses proved to be helpful in exploring whether focus groups can help children develop a deeper understanding of virtues. This is because the focus groups provided the space and structure to discuss and apply virtue concepts to everyday meanings, even with the children being of a younger age group. Prior to the intervention, their concept of being a 'good person' comprised simple actions/outcomes, such as 'sharing toys' and treating others nicely by not hitting, pushing, and so on. This reflects the typical early childhood understandings of moral actions – most often occurring in the children's real world (i.e., here and now) and omitting deeper contemplation. Conversely, after the intervention, the children's responses reflected a wider and more meaningful understanding of what the virtues mean beyond their initial here and now conception. The responses demonstrate this progression in a number of ways. First, with increasing explicitness and consciousness, the children develop the use of specific virtues such as honesty, gratitude and compassion in describing the importance of social relations. Second, the children acknowledge the internal dimension of striving towards good. For example, C1's definition of honesty as 'telling the truth even if it's hard' exemplifies a shift towards 'wanting' to be virtuous even when it is difficult, rather than 'just doing it' superficially or to gain an external reward. This resonates with an awareness of the challenges involved in trying – often – to do

the good or right thing. This can also be contrasted with their earlier connections of the term 'good' with descriptions of simple acts of goodness. The strength of the focus groups, therefore, lies in exposing children to a direct and open platform to discuss the 'why and how' questions of virtues rather than simply the 'what'. This development is promising; as Jonas and Nakazawa (2021) note, complete knowledge of virtue includes both the desire to act virtuously and the willpower to follow through.

5.4.3.2 Practical Application in Real-Life Scenarios

One of the most important outcomes of the focus group method was the platform it provided the children to move beyond theoretical understanding to a practical awareness of how to implement what they learned in real-life scenarios – a central challenge in CE pedagogy and discourse more broadly. In the pre-focus-group discussions, the children's examples of virtues were mainly used to describe straightforward instances of sharing crayons or tying shoelaces. While these are good, well-intentioned expressions centred around direct, observable behaviours, they fail to demonstrate the oftentimes deeper aspect of virtuous behaviour, which requires empathy and the consideration of others' needs.

However, after the intervention, the children showed more socially conscious and thoughtful responses, such as C1's observation reporting a friend in need of help to the teacher. This is a clear shift from an individually-directed response to a more social-orientated one encompassing the needs of others. This is important, as the change from individual to social responses highlights the potential ways the intervention supported the children's cognitive ability to recognise and connect the dots to real-life applications of the virtues. As a result, the children are learning to embody them naturally in daily life, mirroring Jonas and

Nakazawa's (2021) idea that true knowledge of virtue involves the integration of cognition, practice and emotional engagement.

5.4.3.3 Developing Decision-Making Processes

The intervention played a role in shaping the children's decision-making processes to take into larger account moral considerations rather than matters of personal convenience and quick reward. Prior to the intervention, all the children responded almost exclusively about (1) avoiding the experience of punishment, and/or (2) obtaining the best possible outcome for themselves, without much attention to the social implications of the decision made. For instance, C3 mentioned not telling the truth about eating the last yoghurt to avoid punishment, and C4 decided to clean up to please their parents rather than using the iPad to avoid negative attention. By contrast, their post-intervention statements move from strict self-interest to what can be seen as mutually empathic and ethically compassionate involvements with others. This shift towards an ethical concern for others is consistent with research that demonstrates how interventions that emphasise empathy and perspective-taking can help children make decisions that take other people's needs and feelings into more careful consideration (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012). Therefore, it is possible that the focus groups and questions the children were given helped them consider the significance of moral qualities in guiding their moral judgements. It also suggests that the children might have benefited from having had time to consider their choices and recognise the wider effects of the ones they made in real-life. More recent studies, such Harrison et al. (2020), which discovered that intentional educational interventions can aid in promoting virtue perception and reasoning, corroborate these findings.

5.4.3.4 Challenges in Applying Virtue

The final emerging theme highlighted how children understand virtues in connection to their social situations. In particular, how moral-decision making can be difficult in scenarios where acting virtuously can lead to punishment or uncomfortable feelings. Prior to the intervention, the children struggled with the conflict between maintaining moral behaviour and maintaining peer relationships. For example, C1 was hesitant to 'tell on a friend', reflecting an internal struggle between choosing loyalty to a friend or being honest because they were aware of something that the friend had done. This highlights the challenge of acting virtuously in situations where the social cost of doing the right thing is high. This further reiterates how *phronesis* is necessary to mediate between conflicting virtues and how children of this age group struggle to practically apply this skill in a way that advances their moral reasoning ability (Peterson & Kristjánsson, 2024). This finding also closely resonates with research showing that peer relations – and especially friendships – are key to moral development (Killen Smetana 2015). It is crucial, then, for interventions to help children cultivate the ability to choose between or at least think about conflicting virtues in a way that is both morally sound and socially harmonious. In turn, after the intervention, the children showed a slightly more reflective approach to other social challenges. C2, for example, reported waiting for their turn in football when others had used physical force (pushing), showing a newly acquired capacity to use virtues like patience in a challenging social situation that might have otherwise caused negative emotions or actions (anger or aggression).

5.5 Summary of Discussion on Focus Groups

In summary, the intervention helped contribute to CE pedagogy in the following ways: (1) exploring the explicit teaching of moral virtues on children's knowledge and understanding learned from the main intervention lessons, (2) encouraging application in context, and (3) supporting articulation in relation to making decisions. This action-orientated development of virtue understanding is essential for better moral character, and in turn better decision-making, learning and ultimately a more flourishing life. More importantly, the structured focus group discussions provided a safe, inclusive 'hook' for children to talk about the virtues in relation to what they may mean or experience in their everyday lives, thereby making virtue learning relatable and suitable to the age group.

Moreover, the intervention complemented by the focus groups appeared to help the children move from an understanding of the virtues is in their basic forms (e.g., honesty is telling the truth) to an articulation of real examples from their lived experiences and emotional dimensions (i.e., I showed honesty in x and this is what it did for others and/or how it made me feel and/or why I should tell the truth when it is difficult to do so). As a result, the observed progress shows a meaningful internalisation of the virtues in relation to their moral fabric or 'makeup', and what doing virtuous deeds can do for them and others in terms of wellbeing. The deepening of the children's morally rich cognition emerged as a valuable aspect of this part of the intervention because it illustrates the potential of well-structured discussion, and questions with a focus, to help develop more fine-grained, richer and more moralised concepts of virtue rather than the common and traditional training on what the virtues mean. This appears to offer a more valuable kind of approach than many others that are also content to train children on 'virtue definitions', which do not integrate the broader

application to relevant and real-life application of concepts as a learning outcome. In essence, the focus groups achieved something meaningful and worthwhile for advancing character education more broadly, highlighting the potentially lasting benefits as these children grow into morally conscious adults.

Finally, the focus groups also laid some essential foundational skills for their future moral reasoning as they are still at the pre-*phronesis* age group. Examples of this were seen when the children took into account the needs of others rather than just focusing on their own. The findings also highlighted the challenges that children face in mediating between conflicting virtues and in developing this skill. Nonetheless, the focus groups appeared to bring about more meaningful changes in both schools across the two contexts – an important finding as it illustrates that the focus group method has the potential of being an inclusive and potentially adaptable method, specifically for younger age groups. The key takeaway is that, by engaging in these focus groups, as evidenced in the empirical results here, educators may be able to stimulate deeper moral reasoning and understanding, potentially allowing for superficial moral understanding to be enhanced or replaced by more considered moral thinking.

5.5.1 Comparison of School A and School B Focus Groups

Based on the focus group discussions, School A seems to have exhibited slightly more developed and applied moral concepts across the themes in comparison to School B. Such differences could be attributed to School A's virtues-led ethos, which may provide a more productive character climate, implicitly or explicitly inclusive of moral virtues. These findings corroborate the results derived from the Knightly Virtues project, which showed that children in virtues/faith schools tend to have higher virtue literacy scores before the

intervention than children from non-faith schools. This is because of the exposure to virtue-based language found in religions, that play a role in the ethos and daily school practices.

It is also important to note that during the time of the intervention, School A was in the process of reforming how to make virtues more explicit, and this could have contributed to the children's heightened sense of awareness. The children may also have risen to the occasion of an intervention that signalled explicit moral education, intensifying their receptivity and engagement in the virtues. For example, School A students may have developed a greater awareness of the virtues by discussing them more with the teacher, attending to the virtue of the week more closely, and caring more about other explicit school practices. This indicates that it is beneficial for schools to combine their own efforts with explicit moral education to enhance the development of virtue literacy in schools. This supports the many research studies that echo the need to package multiple ingredients for greater moral success, such as school climate (Safder & Hussain, 2018) and teacher reinforcement (Carr, 2003) – combining both 'caught' and 'taught' methods. In essence, then, it takes multiple components for children to develop a moral virtue repertoire; simply absorbing the virtues through a CE intervention is not sufficient.

Moreover, it is also possible that the children of School B may have had lower literacy skills than those of School A, which could have enabled School A's children to more readily comprehend and engage with moral concepts, in turn influencing their responses. This difference in literacy skills may be due to differences between the two schools: For example, School A may have a different demographic constituency, and socioeconomic status has been shown to be associated with early literacy prior to school entry (Buckingham, Beaman & Wheldall, 2023). School A may also have had more stringent entry requirements, and these

may have attracted a cohort with higher initial literacy levels. Such factors could be associated with the differing responsiveness to the CE intervention observed between the two schools.

Additionally, during the focus group with School B, the findings revealed that the children did not understand the meaning of some virtues or how to apply them to real-life situations. Their responses may have been shaped by their own cultural norms and values. For instance, children from low-income families may have been less familiar with the virtue of kindness due to different priorities, work demands, migrant patterns and perhaps even lower parental education. Similarly, children from ethnic minority households may have different values and dispositions stemming from their own cultural backgrounds. This aligns with Bransford and Johnson (1972), who argue that 'cultural knowledge seems to affect comprehension much like background knowledge' (Knight, 2014, p. 40). Indeed, cultural standards and values are involved in the way in which people come to understand, reason with, and signal their application of moral concepts. As such, educational programmes need to reflect the importance of addressing differing cultural perspectives. As Lapsley and Narvaez (2006, p. 22) state, 'the goal of character education, in other words, is less about enlisting children in the battle against ethical relativism, and more about equipping them with the moral dispositions and skills required for effective citizenship in a liberal democracy'.

Numerous studies highlight that focus groups can be an effective pedagogical tool for students; however, the existing research is mostly concerned with general learning outcomes, such as cognitive and social skills related to cooperative learning and group discussions (Felder & Brent, 2007; Bohnsack, 2004), not outcomes specific to how focus groups enhance virtue literacy. Given the developments observed across both schools, the focus groups

seemed to contribute to understanding the role of the intervention. This is corroborated by the research, which supports that focus groups are 'particularly suited for obtaining several perspectives about the same topic' (Gibbs, 1997, p. 1). That is, when students interact with each other to share their thoughts and ideas, they can reflect on them and develop a better grasp of the topic at hand. This resonates with the findings of this study, where the use of focus groups appeared to help the students articulate a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of virtues. This indicates that learning in a socially interactive way, can be helpful in supporting children progress morally – a natural place for pedagogy to start considering our innate social nature.

Furthermore, these findings also contribute a new perspective to the field of character education by specifically exploring how focus groups can support the dialogue of other moral-related skills among children – a topic that has not been extensively explored. The focus group discussions enabled the children to articulate and talk through their conceptions in such a way that they may not have otherwise been able to do in any other format. Here, the findings derived from the four themes begin to tell us something important about not only the role teaching virtues explicitly, but perhaps a more enlightening finding of the often neglected ingredients of truly purposeful character development – beyond learning about the virtues, to looking out for and cultivating their appearance in real life and in decision-making, and over time, this could support the children to grow the capacity for *phronesis* in later life.

More significantly - what role does cooperation play in conceptualising virtues and their development in children? By using focus groups, the children were provided an opportunity to interact with one another and co-operate in developing an understanding of the virtue meanings and related skills. This approach follows work by Michael Tomasello (2019) on

cooperation in the evolution of human beings (specifically children) and the ways in which being in a group or team assists in moral development: not just through the bonding that happens when children work together but, in the consciousness, or 'theory of mind' that others have and share. This awareness helps children not only learn about virtues but also understand how their actions affect others. Working in groups or teams helps to promote this awareness, as children must consider different perspectives and emotions. This is key to helping them develop empathy and moral reasoning, which are essential for their overall growth in understanding virtues – and applying such skills in the real-world. Finally, this is something that, I believe, is central to any moral understanding we might reach in understanding how CE helps children develop their character.

To conclude, I think that the focus groups conducted at the beginning and end of the intervention provided a useful comparison into what the children thought the virtues mean, how the virtues manifest in real-life scenarios, and how the children made decisions about what to do – each of which suggests a positive step forward in CE pedagogical developments. These are important skills, as they can ultimately assist children in making virtue-related decisions and developing specific pre-*phronetic* skills as they mature into adolescence and adulthood. While exposing children to these skills and topics can assist children during adolescence, I consider it to be particularly helpful to children at earlier ages when they have not yet developed a moral framework. As a final remark, having the space and structure to reflect and discuss the essential facets of moral learning will encourage children to become more mindful and deliberate about how they act and think about virtues – thereby forming a part of their moral identity.

5.6 The Role of Diverse Narrative Stories for Promoting Virtue Literacy

Using narrative stories in the classroom, in particular for the promotion and development of moral education in children, is a well researched field (Krogh & Lamme 1985; Clare & Gallimore 1996; Nucci & Ilten-Gee, 2021). More recently, Watts (2023) conducted research on how primary school teachers in England value and use stories as a tool to teach character education. Watts found that primary school teachers highly valued stories to engage children and develop their character. This is relevant to the present thesis and reiterates the power of narrative stories as a method of choice among educators – the front-line workers of moral education. Although the sampling of diverse stories was limited (four out of the six stories used included an aspect of diversity), the increase in students' virtue literacy scores after the intervention points to the fact that the use of stories played a role in helping students to better understand the virtue at hand, again supporting the view that cultural stories can help to shape the moral education of young children. Interestingly, many students' conceptualisations on mind-maps after the intervention lessons, did not include explicitly symbolic interpretations of the characters from the stories; rather, the children's understanding of the virtue was linked to real-life events and actions. For example, take the virtue courage, where the narrative story was based on a young Muslim girl who demonstrates courage by wearing a religious headscarf, aware of the repercussions and bullying she may face. During the lesson's post mind-map activity, the children did not reference the character or draw upon their knowledge of the details of the narrative story, but instead translated the abstract moral lesson and applied it to how they could apply it to the real world, including 'stand up for yourself', 'stand up to a bully', 'speaking up' and 'not being afraid'. This finding was similar across the

other lessons and may suggest that children aged 7–8 can understand moral concepts from stories without explicitly drawing from or referencing the characters therein.

One of the main challenges of the intervention design was the lack of children's literature representing diverse cultures with a clear focus on virtues. This clear paucity of multicultural virtue-focused books points to a gap in the narrative stories available to teachers and parents who are interested in developing the moral character of their children. This is extremely problematic, as stories are a powerful tool, holding distinctive value in teaching virtues to children. Without access to diverse narratives, children may be deprived of the opportunity to form an understanding on how virtues are relevant to their own and other's cultural identity, which is essential in increasingly diverse school settings and world. More seriously, this gap restricts educators and parents from having access to the tools they need to develop moral character and it becomes more difficult to convince them that CE can be practical and resonate with children's lived experiences. Take for example, the humility story used in the intervention which did not reflect or resonate with the children's experiences and was the least developed virtue. I believe, one of the biggest challenges to practical CE - is in expanding the availability of such critical resources and exploring their impact.

Moreover, the research findings derived from this study bring a new perspective to the field of character education, in particular to the development of virtue literacy among children. While I argue in Chapter 2 that children's literature can and should be representative of a more diverse selection of characters and settings, the absence of direct representation does not necessarily mean an absence of moral development. This is consistent with Zunshine's (2006) research on ToM, which involves understanding how one person perceives the mental states of another and is essential to the development of empathy. Her research suggests that

even in the absence of direct representation, children can engage with characters and scenarios abstractly to understand complex social and moral issues. In addition, the findings here highlight the role of discussions centred around moral issues in the stories as an effective strategy for promoting children's moral development (Krogh & Lamme 1985). More importantly, the children's tendency to link the virtues learned from the stories and apply them to what they would do to show a particular virtue in the real world, instead of mentioning the characters or the stories, indicates that they are not merely comprehending the story on the surface. Rather, they are thinking about what they have learned and trying to form connections with their own lives. This suggests that reading about virtues helps children apply moral knowledge from stories to their own lives, even when they do not allude explicitly to their characters or plot.

5.7 Reflections on Methodology and Summary of Key Conclusions

Upon reflecting on the outcomes of the study, it is clear that the intervention made some valuable contributions to the field of character education pedagogy and discourse. Here, I consider and describe the aspects of the intervention that worked well, highlighting the insights gained from the methods used in the intervention. I also contemplate what could have been improved when implementing the intervention with children, focusing on the areas that require further empirical investigation, all of which can help anchor the directions for future research outlined at the end of the thesis.

To begin, one of the critical achievements of this intervention lies in how intentional and explicit teaching methods appeared to support the children's ability to understand virtues beyond simply defining them. This observation is particularly helpful and potentially

highlights the role of narrative stories, structured focus groups and Socratic questioning, the use of the 4R Model – all of which helped in encouraging children to go beyond the basic recognition of virtues to understanding when they can be shown, to whom, how and when, while illuminating some of the emotional consequences. The narrative stories were relatable and age-appropriate, helping the children make sense of abstract ideas, while making those concepts more concrete and accessible by giving them examples of situations that the children could understand more readily. The narrative stories were complemented by the Socratic questioning to engage the children's thinking processes around the characters, their actions and the consequences, and their emotional states. As such, the method reinforced the importance of using stories that can elicit relatable experiences. The Socratic style of questioning helped the children think through and express their thoughts and questions. This allowed them to talk and engage in discussions about the characters and their ideas, as well as relate to each other. This also enabled the children to explore the ideas around the virtue; in doing so, they evaluated the virtues based on their own lived experiences. This method was valuable because it promoted intellectual curiosity and collaborative discussions.

The focus groups, on the other hand, gave the teacher the opportunity to let the children explore how they might use the theoretical knowledge in real-world scenarios, with the children using moral reasoning at their own developmental stage. These included a deeper understanding of virtues and how they contribute to one's moral identity, the practical application of the virtues, and how to best make decisions, including challenges in applying the virtues to their social worlds. Such conversations helped the children think about virtues beyond the traditional 'virtue definition' learning routine. The combined social and verbal dimensions of the focus groups helped to show how children may benefit from dialogical

settings to further enhance their learning. Finally, the use of the 4R model helped as a pedagogical tool when facilitating the delivery of the session, especially for the age group. This was because the learning was scaffolded and suitable for the age group, ensuring that the key concepts were effectively communicated to the children. Additionally, the stages of the model provided children with a gradually learning progress throughout the lessons, which meant they could be slowly build upon their understanding. Essentially, when these methods are used together, more opportunities for interactive learning and meaningful moral understanding that children can draw on to guide their behaviour across different contexts in real-life can take place.

Furthermore, the children's conceptualisations highlighted the need to build children's understanding of a broader set of virtues in character education beyond those that are typically focused on (gratitude, kindness, honesty, etc). While valuable, virtues less commonly taught such as humility, loyalty and courage are equally, if not more important, in everyday life - these virtues are often left untaught and unexplored in the CE repertoire. In saying this, the methods used to develop humility, loyalty and courage with children must be more differentiated and scaffolded than the skills that facilitate the internalisation of virtue traits such as kindness, gratitude or honesty. This is because the children are arguably less exposed to them through stories, authority figures like parents or teachers and arguably do not receive the same reinforcement, prioritisation or modelling as the commonly taught virtues. I believe that without such exposure, children may not understand or appreciate the role of these under-recognised or under-taught virtues in their everyday lives. Without including them in the mix (and them being modelled by the adults who surround children), the risk is run of their moral learning being 'narrow', less equipped, more impoverished, and

somewhat less capable of responding as effectively in complex social/ethical situations – stagnating their ability to develop *phronesis* later in life. In addition, since the intervention did not involve establishing connections between virtues, more abstract virtues were less likely to be understood relative to those that are more readily observable. However, some of the mind-maps implied covert connections between virtues: For example, humility-related expressions appeared in the mind-maps for gratitude, and loyalty-related expressions appeared in the mind-maps for honesty. This may imply that children can unintentionally link certain virtues together, and that this is a natural occurrence – it does not need to be explicitly taught that certain virtues cohere. In sum, if we expand the repertoire of virtues in CE, children are more likely to develop a broader understanding of how to become morally conscious, intentional and well-rounded moral citizens.

Thirdly, although progression was seen across the virtues post-intervention, they did not all develop to the same extent. This is likely due to significant individual differences in children's capacity to understand and express the virtues, including differences in socio-cultural backgrounds and cognitive development. Some of the key concepts from the field of cognitive development can help to explain why differences across both virtues and participants emerged. Cognitive development is a combination of a child's internal factors (such as their own individual abilities) and external factors (or factors outside the child, such as their environment and personal experiences) (Bjorklund, 2022). Since cognitive development is a social construct, environment is a large component. For example, a child who has been raised in a household where gratitude is emphasised as a core value would have a more developed capacity to understand and express connective gratitude compared to a child growing up in a household where such values are absent. This highlights how factors

that influence children's cognition influences the development of virtues. More importantly, this connects to what Bjorklund (2022) states, that is: 'intelligence is our species most important tool for survival…it has provided us with powers of discovery and invention which we change the environment or develop techniques for coping with environments that we cannot change' (p. 1). Similar to how intelligence helps humans survive and adapt, it is a process that develops slowly over time - through experiences and interactions with the world. The same is true for moral understanding – such as learning about how character shapes who we are as a species. In essence, children need time and supportive environments, where they can learn and reflect on character traits – and how they contribute to more harmonious lives for self, others and society.

Taken together, these contributions also point to the need for more intentional and explicit methods of teaching virtue and for a wider scope of virtues to be taught to children. Indeed, Tomasello (2019) argues in his book *Becoming Human: A Theory of Ontogeny* that both cognitive and social development are hardwired for culture and that there is only a narrow window of time – around age 6–7 – in which opportunities for certain 'strategic interactions' with adults in the initial aspects of cultural or conventional learning have their greatest impact on a child's development. Around this critical age, when children begin to develop more sophisticated social relationships with adults and peers, Tomasello posits that they acquire something called 'executive self-regulation', a type of self-control over their beliefs and actions that forms the cornerstone of moral development. In the context of my findings, this means that, by the age of 7–8, children will be able to understand and start engaging with a wide variety of virtue concepts with the support of simple, structured, intentional teaching. This is one of the important findings from my work with children in

primary schools: With the right learning environment, scaffolding and support, virtues can become accessible even to quite young children. Maximising the kinds of opportunities that facilitate the development of 'executive self-regulation' and the ability to incorporate 'virtue concepts' into a child's broader moral outlook means introducing young children to a wider range of virtues, and also using structured, intentional teaching to support their comprehension. This shows that effective CE in childhood cannot be passive. It needs a carefully designed pedagogy that aligns with the natural developmental processes.

Finally, before moving on to suggested improvements, it is important for me to reflect on the contributions I have made to explore the potential of explicit virtue interventions across different educational settings. This reflection is particularly relevant given that schools currently reflect a broad and very diverse set of environments with different ethos statements, cultures, practices and priorities. Therefore, my research suggests the potential for character education to be scaled beyond a single context. The observations I have made during the thesis provide an optimistic finding that although schools that have a virtue-based ethos and partake in daily virtue practices (School A) are generally considered more susceptible to character interventions, this is not always the case – supporting my own experience outlined in Chapter 1. In fact, the subtle differences in outcomes between the two schools highlight the role of explicit, structured and tailored interventions even without the wider school culture necessarily engaging in CE (School B). These findings suggest that character education initiatives can be adaptable and developing virtue literacy might be possible in different school environments, even when those environments are not already committed to character education, thus creating room for a greater number of children to benefit from moral education.

5.8 Areas for Improvement

While the research was successful in many areas, I now move on to discuss the areas that I thought could have been improved if I were to repeat the study. First, when attempting to teach the more complex virtues such as loyalty, and humility, in hindsight more scaffolding was required. While the narrative stories used in the intervention were suitable for the age group, they needed to be scaffolded further and include more relevant situations relatable to the children's own lives. For example, when teaching humility, the story may have needed to be more explicitly related to the children by linking it to situations in which the children may find themselves: for example, children having to show humility in the context of learning about something they struggle to understand in the classroom. Likewise, when talking about virtues such as loyalty, it would have been helpful to present material that children would recognise in their peer relationships, family lives or familiar role models. If they saw the virtues connected to situations with which they were already familiar, they would have been better able to understand their application to their own interpersonal relationships, as shown in the 'loyalty' stories by sharing a friend's burden or humility by admitting error, apologising to others and reflecting on one's limitations.

Second, the finding that the children struggled the most with the reasoning and reflection components of virtue literacy highlights the difficulty and challenges in promoting these components through an intervention. This could have been improved by integrating more structured and guided reflection activities, such as the use of reflective journals or the teacher modelling how to reflect in a more longitudinal, gradual way, as opposed to assuming that they are able to do so in a short space of time. A similar strategy could have been applied to reasoning skills, providing children with more reasoning opportunities, such as problem-

solving tasks they could complete at home, wherein the children are required to weigh up different virtues in different situations and consider the potential outcomes of their decisions. In essence, the process of developing reasoning and reflective skills takes longer. As a caveat, schools overwhelmingly endorse and promote behaviour policies that rely on punishment and reward rather than fostering a 'reflecting and/or reasoning on behaviour' approach. Ironically, this disciplinary approach may be a barrier to children developing the same sort of reflective and reasoned competence that we want them to develop morally and, more importantly, *phronetically* in later life. While changing a school's behaviour approach may be a significant challenge and further research is required, taking this into account is worthwhile when attempting to develop whole-school approaches to character education.

In summary and building upon the earlier discussion that there is a strong requirement for more virtue-led resources, specifically diverse stories, I would design the resources from scratch. This way I would have more autonomy over the stories design, characters, relatability and virtue-related message. Each story would centre around key virtues and relatable characters, plots and challenges in accordance with the age group. In addition, I would incorporate interactive elements to the stories such as questions that would help stimulate reasoning and reflecting components of virtue literacy.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

As I conclude the present research study, I am reminded of my reasons for undertaking the research to begin: the curiosity to explore ways the education system can contribute to children's lives, in particular to their character development, beyond the exhaustive focus on academic attainment. Related to my experience in teaching, I identified a gap between CE initiatives in schools and the way virtues are contextualised in the educational system. The reality is that some schools are excited about CE initiatives, while others remain uncertain about their significance. Nevertheless, what became clear is the discrepancy between the ways in which educators teach the skills of character education and the ways in which children understand, conceptualise and apply virtues to their lives.

To conclude, the growing support for moral education in primary-aged children reflects a broader recognition of the critical role early childhood plays in shaping future character. As Tomasello's work centrally highlights, social interaction and cooperation are central to the development of morality during this formative period. Children, especially in the pre-*phronesis* stage, are highly receptive to their environment and social influences. While they have not yet fully developed *phronesis*, early exposure to moral education sets the foundation for future growth in moral formation. By focusing on social-contextual learning and cooperative experiences, educators can help promote the virtues that support this cognitive development. However, for such outcomes to be successful, there is a clear need for more practical pedagogies for character education to work in school settings. These pedagogical approaches should be designed to integrate these principles, ensuring that moral education not

only takes root during the early years but also evolves to meet the complex moral demands of growing children and external influences. Practical character education methods will provide the scaffolding necessary to support children's holistic development, preparing them for a well-rounded future in terms of character and wellbeing. It was in this spirit that the current research study adds value into how an explicit, structured virtue-focused intervention utilising a range of methods can be worthwhile as a pedagogical tool in providing CE in primary school settings –contributing to knowledge and progress in the field of character education.

6.2 Limitations and Generalisability

While the study offers exploratory and interpretive insights into the potential role of an explicit virtue-focused intervention in supporting children develop virtue literacy across two schools, it also has limitations in its research methods and overall conclusions drawn (see section 3.9). Such considerations are important to acknowledge in order to better contextualise the findings and assist future research. One of the sampling limitations was the sample size. As a result, the demographic characteristics of the participants were limited to two schools in the West Midlands region of the UK, meaning that the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than conclusive evidence because the age group (7–8 years) and environment specificity further restrict wider applicability. It is possible that, in the case of this study, the interventions produced observable improvements in virtue literacy because they were both suited to the age group (7–8 years) and the context (geographically close schools). Such specificity, however, also limits the generalisability of the findings.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, one of the distinctive features of qualitative research is that it is more concerned with depth rather than breadth of understanding. Accordingly, it seeks to

gain an understanding of the subtler and more nuanced understanding of the participants moral understanding. The sample size of the overall main study intervention consisted of 42 participants, while the preliminary study consisted of 20 participants. While the sample size was adequate for an exploratory qualitative study, it raises questions about how transferable of findings to other settings. In the research on qualitative methods, Morse (2015) recommends that increasing the sample size and diversity of cases will lead to higher levels of saturation and will ultimately lead to richer interpretation of data. Therefore, the relatively small sample size suggests that my findings should be interpreted cautiously, though they do provide a starting point for understanding virtue literacy in this context.

In addition, given the aims of the research project (i.e., to explore virtue education and the development of virtue literacy in two very different school contexts), it was necessary to use purposeful sampling so that schools matched the descriptions set out in the aims of the study (i.e., one where students had been exposed to character education via a virtues-focused curriculum, and one where such exposure had been either negligible or totally absent). However, this sampling approach has its limitations. First, it can introduce selection bias because participants are not randomly selected from a population but carefully chosen in advance according to established criteria, thus limiting the degree to which results can be generalised to the wider population. Second, selecting contrasting schools fails to account for the nuanced differences between them in practice, such as how the schools realistically approach virtue education on an day-to-day basis or how other contextual differences/ aspects that may influence the outcomes.

Another critical limitation is that the study used exclusively qualitative methods. Hammersley (2008) notes the potential bias and subjectivity of qualitative research methods: that is,

although qualitative approaches to research can be particularly useful in gaining insight into participants' experiences and understanding, they are also liable to variations in interpretation and researcher bias. Focus groups, for example, are useful for gaining an insight into what the participant learned from participating in the intervention, but they offer only a partial picture of the children's development of virtue. Similarly, the exploration of virtue literacy assessed in the form of the mind-maps was unable to capture the complete range of the four components under study.

Taken together, the limitations in sampling and methodology (see chapter 3 for a full description) mean that the findings should be interpreted as exploratory and contextual, rather than definitive. In this way, I help provide a foundation for future research to potentially address some of the challenges and limitations I raise and potentially triangulating qualitative methods with quantitative one's to fully capture how virtue literacy develops.

6.3 Contributions to Character Education

Despite the limitations presented above, my findings and contributions to the field of CE remain both useful and valuable, specifically for those interested in: (1) understanding the benefits and setbacks in developing virtue literacy among younger children; (2) utilising and advancing pedagogical methods, including explicit instruction and a new model; (3) understating both (1) and (2)'s potential influence on different educational environments; and 4) promoting related pre-*phronesis* skills to younger cohorts of children, each of which are briefly outlined below:

Understanding the Benefits and Drawbacks of Developing Virtue Literacy Among Younger Children

The findings provide useful insights into the advantages and challenges of developing virtue literacy in young children, including details about how children made sense of different virtues, which ones were easier to understand and which were more challenging and potential reasons as to why. This is important because how children develop their understanding of virtue will allow educators to design more effective and inclusive interventions in character education, teaching virtues in ways that are developmentally suited to children's evolving cognitive needs.

Highlighting the Interconnectedness of Virtue

The findings highlight the implicit associations between virtues that the children built despite it not being an explicit task of the intervention to do so. This helps to identify just how children naturally map abstract virtues such as humility on to more concrete virtues such as gratitude, and loyalty on to honesty. These findings are important and suggest ways that virtues education can improve moral literacy by both highlighting and utilising these natural associations. At the same time, the findings suggest a need for educators to be aware of these overlaps so that they can help children see and link the virtues that are interdependent moral qualities.

Utilising and Advancing Pedagogical Methods

This research study suggests that certain teaching approaches – particularly the use of narrative stories, Socratic questioning, focus groups and the 4R Model – can positively help

children understand more meaningful virtue associations. *Socratic questioning* helped encouraged children to develop critical and reflective thinking and prompted them to explore how virtues can be understood more deeply, how they can be applied in real-life and the challenges in applying virtue. *Focus groups* promoted social interaction, allowing the participating children to engage with peers, reflect on own and other perspectives and collaboratively build their understanding of virtues. *The 4R Model* supported both teacher instruction and student learning experiences by creating structured opportunities for students to connect engage with the learning material. With that said, I explore how such models like the 4R, designed in this study, can be leveraged to help both educators and children in character education. Most importantly, the study provides a potential blueprint for pedagogical practice – pointing to what can and cannot be changed at the classroom level so that character education can be delivered more realistically and in a more developmentally appropriate way.

Understanding the Application of These Insights in Different Educational Environments

Implementing the intervention with two different school populations added depth to the research by illustrating the way that an explicit intervention can support meaningful progress across children from two varying educational contexts. This means that developers of CE intervention, need not be discouraged by the lack of prioritisation or interest from school leaders; rather, they should focus on engaging children in CE activities deemed appropriate for their age group.

Advancing Character Education with Younger Children

Finally, it is worth noting that much of the existing research on character education in a UK context focuses on later childhood and/or adolescence. By focusing on 7–8 year-olds, my research has helped illuminate the importance of this developmental age group for laying the building blocks for promoting *phronetic* agents in future and to not underestimate their cognitive ability to develop in this area. In addition, the research has helped understand 'what works' and what needs work - in tailored interventions and has created more avenues for future research to focus on how best to make the less promoted virtues more accessible to children.

In summary, despite the limitations of the research, the abovementioned contributions are helpful because they move beyond offering theoretical understanding to also offer practical support for educators and policymakers.

6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

The evidence presented by the empirical research summarised in this thesis suggests that intervention focused on the children's engagement with the six moral virtues – contributed to their virtue literacy development. The study has provided an exploratory perspective into how this may have been supported by incorporating a range of diverse narrative stories and an innovative 4R model, accompanied by Socratic questioning and focus groups. This structured and intentional approach helped children aged 7–8, who were previously unfamiliar with these virtues or understood them only superficially, to understand, develop and build upon them, applying them in practical ways to their own lived experiences. Ultimately, the

intervention seemed to have helped the children develop a more meaningful understanding of virtue literacy.

As a final and important point: the thesis concludes with several recommendations for practitioners, policymakers and researchers interested in character education.

Investigate Less Commonly Taught Virtues

While gratitude, kindness and honesty feature prominently within CE, we should also examine and incorporate the less common virtues, such as humility, loyalty and courage, into school curricula, since these are equally vital for individual and societal flourishing. Given that children are arguably less exposed to these virtues by parents or teachers, the educational interventions on these virtues should be more explicit, including through direct instruction and examples of moral role models who enact the specific traits. By expanding the sphere of character virtues that educators prioritise, children will develop a broader, richer and more differentiated moral understanding that will be more meaningful for navigating complex ethical and social situations.

Explore the Interconnectedness of Virtues

Building upon the findings from this study, further research would also be necessary to explore the interconnectedness of virtues beyond those investigated here. Since this was not a primary focus of the study but an unexpected finding, it does not capture other intriguing questions about how children represent these relationships and the extent to which they understand them. Therefore, it may be particularly fruitful to investigate the extent to which

children can explicitly link different virtues together and how they influence their development of virtue literacy.

Develop Age-Appropriate Pedagogical Tools

Another important direction for future research is to develop age-appropriate pedagogical interventions by adapting the choice of stories, the questioning and the intervention activities to accommodate the distinctive developmental stages of children. Virtue education interventions need to be adjusted to the cognitive, emotional and social development levels of children from different age groups and experimental studies need to be conducted to test the effectiveness and efficiency of these approaches. Given the heterogeneity of developmental levels of children across different age groups, educational strategies can be developed that specifically address and adhere to these developmental levels to promote and boost virtue literacy growth across different age groups.

Explicitly Promote Pre-Phronesis Related Skills

Moving forward with practical applications to developing moral character in children means that, future interventions must go beyond teaching theoretical definitions of virtues. Instead, they should clearly make explicit the cultivation of pre-*phronesis* skills. This could include opportunities to explore decision-making, reflect on them, think about applying the virtues in real life situations and the challenges in which children tend to find themselves. Each of these endeavours is an essential precursor to the fully fletched moral thinking and reasoning required for *phronesis* to progress and then mature.

Enhance Reasoning and Reflection Components of Virtue Literacy

Lastly, more research could aim to develop better pedagogical approaches for increasing the reasoning/reflecting component of virtue literacy. While my intervention showed a small step forward in this dimension, it seems as though the depth of improvements were not as pronounced in reasoning and reflecting compared to virtue knowledge and understanding or perception. Researchers could seek to further define and develop how these dimensions could be scaffolded more fully into a CE intervention. For example, researchers could create more occasions for children to reason and reflect – this could include guided discussions or reflective journal-writing, for example. Such approaches can help children think about and apply virtue knowledge to possible real-world situations and dilemmas. These sorts of learning experiences help children understand how the abstract insights of character education have relevance to the decisions and problems that they encounter on a day-to-day basis.

Each of these recommendations can help point towards a more practically relevant approach to CE in a way that develops a variety of skills they need to build and acquire *phronesis*. In turn, this will provide both children and teachers with a better understanding of how such virtues could allow them to practice a deeper, more deliberative and reflective way of behaving – that enhances their relationships, emotional well-being and life. Ultimately, this aligns with Aristotle's view of the function of humans - promoting the flourishing of the self, others and society in a way that transcends all of these - a thriving world and humanity.

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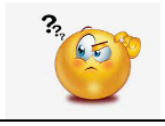
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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Parent Child Consent Form & Information Sheet

Child Consent Slip

Please read and tick the boxes if you agree with them.

	I have listened to and understood the information about the project.	
	I understand I don't have to take part and can ask to stop at any point.	
	I am happy to be audio recorded and for my work to be photocopied.	
	I have had the chance to ask any questions about the project.	
	I am happy to take part in the study.	

Full name: .....

Date: .....

Parent Information Sheet & Consent form

PhD Study in Character Education

Title of Research: An Exploration into the Development of Virtue Literacy in Children Aged 7-10 years old.

Parent Information Sheet

Description: We are inviting your child to take part in a research study being conducted by myself Rianna Yafai. I am a PhD Researcher at the University of Birmingham within the School of Education exploring Character and Virtues. I aim to run a 6- week project, 1 hour a week with pupils aged 7-8 years old. The study's main aim is to look at how they develop their understanding of virtues such as gratitude and kindness.

What will be required?
Children who take part in the intervention will read narrative stories and take part in focus group discussions considering how and why it is important to show virtues in and outside of school. The focus groups will be audiotaped for use in standard research procedures (e.g. analysis of responses and discussions).

Are there any risks to my child?
There are no risks to your child's safety. The stories raise no sensitive or controversial issues and do not contain elements that would prevent children from participating. Rather, there are potential benefits to your child's ability to reflect on virtues such as kindness and compassion and consider why they are important to display.

Who will see my child's responses?
All responses and research notes are anonymous and will not be identifiable to anyone (they will not include any names or other information) and will be kept on a secure database, only accessible to myself as the researcher.

What is the purpose of this study?
The primary purpose of the research is to use the results in my PhD thesis. However, the wider findings of the study could be used to support schools with identifying the techniques that best enhance the virtue development of their pupils.

What will happen if I or my child wish to withdraw?
Completing the intervention will be important to the completion of the research, however if you wish to withdraw out of the study, you have up until 2nd February 2023, and any data collected with your child will be securely disposed of.

Any additional questions, or concerns please contact me via email: rxy165@student.bham.ac.uk
Contact email address for Lead Supervisor: L.DOlimpio@bham.ac.uk

Informed Consent Slip

I, _____ give permission for my child, _____ to participate in the research project. The study has been explained to me and my questions answered to my satisfaction. I understand that my child's right to withdraw from participating or refuse to participate will be respected and that his/her responses and identity will be kept confidential.

I agree to have you have to audio my child during this study. I understand this audio will only be used for the purposes of research (e.g. analysis of responses, transcriptions of responses, etc.).

I understand that data collected during the study may be looked at by the researcher and her PhD supervisors at the University of Birmingham and I give permission for these individuals to have access to my child's responses.

I understand that names and distinguishing features will not be included in any material for publication.

I give this consent voluntarily.

Parent/Guardian Signature:

_____ _____

Signature: Date:

Appendix 2: Socratic Questioning Guide

Topic	Socratic Questions
Story Character Showing Virtue X	• In this story, what virtue does (character name) show to x? • How does he/she show that virtue? • What does this virtue tell us about (character name)? • Can you give me an example?
Choosing Between Virtues	• Why doesn't he/she choose to be (a different virtue) instead? • Why is it important that he/she chooses to be (virtue)
Consequences of Not Showing Virtue	• What could happen if he/she doesn't show x?
Defining Virtue	• What does virtue x mean?
Personal Experience with Virtue	• Has there been a time when you showed the same (virtue)? • Do you know anyone who does/doesn't show this (virtue)?
Impact of Virtue on Others	• How would that affect someone? • What emotions would they feel?
Timing of Showing Virtue	• When is the right time to show virtue x? • What amount of virtue x is a good amount to show? • What could happen if we show too little or too much of virtue x?
Self-Reflecting on Virtue	• How does the character's actions reflect their virtue? • In what ways could you apply this virtue to your own life? • Have you ever struggled with this virtue? If so, how did you overcome it?

Appendix 3: Sample Semi-Structured Focus Group Guide

Theme	Questions (Before Intervention)	Questions (After Intervention)
Understanding of virtue	What do you think it means to be a good person? What other virtues can you think of?	Did you learn about any new virtues during the lessons? How do you think virtues help us become better people?
Application of virtue in real life	Can you think of a time when you demonstrated a virtue such as kindness or honesty? What did you do, and how did it make you feel?	Can you think of a time when you applied one of the virtues you learned in the lessons to a real-life situation? What did you do, and how did it make you feel?
Decision-making process	Can you think of a time when you had to make a tough decision? What did you do and why?	Can you think of a time you had to make a tough decision, and how has what we have learnt helped you?

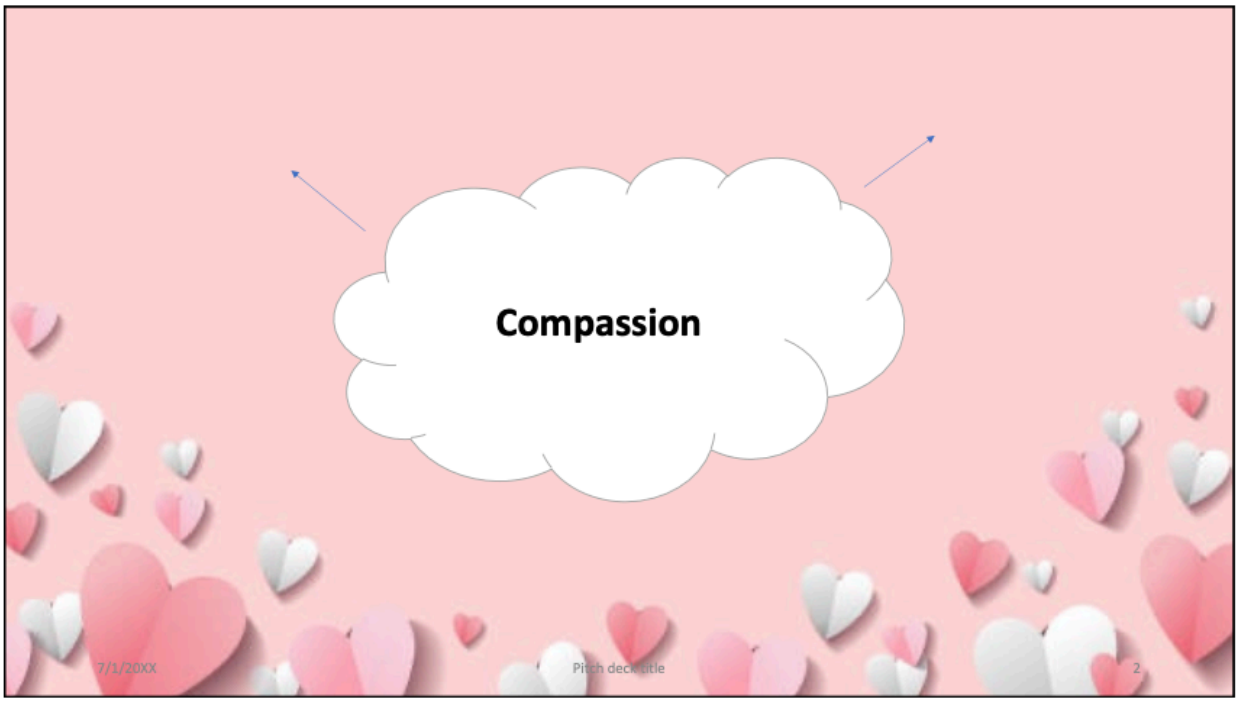
Appendix 4: Link to Narrative Stories

Lesson no.	Type of Moral Virtue	Narrative Stories	URL Link
Preliminary	Compassion	We're All Wonders by R. J. Palacio	https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/555247/were-all-wonders-by-written-and-illustrated-by-r-j-palacio/
Lesson One	Gratitude	All Are Welcome by Alexandra Penfold, illustrated by Suzanne Kaufman	https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/36959643-all-are-welcome
Lesson Two	Courage	The Proudest Blue by Ibtihaj Muhammed	https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/43853210-the-proudest-blue
Lesson Three	Kindness	Kindness is my Superpower by Alicia Ortego	https://www.amazon.com/Kindness-Superpower-Childrens-Illustrated-Empathy/dp/1735974102
Lesson Four	Loyalty	The Ugly Duckling by Hans Christian Andersen	https://americanliterature.com/author/hans-christian-andersen/short-story/the-ugly-duckling/
Lesson Five	Honesty	The Empty Pot	https://www.amazon.com/Empty-Pot-Demi/dp/0805049002
Lesson Six	Humility	The Lion and the Mouse by Aesop	https://aesopsfables.org/F199_The-Lion-and-the-Mouse.html

Appendix 5: Preliminary Lesson Slides



1



2

What does compassion mean?



5



Let's Read

- Before we read, look at the cover.

- What is different about the boy on the cover?
- why may he be wearing a space helmet?

7

Review: What virtue is necessary in this situation?

- When is the right time to be compassionate towards Auggie?
- Why is it important to be compassionate towards Auggie?
- What could happen if we didn't show compassion?
- How would that affect him?

It is okay to feel a little different sometimes, but that's what makes the world so interesting and beautiful. Just like Auggie, we're all wonders. Remind everyone how important it is to tell others that you love them. With just a simple act of kindness, one person can start a kindness chain!☺

8

A world full of compassion

Let's all close our eyes and take a moment to think.

Try to imagine a world full of compassion. Think to yourself what that might look like and how everyone in the world would feel. Hold that vision and those feelings in your mind for a moment.

When you're ready, open your eyes.

Is this a world you'd like to live in?

Can we all help to create this world full of compassion?



12

Reflect & Recall

What are some ways that you can apply the virtue discussed in this lesson in your daily life, and how can you make sure to remember to do so?



14

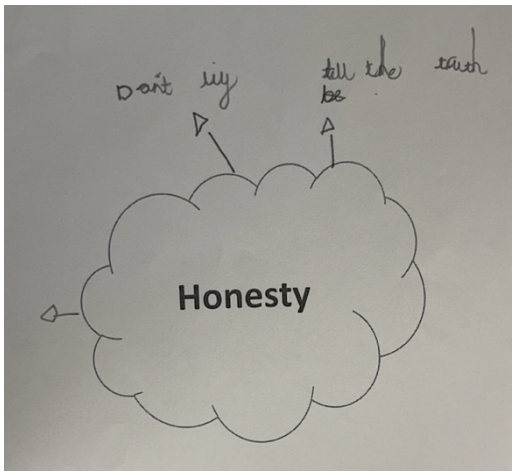
Compassion

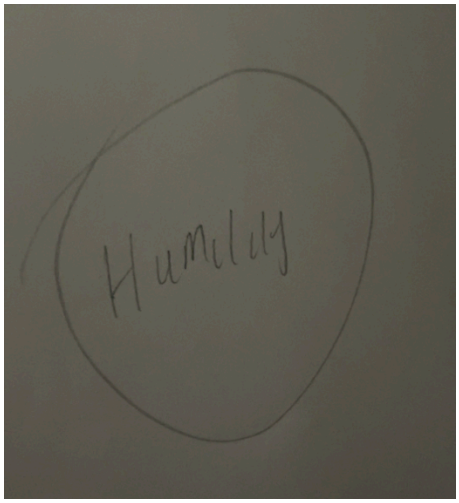
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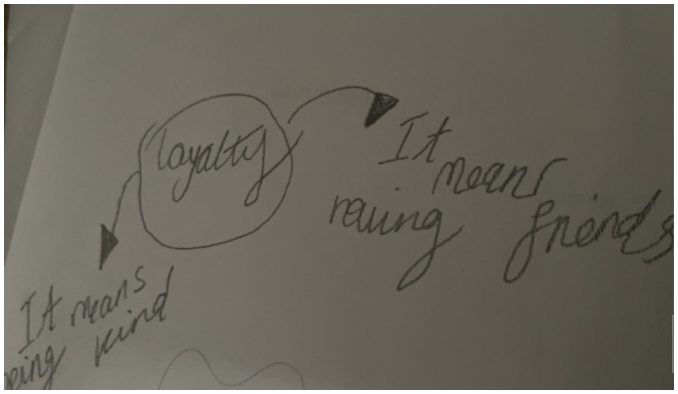
Appendix 6: Mind-Maps Collated from Main Study

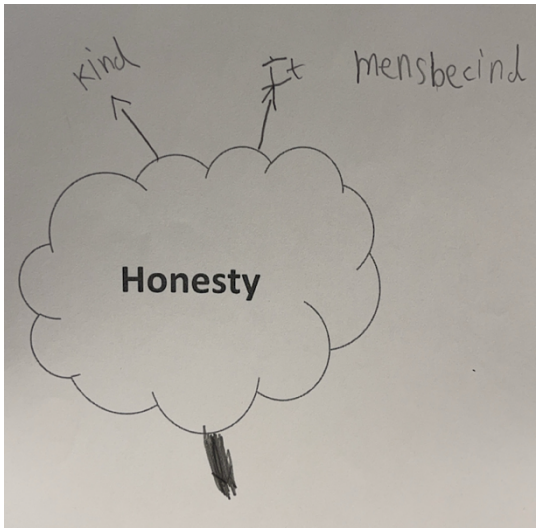
The following mind-maps have been selected as representative examples from the main study, which explored children's understanding of virtues. These mind-maps were created by students across two schools (A and B). While a wide range of data was collected, only a few examples from each group is attached rather than the entire dataset.

School A (Pre-Intervention)

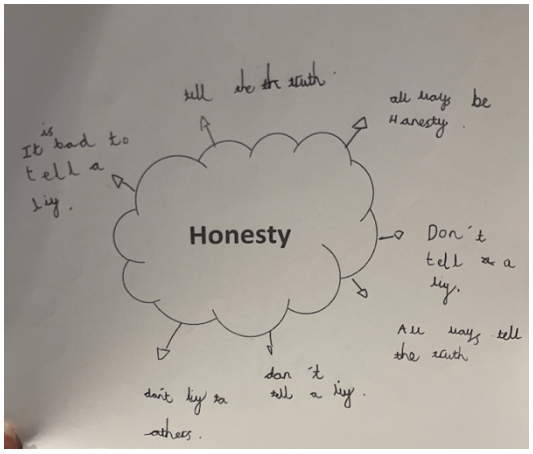


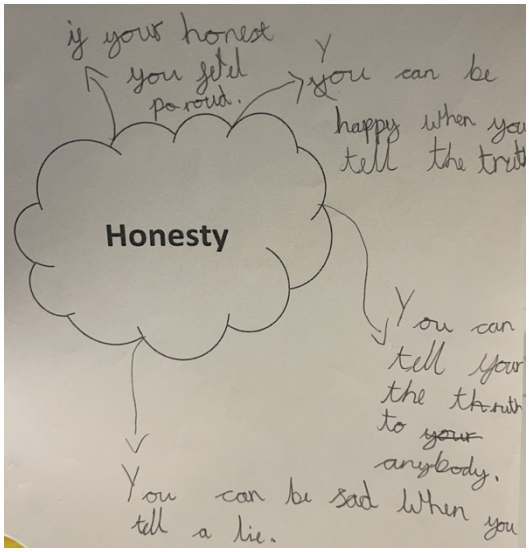


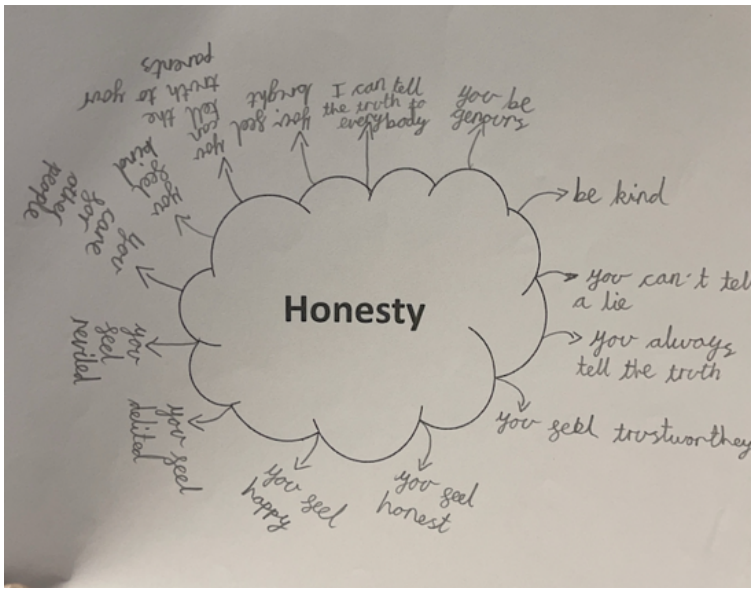


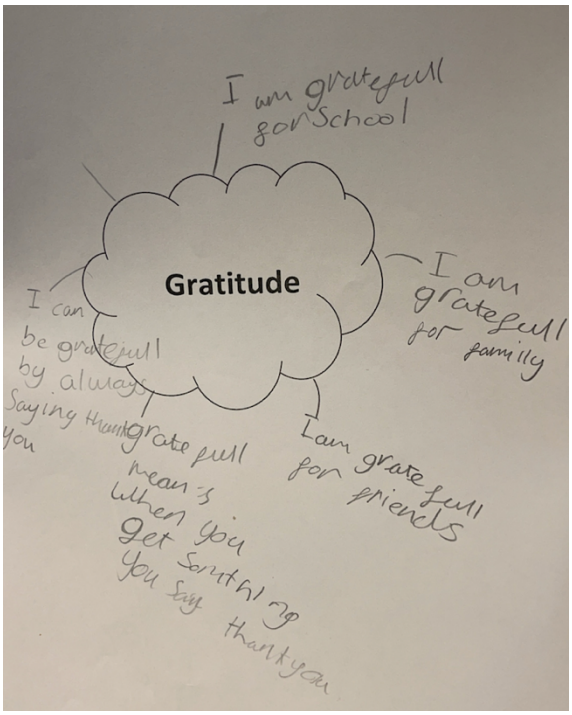


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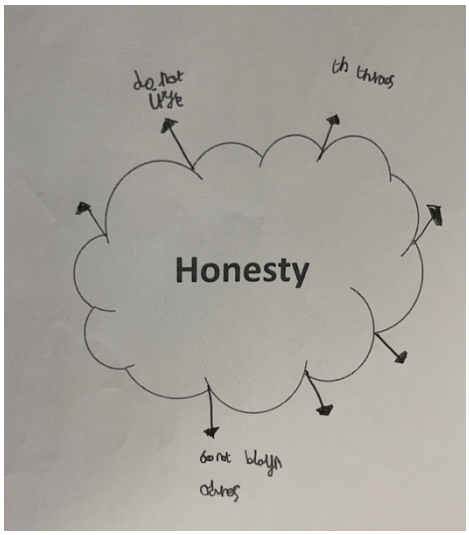


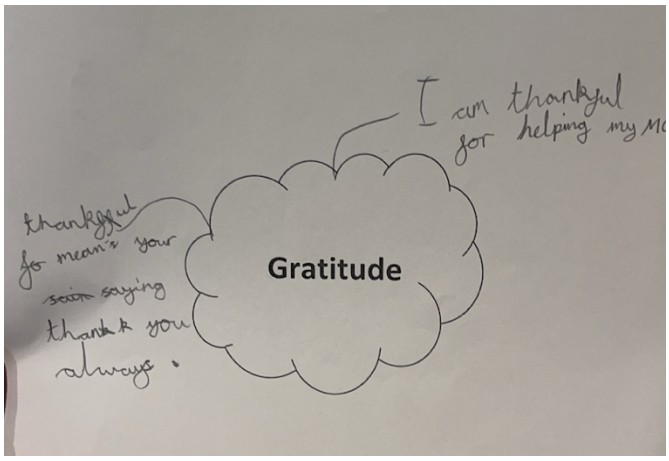


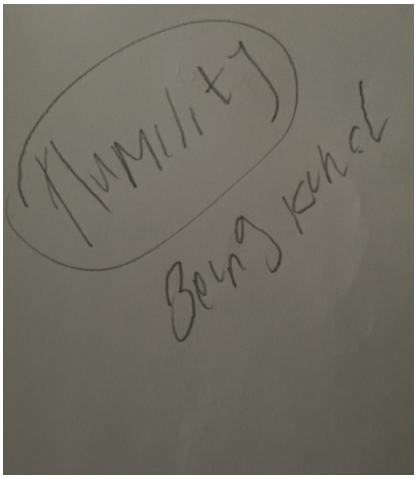


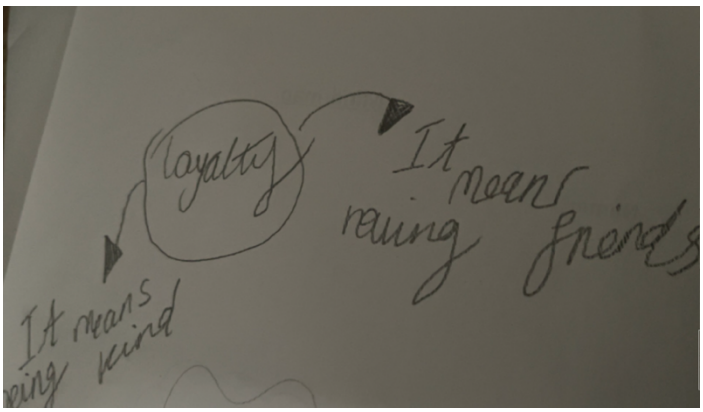


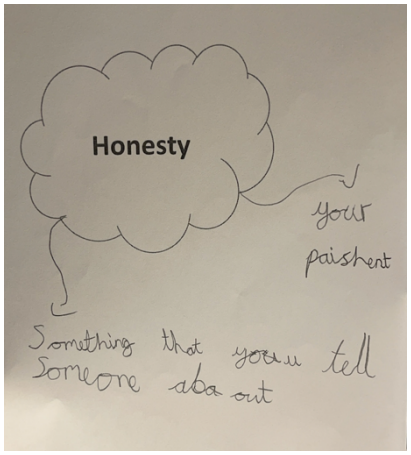
School B (Pre-Intervention)

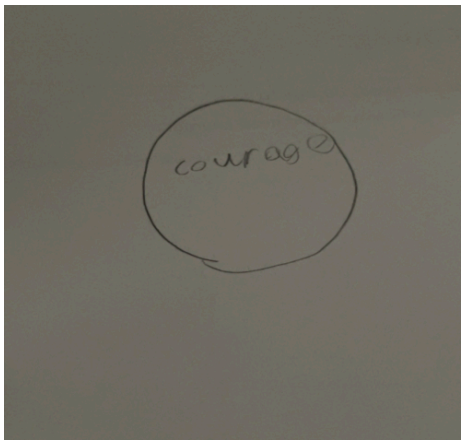




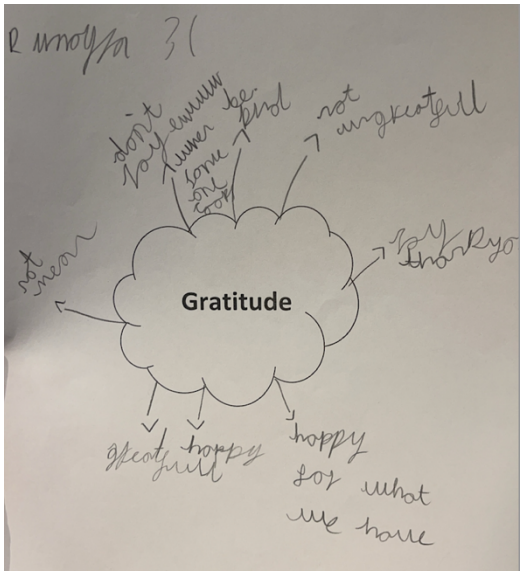


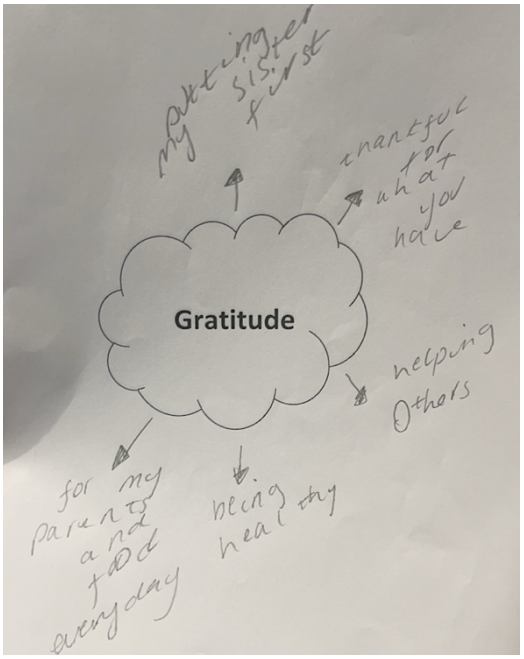


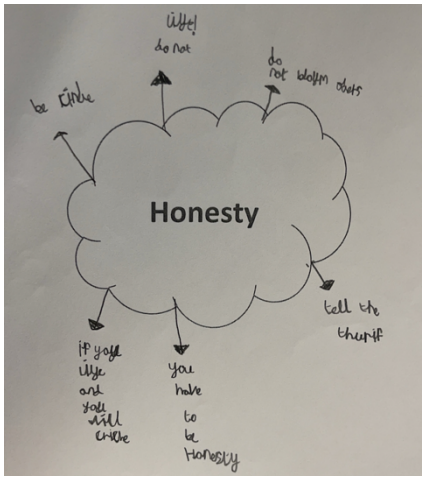


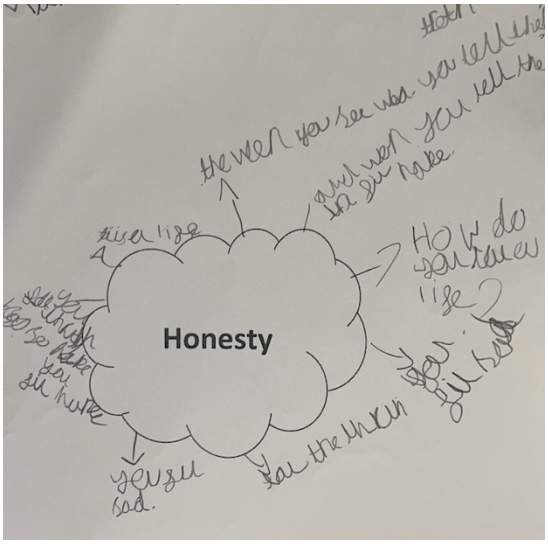


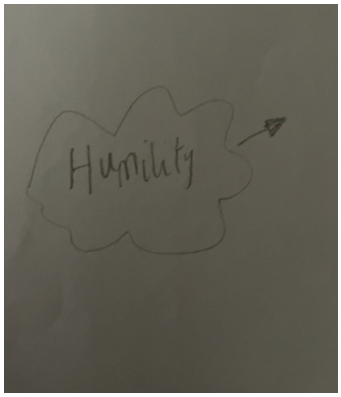
School B (Post-Intervention)











Appendix 7: Focus Group Transcripts & Coding

Focus Group Transcripts

Transcript Conventions:

- **[inaudible]**: Parts of the audio that are unclear or not fully audible.
- **[overlapping speech]**: Instances where multiple participants are speaking at once.
- **[laughter]**: Non-verbal cues indicating laughter.
- **[pause]**: Brief pause in the conversation.
- **[long pause]**: Extended pause in the conversation.
- **[interrupts]**: Indicates when a participant interrupts another.

Key – Transcript Thematic Codes:

Theme	Example of Coded Responses	Colour code
Understanding Virtues	'Helping people and not being mean'	Orange
Application to Real Life	'I helped my little sister tie her shoes'	Yellow
Decision-Making Processes	'I told the truth about eating the last yogurt, even though I got told off'	Blue
Challenges in Applying Virtues	'Sometimes, like when others are not being nice, it's hard to be the only one who is'	Green

School A: Pre-Intervention

(Time: 20 minutes)

[1] Facilitator: Good afternoon, everyone! Today, we're going to talk about what it means to be a good person. Let's start with the first set of questions.

[2] Pre-Understanding of Virtue:

[3] Facilitator: What do you think it means to be a good person?

[4] Child 1 (C1): Being nice to others and sharing toys. I think being good is when you don't do bad things.

[5] Child 2 (C2): Yeah, like not hitting and saying sorry when you do something wrong.

[6] Child 3 (C3): I think being good is helping people and not being mean.

[7] Child 4 (C4): Sharing snacks! And not lying.

[8] Facilitator: Those are great answers. What about if someone doesn't share their snacks? Does that mean they're not a good person?

[9] [pause]

[10] Child 2 (C2): Um, maybe... But maybe they are saving it for later?

[11] Child 1 (C1): Or they just don't want to share! But that's still not very nice.

[12] Facilitator: [inaudible] Interesting thoughts! So, sometimes being good might depend on the situation, right?

[13] All Children: Yeah!

[14] Facilitator: Can you think of a time when you demonstrated kindness or honesty? What did you do, and how did it make you feel?

[15] Child 1 (C1): I shared my favourite crayons with a friend.

[16] Child 2 (C2): I told my mom I broke a cup. It made me a bit scared, but she wasn't mad.

[17] Child 3 (C3): I helped my little sister tie her shoes.

[18] Child 4 (C4): I didn't join in when others were being mean to the new boy the other day.

[19] [pause]

[20] Facilitator: Wow, those are some great examples. How did you feel after doing those things?

[21] Child 1 (C1): Happy! My friend said thank you, and we drew together.

[22] Child 2 (C2): I felt better after telling my mom. I was scared at first.

[23] Child 3 (C3): It was nice to help her. She smiled.

[24] Child 4 (C4): The new boy looked happy I didn't join in.

[25] Facilitator: It sounds like you all felt good after doing something kind or honest. Does anyone think it's sometimes hard to do those things?

[26] Child 3 (C3): Yeah, sometimes. Like when others are not being nice, it's hard to be the only one who is.

[27] Child 2 (C2): Or when you think you'll get in trouble for telling the truth.

[28] Child 1 (C1): [interrupts] Yeah, like, um, I didn't tell on my friend when they did something wrong because I didn't want them to get in trouble. [inaudible]

[29] Facilitator: That makes sense. It can be tough to do the right thing.

[30] Facilitator: so that leads us onto our next question can you think of a time when you had to make a tough decision? What did you do and why?

[31] [long pause]

[32] Child 3 (C3): I told the truth about eating the last yogurt even though I got told off.

[33] Child 4 (C4): My mom asked me to clean up after myself, and I really wanted to go on the iPad, but I picked cleaning because it made my mom and dad happy, and my room was tidy as well.

[34] [laughter]

[35] Facilitator: Those were tough choices! How did it feel to make those decisions?

[36] Child 3 (C3): It didn't feel good at first, but I knew I had to be honest.

[37] Child 4 (C4): I was a little sad I didn't get to play, but my parents were happy.

[38] Facilitator: It sounds like you both thought about how your actions would affect others. Does anyone else have a tough decision they've made?

[39] [overlapping speech]

[40] Child 1 (C1): [speaking over] Um, yeah, like I didn't tell my friend that I, um, [inaudible] didn't tell on them, and then I felt bad.

[41] Facilitator: Thank you for sharing that. It's hard to know what to do sometimes, especially when you care about someone, or you're scared of getting in trouble. So how can

we make the right choices? This is what we will be exploring over the next 6 weeks as we learn about different virtues.

End of Transcript

School A: Post-Intervention

(Time: 18 minutes)

[1] Facilitator: Welcome, everyone. It's nice to have you all here, and I hope you've enjoyed our lessons on the different virtues. After our lessons, did you learn about any new virtues? How do you think virtues help us become better people?

[2] Child 1 (C1): We learned about honesty. It's when you tell the truth even if it's hard. I think it helps us be better because people can trust us.

[3] Child 2 (C2): I learned about gratitude. It's saying thank you and not moaning when things don't go your way and helping others.

[4] Child 3 (C3): kindness is a virtue we learned. It's like being nice to everyone, not just friends. It makes us better by making friends with everyone.

[5] Child 4 (C4): Yeah and helping each other. Like being compassionate. That's a virtue too.

[6] Facilitator: Those are great answers. So, can you think of a time when you applied one of the virtues you learned to a real-life situation? What did you do, and how did it make you feel?

[7] Child 1 (C1): Yesterday, I told the teacher that my friend was shy and didn't want to ask for help, but she really needed help. Then when I told the teacher, and my friend said thank you, I felt like a good friend.

[8] Child 2 (C2): [pause] In football today, I waited for my turn to kick the ball even when other children were pushing each other.

[9] Child 3 (C3): I shared my snack with someone who forgot theirs. It made me feel kind and compassionate.

[10] Facilitator: It sounds like you all did a great job using the virtues. Does anyone think it's sometimes hard to do those things?

[11] Child 3 (C3): Yeah, sometimes. Like when others are not being nice, it's hard to be the only one who is.

[12] Child 2 (C2): Or when you think that an adult like a teacher will tell your mom and you will get in trouble.

[13] Facilitator: [inaudible] Right. So, let's talk about making tough decisions. How do you decide what to do now when you have a difficult decision to make?

[14] Child 1 (C1): We learned to think about how our choices affect other people.

[15] Facilitator: Can you give me an example?

[16] Child 1 (C1): Yeah, like if I am making fun of someone, then that person is going to be sad.

[17] Child 2 (C2): Yeah, we talked about being honest with others and not lying even when it's hard.

[18] Child 4 (C4): I told my mom I learned about being grateful for the things in life, like family and friends. So sometimes I just have to be thankful instead of moaning.

[19] Facilitator: [laughter] That's a really good point. Thank you all for sharing. It sounds like you're really thinking about how these virtues work in your life. How does that make you feel overall?

[26] Child 1 (C1): I think it makes me feel proud, like when I do the right thing.

[27] Child 2 (C2): [overlapping speech] Yeah, and like I'm helping to make things better, even if it's small.

[28] Child 3 (C3): Sometimes I feel like it's hard, but then I feel good after, like when I help someone.

[29] Facilitator: Absolutely, even small actions can have a big impact. You all did great today. Thank you so much for your thoughts.

[30] Child 4 (C4): Can we talk more about kindness next time? I like that one.

[31] Facilitator: Of course, our sessions are over now, however, I will make sure that I let your teacher know that you want to learn more about kindness.

End of Transcript

School B – Pre-Intervention

(Time: 17 mins)

[1] Facilitator: Good afternoon, everyone! Today, we're going to talk about what it means to be a good person. Let's start with the first set of questions.

[2] Facilitator: What do you think it means to be a good person?

[3] Child 1 (C1): Listening to the teacher.

[4] Child 2 (C2): Yes, or helping mom and dad clean up.

[5] Child 3 (C3): [interrupts] And not fighting with your siblings!

[6] Facilitator: Those are good examples. Does anyone else have an idea?

[long pause]

[7] Child 4 (C4): Um... sharing my toys with my friends.

[8] Facilitator: That's right. So, it sounds like being a good person is about doing kind things for others. [pause] What if someone doesn't listen to the teacher? Are they still a good person?

[9] Child 1 (C1): [pause] Maybe... but they should try harder next time.

[10] [interrupts]

[11] Child 2 (C2): Yeah, everyone makes mistakes sometimes.

[12] Facilitator: Exactly, it's okay to make mistakes, but trying to do better is important.

[14] Facilitator: Can you think of a time when you were honest or kind? What did you do and how did it make you feel?

[15] Child 4 (C4): I can't think of one. [long pause]

[16] Child 2 (C2): I gave my friend a pencil because she lost hers.

[17] Facilitator: That's a nice thing to do. How did it make you feel afterward?

[18] Child 2 (C2): Good, she smiled at me.

[19] Child 3 (C3): [overlapping speech] I helped my mom clean up the dishes.

[20] Facilitator: That's great! How did your mom react?

[pause]

[21] Child 3 (C3): She was happy and said thank you. It made me feel proud.

[22] Facilitator: Can you think of a time when you had to make a tough decision? What did you do and why?

[24] Child 1 (C1): Don't know.

[25] Child 3 (C3): Sometimes I have to decide if I want to be someone's friend. And if they do something mean, then I might not be their friend.

[26] Facilitator: That's a tricky situation. How do you decide if they're still your friend?

[27] Child 3 (C3): [pause] I think about if they usually are nice or not.

[28] Child 2 (C2): [interrupts] Yeah, sometimes people just have a bad day.

[29] Facilitator: That's true, understanding that helps us make fair decisions.

30] Child 4 (C4): I think about if they said sorry. If they say sorry, then it's easier to be friends again.

[31] Child 1 (C1): But what if they don't say sorry? Then what?

[32] Child 3 (C3): [overlapping speech] Maybe they don't know they hurt you. You can tell them, and then see what they do.

[33] Facilitator: That's a great idea, C3. Communication can help clear things up. Does anyone else have an example of a tough decision?

[34] Child 2 (C2): [pause] Um, sometimes I don't know if I should tell the teacher if someone's being mean. Like, I don't want to get them in trouble.

[35] Child 4 (C4): But if they're being really mean, you should tell.

[pause]

[36] Facilitator: It's hard, but sometimes telling a trusted adult can help everyone, even the person being mean. What do you think, C2?

[37] Child 2 (C2): [long pause] Yeah, I guess it's better to tell, so they can learn to be nicer.

[38] Facilitator: Absolutely. It's all about helping each other grow and be better people.

End of Transcript

School B – Post-Intervention

(Time: 19 mins)

[1] Facilitator: Morning everyone, today we are going to think about what we have learnt over the past 6 weeks. The first question I want you to think about is after our lessons, did you learn anything new about how to become better people?

[long pause]

[2] Child 3 (C3): Honesty is important. It helps us become better by being truthful and trustworthy.

[pause]

[3] Child 4 (C4): We learned about gratitude. It's being thankful for what we have. It helps us become better by making us appreciate everything around us.

[4] Facilitator: Those are great points. So, after our lessons can you think of a time when you applied one of the virtues you learned to a real-life situation? What did you do, and how did it make you feel?

[5] Child 3 (C3): I was honest about making a mistake at home, and my mom said it was okay. And it made me feel happy.

[6] Child 2 (C2): I was grateful to my mom for making my favourite food, pizza.

[7] Child 4 (C4): I was grateful to my teacher for helping me understand math.

[8] Child 1 (C1): I helped my little brother when he couldn't find his toy, and he was really happy. It made me feel good too.

[pause]

[9] Facilitator: That's wonderful! Can anyone else think of a situation where they had to make a tough decision?

[10] Child 1 (C1): Sometimes you have to tell the truth even when it's hard or if you will get told off.

[11] Child 2 (C2): I learned that being kind, even if you don't like someone, is good for me because if I'm nasty, then I won't feel good about it, and it could happen to me one day.

[12] Child 3 (C3): Yeah, if I don't like what someone does to me, then I just ignore them. And if I like my friends, then I can be kind and grateful for the things they do.

[13] Child 4 (C4): [interrupts] But what if they keep being mean? Should you still ignore them?

[14] Child 2 (C2): [pauses] Maybe you should talk to them and tell them how you feel. If they're really your friend, they'll stop.

[15] Facilitator: That's a great suggestion. It's important to talk about our feelings and let others know when something isn't right.

[16] Facilitator: It's great that you're thinking about how your actions can affect others. How do you decide what to do now when you have an difficult decision to make?

[17] Child 1 (C1): Well, I told the truth even when it was hard. It felt good afterward because my friend was nice to me again.

[18] Child 4 (C4): [interrupts] Yeah, and I didn't get in trouble when I told the truth.

[19] Facilitator: That's true, telling the truth can sometimes be tough, but it's important. What about making decisions? How do you decide what's the right thing to do?

[20] Child 2 (C2): I think about if it's going to hurt someone's feelings. If it is, then maybe I shouldn't do it.

[21] Child 3 (C3): Or if it's going to help someone, then I should try to do it.

[22] Child 1 (C1): And if you're not sure, you can ask a grown-up. They can help you.

[23] Facilitator: Excellent! You're really starting to think about others and how your actions can make a difference. Does anyone else have an example of making a tough decision?

[24] Child 4 (C4): [pause] Sometimes, I don't know if I should play with someone if they've been mean before.

[25] Child 1 (C1): But maybe they're just having a bad day. I try to give them another chance.

[26] Child 2 (C2): Yeah, and if they're still mean after that, maybe it's okay to not play with them for a while.

[27] Facilitator: That's a really kind way of thinking, C1 and C2. It's important to give people a chance to be better. And sometimes, stepping away for a bit can help too. It is the end of the focus group now, thank you all for participating and was lovely to see you all again.

End of Transcript