

GUEST COLUMN: January/ February 2026

Persevilstence

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Pulling off my waterlogged, brown leather walking boot revealed a steaming woollen sock. As I gingerly eased off my sock - an angry red blister on my heel looked up at me as if to say: well what did you think would happen?

Twenty miles that day across Dartmoor National Park in the pouring rain and thick fog had been challenging. Our five-strong party of 17 year-olds had managed to navigate successfully from tor to tor - our training had worked.

On the long drive home after the annual Ten Tors event - where thousands of young people pit their fitness, skills and teamwork against the rugged terrain, bad weather and the urge to give up - my father sagely said this was 'all good character building stuff'. As young men we were building what Alistair Campbell calls *persevilstence*: a special blend of perseverance and resilience.

That experience 30 plus years ago remains in my memory. As a headteacher, when it comes to building character in students, I take it seriously.

We all know that the quality of a school's culture is directly proportional to the quality of the relationships between staff and students, students and students, staff and parents, and staff and staff. The motto 'Achieving Together' - to be found in countless school prospectuses - sums up a culture where all stakeholders, with an agreed common purpose, collaborate to bring out the best in each other.

What is 'character' and where can I get some?

A student's developing character is born from their values. These values are developed first at home, then at school, then through their peers - and, increasingly, through the ubiquitous social media groups.

A school's set of core values ('what we value round here') - Tolerance, Respect, Honesty, Integrity - become the foundation stones of the children's character development. Don't ask students **WHAT** they want to be when they reach adulthood - rather, ask them **WHO** they want to be?

Having role models and mentors in school helps this process. Yet evidence suggests that schools that explicitly teach a Character for Learning curriculum such as promoted by the [Jubilee Centre](#) are finding wholesale benefits.

Data - like wildebeest on the plains - start to run in positive herds: improvements in attendance, punctuality, behaviour, engagement, progress and attainment are the consequence of students who are taught the value of having a good character.

In proven practice, character traits can be taught in two-week blocks. For example, teaching perseverance: children are challenged in tutor groups to learn the beginnings of sign language, specifically a song. The best tutor group then performs the song for hearing impaired children at a local school.

The real life context to this, added to the fact that the final performance is filmed, affords the students real motivation to learn, and win the chance to help others. Their sense of wanting to support others equally develops empathy and kindness.

Each student's Character for Learning (CfL) score is reported to parents termly, so they can then see how to support and encourage their children at home. Students with the top scores peer mentor those with lower scores in a positive and respectful way.

I would encourage colleagues to consider the 'Character Education Quality Mark' which our school recently undertook. As with so many Quality Marks, the gold is in the process - but I wouldn't be a headteacher if I didn't also love a plaque for the reception area. Our Quality Mark report concluded:

'The assessor was particularly impressed with the manner in which the school has seamlessly integrated traditional UAE values and traditions with the 'character' demands necessary to prepare students for life in a challenging 21st century. Through this character-focused approach, students are empowered to build a strong sense of identity, pride, and civic responsibility.'

Whatever your school's context – on the moors of Devon or in the deserts of Oman - it is through explicit promotion of the importance of character education that a lasting sense of community and belonging is nurtured and grown.

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He is author of [*The A - Z of Primary Leadership*](#)