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BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Character Education in the Irish Educational System

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## Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci na téma: „Charakterová výchova v Irském vzdělávacím systému“ vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem v ní všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne. 18/06/2024.

Podpis *Anna Maryšková*

## **Poděkování**

Tímto bych ráda poděkovala Mgr. Barboře Bačíkové za podporu, vedení a trpělivost při vedení mé bakalářské práce.

## Anotace

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Název práce:	Charakterová Výchova v Irském Vzdělávacím Systému
Název v angličtině:	Character Education in the Irish Educational System
Zvolený typ práce:	Bakalářský
Anotace práce:	Tato práce zkoumá roli a vliv výchovy k charakteru na irských středních školách a kombinuje teoretickou analýzu s kvalitativním výzkumem. Zabývá se názory studentů, učitelů a rodičů na hodnotu programů výchovy k charakteru s ohledem na morální, etický a sociální rozvoj. Tato práce zdůrazňuje význam začlenění morálních principů do vzdělávání a opírá se přitom o klíčové teoretické rámce. Z rozhovorů, které byly provedeny, vyplývá, že tyto programy jsou velmi oceňovány, přičemž je zdůrazňována jejich důležitost pro podporu všestranného rozvoje a společenské odpovědnosti. Výsledky vyzývají k pokračující podpoře charakterové výchovy s cílem vychovat všestranně eticky založené jedince.
Klíčová slova:	Morálka, etika, programy, ctnosti, hodnoty, rozvoj, charakter, sociálně-emoční učení, občanství, odpovědnost, student, učitel
Anotace v angličtině:	This thesis examines the role and impact of character education in Irish secondary schools, combining theoretical analysis with qualitative research. It explores students', teachers' and parents' perceptions of the value of character education programmes in regard to moral, ethical and social development. This thesis emphasises the importance of integrating moral principles into education, drawing on key theoretical frameworks. Interviews that were conducted reveal a strong appreciation for these programmes, highlighting their role in promoting well-rounded development and social responsibility. The conclusions call for continued support for character education in order to raise well-rounded, ethically grounded individuals.

Klíčová slova v angličtině:	Morality, ethics, programmes, virtues, values, development, character, social-emotional learning, citizenship, responsibility, student, teacher
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# 1. Introduction

The goal of character education is to instil moral values and qualities in pupils by placing it at the heart of academic learning and moral growth. (Lickona, 1993.) Character education is becoming more and more important in Irish schools since it helps develop responsible citizens who can make constructive contributions to society. This thesis sets out to investigate the various aspects of character education in Irish schools, with a particular emphasis on the curriculum, morals, virtues, values, and ethics.

This thesis seeks to offer a thorough examination of the definition, application, and perception of character education in Irish schools. As a pedagogics student and aspiring teacher, I have a strong interest in the overall growth of children and understand the critical role that character education has in promoting emotional intelligence and moral principles. By providing a thorough analysis of character education techniques and relying on both theoretical frameworks and empirical data, this thesis aims to investigate, explore, and discuss this topic in detail.

The qualitative technique of semi-structured interviews is used in this thesis' methodology to assist in the analysis of character education methods and initiatives in the Irish education system. Through the collection of opinions from a teacher, student, and parent, this thesis aims to offer a comprehensive analysis of character education methods. The thesis is set up to comprehensively investigate several character education-related topics. It begins by giving definitions for important terms like morals, virtues, and ethics to lay the theoretical groundwork for further examination. Examining available programmes provides valuable information about how character education initiatives are put into practice.

It is crucial to acknowledge this thesis' limitations, though. This thesis does not go deal in detail with the more general societal elements that affect character formation, such as family dynamics or cultural influences. Character education plays a significant role in students' moral development and as such, this will be the focus. This thesis will concentrate on character education explicitly within the context of the school, with the goal of exploring the methods and programmes that have a direct influence on the character development of Irish learners.

In conclusion, this thesis aims to add to the current discussion on character education by providing an analysis of its theoretical foundations, real-world applications, and possible effects



on students' lives. This thesis aims to inspire teachers who are actively helping the next generation of responsible citizens grow and mature by exploring the complexity of character education within the Irish school system.

## **1.1 Purpose of Thesis**

This research has several goals, including investigating, evaluating, and adding to the conversation around character education in the Irish school system. This thesis also aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of character education by exploring all of its aspects, such as its teaching techniques, socio-cultural influences, philosophical and psychological bases, and empirical proof of its effectiveness. Through an examination of theoretical frameworks including moral psychology, virtue ethics, and socio-emotional learning theories, this research aims to provide insight into the theoretical foundations of character education. In addition, it aims to investigate the many methods and techniques used in the implementation of character education programmes in different educational contexts, such as official classroom instruction, extracurricular activities, and community projects. Furthermore, the thesis intends to investigate the possible impacts of character education on students' cognitive, social, emotional, and ethical development in addition to its wider implications for developing positive behaviours, creating a healthy school climate, and responsible participation in society.

This work's primary goal is to offer a thorough examination of the definition of character education in the Irish context. This thesis aims to define character education and its crucial elements—morality, virtue, value, and ethics—by exploring the literature and reviewing current frameworks. This thesis aims to provide a clear idea of character education, which starts the conversation on how to use and evaluate it in Irish schools.

Furthermore, this research focuses on the methods and initiatives Irish schools use to support character education. This research also intends to identify best practices and obstacles related to the implementation of character education by looking at different teaching methods and educational initiatives. This research also aims to obtain insights into the opinions and experiences of significant parties about character education programmes through interviews with teachers, students, and parents. Through these interviews, the research intends to discover more about the claimed effectiveness of different approaches as well as the challenges and barriers associated with implementing character education programmes into action. This analysis will allow me to look at differences in methods and results as well as recurring themes, patterns, and trends throughout schools.

This research intends to add to theoretical and practical conversations on character education, in addition to offering insights into existing character education practices. Through a comprehensive analysis of existing literature and empirical research, this thesis aims to propel our comprehension of the mechanisms by which character education cultivates beneficial results for students. The purpose of this research is to provide educators and others who are active in promoting character education in Irish schools with recommendations for policy and practice.

The overall goal of this research is to expand our knowledge of character education in the Irish educational system, identify opportunities for development, and support additional efforts to raise the next generation of morally upright individuals. With a thorough examination of the concepts, applications, and possible effects of character education, this thesis seeks to educate and motivate constructive change inside Irish educational institutions and beyond.

## 2. Character Education

An essential component of the educational process, character education aims to support the growth of morals, values, and ethical principles in people (Lickona, 1991). It includes making a conscious, methodical effort to develop the moral qualities that support societal responsibility, moral thinking, and personal integrity (Kohlberg, 1984). Beyond typical academic instruction, character education recognises the value of encouraging students' moral and social-emotional development in addition to their cognitive development (Kristjánsson, 2013).

Ultimately, character education is based on the idea that learning should convey the values and concepts required to live moral and satisfying lives, in addition to providing knowledge and skills (Kohlberg, 1984). It acknowledges that academic achievement on its own does not ensure success in life and aims to meet the complete requirements of pupils (Kohlberg, 1984). Character education, on the other hand, places a strong emphasis on developing traits like integrity, empathy, resilience, and respect (Kristjánsson, 2013) —qualities that are essential to navigating the complexity of today's world.

The development of moral character is one of the main principles of character education. This involves supporting children in understanding the difference between good and bad, developing empathy and compassion for others, as well as creating a strong moral compass to direct their habits and choices. Character education highlights that moral growth is a continuous process and aims to give students the skills and resources they need to resolve moral dilemmas and make ethical choices (Kristjánsson, 2013).

Character education stresses not just moral growth but also social-emotional learning (Lickona, 1993). This involves guiding pupils in gaining social awareness, self-awareness, relationship skills, and the capacity to make responsible decisions. Character education helps children develop social-emotional skills so they can effectively control their emotions, form healthy relationships, and make moral decisions in a variety of social settings (Kristjánsson, 2013).

Additionally, character education underlines the importance of cultivating a positive school culture and climate. Students' values, attitudes, and behaviours are greatly influenced by their educational experiences, and character development can only be promoted in a supportive learning environment.

A variety of strategies and techniques are included in character education with the goal of facilitating character development. These could include providing students with clear instruction in moral and ethical principles, giving them the chance to participate in volunteering and community service projects, incorporating character education concepts into all subject areas of the curriculum, and putting in place school-wide programmes that encourage good behaviour and cultivate a culture of respect and kindness.

Moreover, character education embraces the value of community, family, and school cooperation in cultivating character development (Lickona, 1991). Character education efforts should include parents, caregivers, and community members as partners in the educational process, as they have a significant impact on the development of kids' character and values. Together, families, communities, and schools can establish a thorough support network that promotes character development both within and outside of the classroom.

In summary, character education, which aims to support people's development of moral, social, and emotional competences, is an essential part of the educational process. It underscores that education aims to prepare students to be responsible, moral, and compassionate members of society in addition to allowing academic success (Lickona, 1993). Through the cultivation of moral growth, social-emotional learning, and a healthy school climate, character education equips students with the tools necessary to live purposeful, happy lives and make valuable contributions to their communities.

Lickona, Kohlberg, and Kristjánsson each provide unique viewpoints on character education that deepen our understanding of the subject. Lickona emphasises the importance of growth of morals, values, and ethical principles in people, while Kohlberg focuses on the conscious mind and how it makes moral decisions which affect character development. Additionally, Kristjánsson places significance on the development of positive virtues and values which affect psychological well-being. Collectively, these numerous perspectives enhance the overall structure of character education and increase its impact in promoting moral growth and ethical behaviour in people.

## **2.1 Aspects of Character Education**

This section examines the fundamental components of character education and how they support the growth of significant character attributes.

### **2.1.1 Moral Development**

Character education encourages the development of moral ideals and ethical reasoning while placing a strong emphasis on moral growth (Kohlberg, 1984). Character education helps people progress from a basic comprehension of the difference between good and evil to more sophisticated ethical thinking by utilising ideas like Lawrence Kohlberg's phases of moral growth (Kohlberg, 1981). Pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional morality are among Kohlberg's stages that offer an outline for understanding moral thinking and reasoning.

However, Jonathan Haidt, a psychologist, presents an alternative perspective on moral psychology. His Moral Foundations Theory portrays that our basic feelings and impulses, such as compassion and a sense of justice, shape our moral judgements (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Unlike Kohlberg, who only considered reasoning, Haidt thinks that feelings and intuition play an equal role in moral judgement as reason. He argues that both our thoughts and feelings influence our moral beliefs. While Haidt's theory recognises that people's moral perspectives might vary depending on their culture and personal experiences, Kohlberg's stages provide a clear path for the development of morality.

### **2.1.2 Ethical Reasoning and Decision-Making**

Ethical reasoning and decision-making, which focuses on helping people develop the critical thinking skills necessary to detect ethical concerns and make good judgements, is a crucial aspect of character education (Lickona, 1991). People are encouraged by character education to weigh opposing ideas and moral principles, analyse the moral implications of their actions, and choose morally correct paths of action. Character education allows people to become moral citizens who can make moral decisions in difficult and puzzling situations through the process of moral reflection and conversation.

### **2.1.3 Civic Engagement and Social Responsibility**

Character education also places a strong emphasis on social responsibility and civic participation, inspiring people to get involved in their communities and promote the common good. Character education encourages people to use their skills and resources to address social concerns and create positive change by promoting a sense of civic duty. This can be done by encouraging students to take part in service-learning projects, community service activities, and civic education programmes.

### **2.1.4 Character Traits and Virtues**

Developing specific attributes and character traits that are essential for success on a personal and interpersonal level is the primary objective of character education (Narvaez, 2006). Honesty, truthfulness, compassion, empathy, perseverance, resilience, and respect are a few examples of these qualities. Activities and conversations aimed at strengthening these values and assisting people in recognising their importance are frequently included in character education programmes.

### **2.1.5 Positive School Climate and Culture**

Lastly, character education emphasises how critical it is to establish a supportive and encouraging school culture and climate (Lickona 1991). The values, attitudes, and behaviours of students are greatly influenced by the schools they attend. Character education can only be nurtured in a supportive learning environment. The idea of character education programmes is to establish welcoming and helpful learning environments where everybody can feel safe and respected. Character education helps to establish an atmosphere in schools where all children can grow morally, socially, and emotionally by promoting a healthy school climate and culture.

## 2.2 Defining Character Education Keywords

A key component of contemporary pedagogy, character education incorporates a wide range of complex ideas and techniques meant to support people's overall growth. In order to fully comprehend the meaning of character education, it is necessary to clarify several key concepts and examine some less-well-known areas. This part aims to define various keywords of character education and clarify the importance of these ideas in promoting the development of moral character.

### 2.2.1 Keywords and Concepts

**Mindfulness:** The practice of deliberately focusing on the present moment without passing judgement is known as mindfulness, and it is a term that is becoming increasingly common in character education (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). It includes methods for improving self-awareness and emotional control, such as deep breathing, body awareness, and meditation. Through the integration of mindfulness techniques into character education, people can cultivate increased self-awareness, emotional resilience, and empathy, ultimately leading to a more profound comprehension of both themselves and others.

**Gratitude:** Practicing gratitude, or recognising and valuing the good things in life, has an immense effect on how people grow as individuals (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). People can gain perspective, resilience, and empathy by adopting an attitude of thankfulness. Gratitude exercises like journaling, giving thanks to others, and counting blessings can be used into character education programmes to promote positivity and improve general wellbeing.

**Empowerment:** One of the primary concepts of character education is empowering people by providing them with the information, tools, and resources they need to take charge of their life and make wise decisions. Programmes for character education can provide people with a sense of agency, self-esteem, and autonomy through the skills they learn. Character education facilitates self-expression, goal setting, and leadership development, enabling people to take an active role in bringing about change both inside and outside of their communities.

**Compassionate Action:** Based on the ideas of empathy and selflessness, compassionate action involves making deliberate efforts to alleviate the suffering of others and advance social



justice. Character education efforts, such as service-learning projects, community service initiatives, and advocacy for social change, can inspire people to take compassionate action. Character education enables people to positively impact others' lives and contribute to a society that is more compassionate, just by promoting within them a feeling of social responsibility and empathy.

**Global Citizenship:** Emphasising people's duties as members of a global community, global citizenship is a growing topic in character education (Kristjánsson, 2013). Through the development of empathy, cross-cultural understanding, and a sense of global connectivity, character education programmes can support global citizenship. Character education helps people become aware and involved global citizens, which equips them to confront issues like social injustice, poverty, and environmental degradation.

**Ethical Leadership:** Integrity, empathy, and a dedication to moral values are all components of ethical leadership, which is an integral part of character education. Character education programmes can help people develop their ethical leadership abilities by giving them the chance to practise making moral decisions, resolving conflicts, and working together. Character education equips people with the skills necessary to become ethical leaders in both their personal and professional life, bringing about constructive change in their communities and beyond. These skills can include traits like honesty, compassion, and social responsibility.

## **3. Morality**

### **3.1 Defining Morality**

Morality, at its core, is about understanding what is right and wrong. It includes ideas like virtue, ethics, and values, which help us make decisions that fit with societal norms and personal beliefs. According to Thomas Lickona (1993), an important figure in character education, states that, morality emphasises the significance of learning moral concepts and putting them into practice in daily life. It includes both moral knowledge and moral conduct.

### **3.2 Theoretical Foundations**

Theoretically, morality in character education comes from several areas: moral psychology, virtue ethics, and socio-emotional learning. Moral psychology looks at how people learn and use moral principles. It tends to focus on the development of moral thinking and behaviour. For instance, Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development show how moral reasoning progresses from basic, self-focused thinking to more advanced, principled thinking that considers the greater good. (Kohlberg, 1981).

Based on Aristotle's work, virtue ethics focuses on developing moral traits like honesty, courage, and compassion. Aristotle proposed that virtues are built through regular practice and that a virtuous person always acts with reason and moral principles (Aristotle, 1999). This view shows why character education is vital for teaching these virtues early, creating a base for lifelong moral growth.

### **3.3 Practical Applications in Character Education**

In practical terms, character education programmes aim to integrate the principles of morality into the learning process. This involves creating a curriculum that promotes ethical thinking, empathy, and responsible behaviour. For instance, the implementation of socio-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks in schools focuses on developing students' emotional intelligence, self-regulation, and interpersonal skills, all which are essential components of moral behaviour (CASEL, 2013).

One effective method of teaching morality in students is through service-learning projects, which combine academic learning with community service. These projects provide students with opportunities to apply moral principles in real-world contexts, creating a sense of social responsibility and empathy. Research has shown that students who participate in service-learning programmes exhibit greater moral and civic engagement, highlighting the positive impact of experience-based learning on moral development (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

### **3.4 Impact on Students' Development**

Character education has an immense impact on how students develop morally. It shapes their mental, social, emotional, and moral growth. Schools can assist students to build a strong moral sense that helps them make choices and act morally. This integral approach to education not only helps students to perform better in school, but it also prepares them to navigate the complexities of our modern society, in a righteous manner.

In the Irish school system, character education programmes have been shown to promote a supportive and inclusive school culture, where students feel valued and respected. This positive environment contributes to improved student behaviour, reduced instances of bullying, and greater overall well-being (Humphreys, 2020). As is suggested, the integration of character education into the curriculum is essential for raising morally skilled individuals who can become a positive influence on the people around them.

To conclude, morality is a key aspect of character education, which shapes the values and behaviours that students carry with them throughout their lives.

## **4. Ethics**

Ethics, as a branch of philosophy, examines the principles of right and wrong that guide human behaviour. It is a cornerstone of character education, which seeks to introduce moral values and qualities in students. This thesis aims to explore character education within the Irish school system, with a particular focus on defining key elements, such as ethics, and their role in helping students' overall development.

### **4.1 Defining Ethics**

Ethics involves the systematic study of what is morally right and wrong, good and bad. It provides a framework for evaluating human actions and their consequences. Ethical principles are derived from various sources, including cultural traditions, religious teachings, and philosophical reasoning. According to Thomas Lickona (1993), ethics plays a crucial role in character education by helping students develop a clear understanding of moral concepts and their applications in daily life.

### **4.2 Theoretical Foundations**

The theoretical foundations of ethics in character education are diverse, encompassing deontological ethics, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. Deontological ethics, associated with philosopher Immanuel Kant, emphasises the importance of duty and adherence to moral rules. Kant argued that actions are morally right if they are performed out of duty and in accordance with universal principles, such as honesty and justice (Kant, 1785). This perspective highlights the importance of teaching students to respect ethical norms and act out of a sense of duty.

Utilitarianism, proposed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, focuses on the consequences of actions. As was stated by Bentham, "It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong" (Bentham, 1776). This consequentialist approach encourages students to consider the outcomes of their actions and strive to promote overall well-being (Mill, 1863). Incorporating utilitarian principles in character education helps students develop a sense of empathy and responsibility towards others.

Virtue ethics, rooted in Aristotle's philosophy, emphasises the development of moral character and the cultivation of virtues. Virtue ethics focuses on the character of the moral agent

rather than specific actions or consequences, highlighting the importance of nurturing moral character in students (Aristotle, 1999). This approach aligns closely with the goals of character education, which aims to develop well-rounded individuals who express ethical principles in all aspects of their lives.

### **4.3 Practical Applications in Character Education**

In practice, character education programmes integrate ethical principles into various aspects of the educational experience. This involves designing curricula that include ethical discussions, moral dilemmas, and case studies that challenge students to think critically about ethical issues. By engaging with real-life scenarios, students can apply ethical theories to practical situations, enhancing their moral reasoning skills.

One effective method for teaching ethics is through classroom debates and discussions. These activities encourage students to articulate their ethical viewpoints, consider alternative perspectives, and engage in respectful dialogue. Research has shown that such interactive approaches promote moral development and encourage a deeper understanding of ethical concepts (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008).

Another approach is the use of ethical reflection journals, where students regularly write about ethical issues they encounter in their lives. This reflective practice helps students internalise ethical principles and recognise the relevance of ethics in their daily decision-making. Studies have demonstrated that reflective writing can enhance students' moral awareness and ethical reasoning abilities (Bebeau, 2002).

### **4.4 Impact on Students' Development**

The incorporation of ethics into character education has a significant impact on students' cognitive, social, emotional, and ethical growth. By engaging with ethical principles, students develop critical thinking skills, empathy, and a sense of justice. These qualities are essential for navigating the complexities of modern society and contributing positively to their communities.

In the Irish school system, character education programmes that emphasise ethics have been shown to improve students' moral behaviour, academic performance, and social interactions. Schools that prioritise ethical education create environments where students feel

valued and respected, leading to greater overall well-being and a stronger sense of community (Humphreys, 2020). As this thesis suggests, integrating ethics into the curriculum is crucial in the upbringing of ethical citizens who are equipped to address the moral challenges of the 21st century.

In conclusion, ethics is a fundamental component of character education, providing the principles and frameworks that guide moral behaviour. By exploring the theoretical foundations and practical applications of ethics in the Irish school system, this thesis aims to demonstrate how character education can effectively promote ethical development. Through the integration of ethical discussions, reflective practices, and interactive learning, character education programmes can nurture students' moral growth and prepare them to lead ethical and responsible lives.

## **5. Methods and Initiatives used to teach Character Education**

### **5.1 Teaching techniques**

#### **5.1.1 Service-Learning Projects**

Service-learning is a teaching approach that combines academic learning with community service. This approach allows students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world problems. It helps students develop a sense of social responsibility and civic engagement with their local community. Students can also develop empathy, teamwork skills and leadership skills, depending on the activities that they take part in. For example, organising a community cleanup could provide some great practical experience for students that helps reinforce ideas of ethics and citizenship.

Research shows that service-learning helps improve students' moral and civic development. According to Eyler and Giles (1999), students involved in service-learning projects show better social skills and a greater duty to community service. These results line up with the goals of character education. In this situation, character education looks to create responsible and ethical citizens.

#### **5.1.2 Ethical Dilemmas and Case Studies**

Another useful technique that can be used in character education is that of getting students involved in ethical dilemmas and looking at case studies. This technique gets students involved with complicated moral scenarios that requires them to use the critical thinking and ethical reasoning skills that they have been taught. One good example of a morally complex situation that might be presented to students is that of the Trolley Problem. This problem involves an out-of-control trolley on a diverging track. The student, who is the observer, has a decision to make. They have the option to pull or not pull a lever on the track. If the student makes the decision to not pull the lever, the out-of-control trolley will carry on and hit a group of five people stuck on the track. If the student decides to pull the lever however, the trolley will be redirected onto the other track, which only has one person on it. This problem presents students with a difficult moral and ethical decision to make (Philosophy Terms, 2023). By looking at these types of situations, students learn to deal with morally grey areas and make

ethical decisions. By presenting students with these types of scenarios, it not only improves their moral reasoning skills, but also prepares them to face ethical challenges in real life.

Including ethical dilemmas like the Trolley Problem into the curriculum can be done through various formats, such as group discussions and debates. Nucci and Narvaez (2008) point out that discussing ethical issues like this in a structured way can help students develop a better understanding of moral principles and the application they can have in everyday life. More importantly, these activities encourage students to have respectful conversations or debates with their peers as well as understand other students' perspectives. These traits and skills are all important parts of a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

### **5.1.3 Role-Playing and Simulations**

Role-playing and simulations are interactive teaching techniques that engage students with realistic scenarios. This gives them a safe environment to practice moral decision-making and empathy. In role-playing exercises, students assume different roles and act out situations that require ethical judgment and problem-solving. Going back to the Trolley Problem for an example, a student might play the role of the person stood on the side of the track who must pull the lever, being timed to create a sense of urgency.

Simulations, on the other hand, create more complicated and immersive experiences. For example, a simulation might involve students managing a fictional community that is facing a crisis, such as a natural disaster. These kinds of activities can help students understand the consequences of their actions on a larger scale as well as the importance of ethical leadership.

Research suggests that role-playing and simulations are valuable in supporting moral development and social-emotional learning. According to Clements and Sarama (2007), interactive methods like role-playing and simulations improve students' empathy and communication skills, as well as their ethical awareness. Students can become better practiced in dealing with moral challenges in their personal and professional lives in the future by practicing making these difficult ethical decisions during their education.



#### **5.1.4 Reflective Journals**

Reflective journals are a useful tool in character education as they can encourage students to think about and describe their thoughts on ethical issues as well as personal experiences. Students can more easily develop a better understanding of their values and ethical beliefs by frequently writing reflections on their lessons and the moral dilemmas that they may face on a day-to-day basis. Reflective journals also give students a safe space to explore their emotions and thoughts. This helps promote a higher level of self-awareness and emotional regulation in the students. This is something that will be explored in detail through one of the character education programmes offered in the Irish education system.

Studies have shown that reflective writing can greatly improve moral and ethical development. Bebeau (2002) found that reflective journals help students take in and learn ethical principles. It also helps them improve their moral reasoning abilities. This practice also supports the development of critical thinking and self-assessment skills, both of which are vitally important for lifelong moral growth.

#### **5.1.5 Collaborative Learning**

Collaborative learning involves students working in groups to solve problems, complete projects, and engage in discussions. This approach creates a sense of community and mutual respect, both of which are necessary elements of character education. Students learn to value different points of view and negotiate disagreements by communicating with their peers. These interactions develop important social skills including communication and teamwork.

According to research, collaborative learning improves moral and social growth. Johnson and Johnson (1999) suggest that cooperative learning environments improve students' social skills, moral reasoning, and academic performance. Working together to achieve mutual objectives helps students develop a feeling of shared responsibility and ethical commitment.

#### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, effective character education requires the integration of diverse teaching techniques that promote moral, ethical, and social-emotional development. Service-learning projects, ethical dilemmas, role-playing, reflective journals, and collaborative learning are all

methods that strengthen these qualities in students. By incorporating these techniques into the curriculum, teachers can create supportive and inclusive environments for students to prepare them to navigate the complexities of the modern world.

## **5.2 Programmes offered by schools**

### **5.2.1 Social, Personal, and Health Education (S.P.H.E.)**

One of the cornerstone programmes for character education in Irish schools is the Social, Personal, and Health Education (S.P.H.E.) curriculum. S.P.H.E. is a mandatory programme in both primary and post-primary schools, focusing on personal development, health, and well-being. The curriculum is designed to help students develop a strong sense of self, enhance their interpersonal skills, and promote positive relationships and healthy lifestyles.

The S.P.H.E. program covers a wide range of topics, including emotional well-being, relationships and sexuality education (R.S.E.), (Department of Education and Skills, 2022). These topics are explored through various ways, such as discussion, group work, and reflective practices, which encourage students to think critically about ethical issues and make informed decisions. Research has shown that S.P.H.E. positively impacts students' social and emotional development, contributing to a supportive and inclusive school environment.

### **5.2.2 Green-Schools Programme**

The Green-Schools programme, also known as Eco-Schools, internationally, is an environmental education initiative that promotes sustainability and environmental stewardship among students. While primarily focused on environmental issues, the Green-Schools programme also incorporates elements of character education by encouraging students to take responsibility for their local environment and develop a sense of global citizenship.

Through the Green-Schools programme, students engage in activities such as recycling, energy conservation, and biodiversity projects. These initiatives create a sense of responsibility, teamwork, and ethical awareness. By participating in the Green-Schools programme, students learn the importance of caring for the environment and acting as responsible citizens. Research has shown that environmental education programmes like Green-Schools can enhance students' environmental knowledge and ethical attitudes (Erdogan, 2011).

### **5.2.3 Civic, Social, and Political Education (C.S.P.E.)**

C.S.P.E. is a core component of the post-primary curriculum designed to prepare students for active and responsible citizenship. The programme aims to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to participate fully in society and to understand the complexities of civic life. C.S.P.E. covers a wide range of topics, including human rights, democracy, the environment, and community involvement. Through activities such as debates, project work, and community service, students are encouraged to engage with real-world issues, develop critical thinking skills, and introduce a sense of social responsibility. The programme's focus on active engagement and hands-on learning aligns with the goal of character education. By incorporating C.S.P.E. into the curriculum, Irish schools provide students with opportunities to apply their learning in meaningful ways, thereby reinforcing the values of respect, justice, and civic duty.

### **5.2.4 Cycle Against Suicide**

Cycle Against Suicide is an impactful programme introduced in secondary schools across Ireland to promote mental health awareness and suicide prevention. This programme involves an annual cycling event that travels through various schools and communities, aiming to spread the message that "It's OK not to feel OK; and it's absolutely OK to ask for help." By engaging students in discussions about mental health, resilience, and support networks, Cycle Against Suicide helps build an environment where mental well-being is prioritised and stigmas surrounding mental health issues are challenged. The programme includes presentations, workshops, and the participation of students, teachers, and community members in the cycling event, creating a sense of unity and shared purpose. Cycle Against Suicide aligns with the goals of character education by promoting empathy, resilience, and social responsibility among students. It empowers young people to seek help, support their peers, and contribute to a culture of openness and understanding in terms of mental health. Through this initiative, Irish schools are making significant strides in addressing mental health issues and reinforcing the values of compassion and community support.

### **5.2.5 Transition Year**

Transition year is a significant chance for pupils in secondary schools in Ireland to develop their character. During this optional year, students are strongly encouraged to engage more among their classmates and participate in activities like work experience and group assignments to a considerably greater extent than in previous years. Participating in activities such as work experience enables students to take on an active role in the professional world and acquire new skills, thus boosting the development of their personal qualities. Transition year also facilitates the development of student's character by providing them with the chance to explore subjects and themes that captivate their interest. These students take part in two-week testers in various courses that are given in the Leaving Certificate cycle, prior to graduating from secondary school. During this period, students are encouraged to explore several subjects in order to discover their passions, enhance their self-assurance, and derive enjoyment from new and different modules.

Being involved in these opportunities, along with engaging in more activities with their peers, enables all Transition Year students to develop into more well-rounded, mature, and autonomous individuals before moving on into adulthood.

## **6. Practical Part**

The practical part of this thesis aims to investigate the value of character education programmes in the Irish education system. It aims to do this through the use of semi-structured interviews conducted with various people involved in the Irish education system. In the case of this thesis, the interviewees will be a secondary school student, a secondary school teacher, and a parent of a secondary school student. By conducting semi-structured interviews with these subjects, this thesis aims to evaluate the value of character education programmes currently being implemented in Irish secondary schools.

### **6.1 Research Objectives**

The research objectives of the practical part of this thesis aim to set out the aims or objectives that the interviews are intended to achieve. These research aims guide the research process by providing a clear focus and direction for the study.

The research aims for the practical part of this thesis are as follows:

- 1. To investigate the value of character education programmes in Irish schools to the parents.*
- 2. To investigate the value of schools' character education programmes to students.*
- 3. To investigate how teachers teach character education programmes in the Irish education system and how valuable they consider them to be for their students.*

These research aims will be the focus of the practical part of this thesis. They will guide and focus the semi-structured interviews.

## 6.2 Determination of Hypotheses & Research Questions

The research questions for this thesis are the questions that the study seeks to answer. These research questions have been formulated based on the research objectives and will provide further detail and focus on what this study aims to investigate.

The research questions for the practical part of this thesis are as follows:

1. *How do students in Irish schools perceive the relevance of character education to their personal growth and societal responsibilities?*
2. *What are teachers' perspectives on the role of character education in supporting students' moral and ethical development within the Irish education system?*
3. *In what ways do parents contribute to the reinforcement of character education teachings in the home and how valuable do they believe it to be to their child's moral and social development?*

In line with the research questions posed above, a hypothesis can be formed which will be proved or disproved based on the data collected from the sample during the data collection period. Therefore, the proposed hypotheses based on the previously stated research questions are as follows:

*“Character education programmes in Irish schools are valued by students, teachers, and parents for their role in promoting ethical behaviour and supporting personal development, rather than solely for academic achievement”*

### **6.3 Description of the Sample to be Studied**

The purpose of this section is to outline and describe the sample to be studied during the practical part of this thesis. The subjects have been selected to ensure a representative sample given the subject at hand. The selection of a representative sample is crucial as it will determine the accuracy of the study. It will also ensure that the findings about the current state and perceived value of character education programmes in the Irish education system are representative of the current generation of students, teachers and parents.

The descriptions of the sample to be studied are detailed below (the identities of the subjects included in the sample will be kept anonymous at the request of the subjects): The first part of the sample to be studied is a final year secondary school student attending an Irish secondary school that implements a large majority, if not all, of the character education programmes mentioned in the theory section. The student is a 6th (final) year student who has completed the optional transition year, has successfully completed the compulsory C.S.P.E. and S.P.H.E. subjects and has participated in the Cycle Against Suicide programme.

The next part of the sample to be studied is a secondary school teacher. This teacher is one who teaches one of the compulsory character education subjects and is heavily involved in the school's extra-curricular character education activities, such as Cycle Against Suicide and Green Schools. This teacher also has experience of counselling in previous schools.

Finally, the last part of the sample will be a parent of a secondary school student. The parent will be aware of and involved in the character education programmes that are being taught in the school and the extra-curricular programmes that students can partake in. This parent also previously attended the studied school and now has children that attend the school. This parent also volunteers and assists with the setup and monitoring of different extra-curricular activities.

Finally, the last part of the sample will be a parent of a secondary school student. The parent will be aware of and involved in the character education programmes that are taught in the school and the extra-curricular programmes that students can participate in. This parent also previously attended the school and now has children attending the school. This parent also volunteers and helps to set up and monitor various extra-curricular activities.



## **6.4 Data Collection Procedure**

The data collection method to be used in the study is crucial to the accuracy and quality of the data to be collected from the sample. Using the correct type of data collection will ensure that the information collected during the study will be useful in answering the research questions posed. Collecting accurate data will allow the hypotheses posed above to be either supported or refuted with a high degree of certainty.

The chosen data collection procedure that will be used to collect data from the subjects is a semi-structured interview with each member of the sample. Each interview will include questions designed to elicit data that can be used to accurately and easily answer the research questions posed. Each participant's responses will be recorded on a telephone and noted at the time of the interview and later reviewed and cross-referenced for inclusion in the thesis.

## **6.5 Research Methods**

Two research methods will be used to gather information that will later be used to answer the research questions and therefore prove or disprove the hypotheses. These research methods have been carefully considered to ensure that the data collected from the subjects is accurate. It will also ensure a fair representation of attitudes towards character education programmes in the Irish education system. When dealing with a small sample size and using a qualitative research method, it is essential that the data collected is of the highest possible quality to ensure that the hypotheses can be answered in a way that provides a meaningful conclusion.

The type of research method that will be used during the research process is qualitative research. Qualitative research is a type of research that relies heavily on the subjective nature and perspectives of the participants, seeking to understand their thoughts and feelings rather than focusing on large amounts of data and statistics. One reason for choosing a qualitative type of research is the flexibility it offers. One of the most common ways of conducting qualitative research is through semi-structured interviews. This type of interview allows the interviewer to ask a set of pre-prepared questions, but also gives the interviewer the freedom to ask any other questions that come to mind during the interview that may be helpful in contributing to the research and answering the research questions.

Therefore, a semi-structured interview was chosen as the research method for the study.

### **6.5.2 Semi-structured interview with a student**

A semi-structured interview will be conducted with a student in a secondary school in Ireland. This interview will aim to explore the student's experiences of the character education programmes offered by the school, as described in the 'Description of the sample to be studied' section. It will also aim to gain insight into the student's feelings about how the character education programmes have influenced their social and emotional skills.

### **6.5.3 Semi-structured interview with a teacher**

A semi-structured interview will be conducted with a teacher described in the 'Description of the sample to be studied' section. The aim of this interview is to gain insight into the implementation of character education programmes and to understand their perceived impact on pupils.

### **6.5.4 Semi-structured interview with a parent**

A semi-structured interview will be conducted with the parent, as described in the 'Description of the sample to be studied' section. The aim of this interview will be to understand the parent's perception of character education programmes and whether they support these programmes in their home. The interview will also help to determine whether the parent has observed any changes in their child's behaviour and social-emotional development as a result of the child's involvement in character education programmes.

## **6.6 Research Data Processing Methods**

This section examines the different ways in which the collected data was processed. The aim of this section is to show how and why the data collected was processed in the way it was. The correct processing of the data collected is vital to the overall accuracy of the study, because if any of the data is either incorrectly transcribed or recorded, then the reliability of the results of the study may be compromised. It is therefore extremely important to ensure that all data collected is cross-checked with a secondary source of collection to reduce the likelihood of errors being made in the transcription of the interview.

Ethical considerations were also an important aspect that was taken into account when processing the data collected during the study. In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, all respondents were kept anonymous. The data provided by the participants was also securely stored and destroyed once the data was no longer of use, in line with GDPR considerations. This principle was also applied to any physical notes taken during the interviews and any physical notes taken after the interviews, which contained confidential information about and from the participants.

## 6.7 Transcription of Interviews

### 6.7.1 Interview with Student

**Interviewer:** Hi, how are you? Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. Could you start by introducing yourself and telling me a little bit about your involvement in C.S.P.E. and S.P.H.E.?

**Student:** Hi, good thanks. I'm a sixth-year student here and I've done both C.S.P.E. and S.P.H.E., and I'm really involved in the out of school activities. Cycle Against Suicide is the main one I'm involved in.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me more about your experiences with C.S.P.E. and S.P.H.E.? How have these subjects been taught in your school?

**Student:** Yeah of course. C.S.P.E. was mainly focused on teaching us about our rights and responsibilities as people. We did a lot of group projects and discussed lots of social issues like human rights and environmental awareness. In S.P.H.E. we looked at topics like mental health and relationships and drugs. There were plenty more, but I think those were the most important ones. The classes were usually discussion-based, which I liked.

**Interviewer:** How valuable do you think these programmes have been for you personally?

**Student:** They've been really valuable to me anyway. C.S.P.E. opened my eyes to the wider world and told me a lot about inequality in our society and that kind of thing. S.P.H.E., on the other hand, helped me develop some good coping mechanisms like managing stress during my exams. Oh yeah, it also helped me understand the importance of mental health, and that's kind of where I got my interest in mental health and helping in any way I can. But yeah, I think both subjects have taught me things that I use on a daily basis, like communication skills and empathy.

**Interviewer:** Can you give an example of how a lesson or project in these classes had a significant impact on you?

**Student:** One project in C.S.P.E. that I think was really good was the campaign we organised to raise awareness about homelessness. We did plenty of research about it and made posters that we hung up around the school. We even held a fundraiser. It was eye-opening for sure to see how big the problem is. It felt good even being able to make a small difference. I'd

say for S.P.H.E., I think the thing that stands out the most for me was the workshop on mindfulness that we did. It actually really helped me manage my stress better, especially when it comes to exams, as I said earlier. I still use those techniques I was taught to help calm me down before my exams.

**Interviewer:** That's great to hear. So, how much do you think these programmes have impacted your social and emotional development?

**Student:** They've had a big impact for me anyway. I've become more confident socially when it comes to speaking up and talking about issues I care about. In terms of emotional development, I've learned to be stronger and understand my own feelings better. One of the big things that S.P.H.E. taught me was how to deal with conflicts and keep up healthy relationships with like my teachers, family at home and my friends.

**Interviewer:** You mentioned being involved in Cycle Against Suicide. Do you think participating in that has linked in with what you've learned in C.S.P.E. and S.P.H.E.?

**Student:** Oh yeah absolutely. Cycle Against Suicide has been an amazing experience. I think it goes really nicely with what I've learned in C.S.P.E. and SPHE. The focus on mental health awareness and support and everything like that in SPHE really got me ready for the emotional parts of Cycle Against Suicide. C.S.P.E. definitely helped me understand how important community involvement is. The practical skills that I learned while doing the campaign about homelessness in C.S.P.E. were great for Cycle Against Suicide.

**Interviewer:** And what would you say the main skills are that you picked up from CSPE that you use in Cycle Against Suicide?

**Student:** I'd say things like organising events and speaking publicly. Yeah, those would be the main ones.

**Interviewer:** That's amazing. Do you think your character education, so the things you learned about relationships and conflict resolution and public speaking, will have an impact on you in the future?

**Student:** Oh yeah absolutely. The lessons from CSPE and S.P.H.E. have definitely changed my views on lots of things. I think it's also changed how I approach challenges. I think the skills that I learned will be really useful for me in college and work. I definitely feel more ready to get out into the world now because of what I've learned.

**Interviewer:** Thank you so much for your answers. Do you have any final thoughts on how things like CSPE, S.P.H.E. and Cycle Against Suicide could be improved or expanded?

**Student:** I think these things are great already, but as with a lot of things, there's always room for improvement. Maybe a few more hands-on activities or real-world applications would be good. Maybe having more guest speakers from a wider group of backgrounds could give us some different perspectives. Overall, though, they've been really useful and enjoyable for me, so I hope they carry on.

**Interviewer:** Those are some really good suggestions. Thanks again for your time and best of luck with the rest of your school year and your exams.

**Student:** Thank you! It's been really good to talk to you.

### 6.7.2 Interview with Teacher

**Interviewer:** Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. So, to start things off, could you share a bit about your background and current role within the school?

**Teacher:** Sure, no problem. I teach C.S.P.E. and S.P.H.E. here at the school. I'm also pretty involved in the Cycle Against Suicide programme. Before this, I worked as a guidance counsellor in another school, which really gave me a lot of insight into what students go through.

**Interviewer:** That's quite a diverse background. How have your experiences in these different roles influenced your approach to character education much?

**Teacher:** My experiences have definitely shaped how I teach my students. Being a guidance counsellor taught me a lot about the emotional and psychological sides of student life. These perspectives are really useful when I'm teaching C.S.P.E. and S.P.H.E. because these subjects touch on social and ethical issues, which are all very personal. It all ties into to the idea that character education is essential for helping students become well-rounded individuals.

**Interviewer:** In your view, what are the key benefits of character education programmes like CSPE and S.P.H.E. for students?

**Teacher:** These programmes are so, so important. C.S.P.E. helps the kids understand their rights and responsibilities and get a sense of social justice. And then S.P.H.E. gives them tools to manage their personal health and relationships. The two of these combined help students develop things like critical thinking, empathy which are crucial for getting through life.

**Interviewer:** Could you elaborate on how the Cycle Against Suicide programme complements the objectives of C.S.P.E. and S.P.H.E.?

**Teacher:** Yeah of course, so the Cycle Against Suicide programme really complements C.S.P.E. and S.P.H.E. in my opinion. It raises awareness about mental health and the importance of community support. When students get involved in it, they learn about mental health issues and how to support each other. It teaches them responsibility and compassion. All of this reinforces the values we try teaching them in C.S.P.E. and S.P.H.E.. Plus, it gets them involved in a real-world project, like the homelessness campaign we did recently, which makes these lessons more tangible.

**Interviewer:** From your experience, how do students respond to these character education initiatives? Do you notice any significant changes in their attitudes or behaviours?



**Teacher:** Overall, students respond really well to these initiatives from what I've seen. They appreciate the chance to discuss real-life issues and develop their practical skills. Over time, I've seen some pretty significant changes in their attitudes and behaviours. They become more empathetic, more engaged in social issues, and a lot more willing to step up and take on leadership roles, as can be seen by some of our sixth-year student taking up ambassador positions in the Cycle Against Suicide programme. It's incredibly rewarding to see that transformation.

**Interviewer:** How do you think the Irish education system as a whole benefits from incorporating character education programmes?

**Teacher:** The whole system benefits immensely from character education. It helps produce students who are not just academically capable but also socially and morally aware, which is just as important as having academically smart children. This promotes a positive school culture and reduces bullying, which is a massive thing that we push for in our school. It also prepares students to be responsible citizens. In the long run, it contributes to a more organised and compassionate society, which is really what we're aiming for by teaching the students these things

**Interviewer:** What challenges do you face when implementing these programmes, and how do you address them?

**Teacher:** One of the main challenges is keeping the content relevant and engaging for all students. Teenagers can quite often be resistant to discussions about personal and social issues. One of the ways I try to address this is by trying to create a safe and inclusive environment where students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts. I try use different teaching methods and real-life examples to make the material relatable and easily understandable to all the students. Another challenge is balancing these programmes with academic demands, since both are important. I do find that integrating character education into everyday teaching helps manage this balance though, as when the students learn coping mechanisms from C.S.P.E. and S.P.H.E., it can help them manage academic stress better.

**Interviewer:** Finally, what advice would you give to other educators looking to enhance their character education programmes?

**Teacher:** I'd say, approach character education with genuine passion and commitment, that's a massive thing. It's also really important to create an open and respectful classroom where students feel heard and valued. I'd also say work with your colleagues and integrate character

education across different subjects to reinforce its importance. And most importantly, in my opinion, led by example. Students are much more likely to embrace and take in these values when they see them reflected in their teachers' behaviour.

**Interviewer:** Thank you so much for your insights. Your dedication to character education is really inspirational, and I'm sure your students benefit a lot from everything you do for them.

**Teacher:** Thank you. It's been great talking to you. I hope my experiences can help highlight just how important character education is in our school especially.

### 6.7.3 Interview with Parent

**Interviewer:** Hi, thanks so much for taking the time to speak with me today. To begin with, could you tell me a bit about your involvement in the school's extra-curricular activities, like Cycle Against Suicide, and what motivated you to get involved?

**Parent:** Yeah of course. I've always been passionate about mental health and character education, so when I heard about Cycle Against Suicide at my child's school, I knew I had to get involved. I help organise some of the events and try to support the kids as much as I can. It's rewarding to see the positive impact these activities have on them.

**Interviewer:** That's wonderful to hear. How has your child engaged with the character education programmes at the school? Are there any particular activities or lessons that they seem to connect with the most?

**Parent:** My child has really taken to the programme. They're particularly fond of the community service projects. I think they like getting out of school to do something more hands-on. The focus on empathy has been impactful on them for sure, and they've even started talking about doing some small projects at home.

**Interviewer:** That's fantastic. Have you noticed any changes in your child's behaviour or social development since they started participating in these character education programmes?

**Parent:** Definitely. I've noticed a big improvement in their emotional intelligence and their ability to handle stress. They're more open to discussing their feelings and have become a lot more empathetic, especially towards their classmates. I've definitely noticed that they're socially more confident and active in making friends in school and helping others both in school and out.

**Interviewer:** It's great to hear that the programme has had such a positive impact. How do you reinforce the teachings of the character education programmes at home?

**Parent:** We try to live by the same principles at home. We have regular family discussions about our values and how we can improve things like our kindness towards each other. We also do things together that promote the things they learn in school, like volunteering or even just being more mindful about our interactions with each other. I think it's all about creating an environment where what they learn in school is reflected in daily life. That's the best way that I've found to help reinforce those kinds of values.

**Interviewer:** It sounds like you have a very well-rounded approach. Can you share any specific examples of how these discussions or activities have influenced your child's behaviour at home?

**Parent:** Yeah sure. For example, after a session on empathy in school, as part of Cycle Against Suicide I think, my child suggested we start a family tradition of writing thank-you notes to people who've helped us in big or small ways. It's become a lovely habit, and it's really helped them appreciate the people in their life more. I think we all needed it to be honest, it's been great for us as a family. Oh, and also, they've started trying to resolve small fights between them and their siblings with what they've learned at school, which has been really impressive to watch, considering they're doing that of their own accord.

**Interviewer:** That's really inspiring. So lastly, what advice would you give to other parents who are looking to reinforce character education teachings at home?

**Parent:** I'd say start by being a role model. Our children learn a lot by observing us. As parents, we are one of if not the biggest influence on our child's behaviour since they pick up on our behaviours from a very young age. Another thing I'd say is to make it a family effort, so discuss the values and lessons that they learn in school and find ways to practice them together. Engaging in community service is great too. It's really important to support each other too and make it fun. I think it's all about creating a supportive environment where our children can grow into themselves naturally.

**Interviewer:** Thank you so much for sharing your experiences. Your insights are incredibly valuable for my study.

**Parent:** You're very welcome! I'm glad I could help. Good luck with your thesis!

## 6.8 Evaluation of Research Results

This section will consist of an evaluation of the findings and data gathered from the interviews conducted with the pupil, teacher and parent. This section will also consider the relevance of the data to the research questions posed at the beginning of the practical part.

What follows is a restatement of the research questions formulated on the basis of the research aims.

1. *How do students in Irish schools perceive the relevance of character education to their personal growth and societal responsibilities?*
2. *What are teachers' perspectives on the role of character education in supporting students' moral and ethical development within the Irish education system?*
3. *In what ways do parents contribute to the reinforcement of character education teachings in the home and how valuable do they believe it to be to their child's moral and social development?*

After conducting the interviews, it can be observed from the transcriptions that all the participants were enthusiastic and forthcoming about their experiences with the character education programmes. After analysing the data from the interviews, it can be seen that the information provided by the participants will be very useful in effectively answering the research questions and therefore concluding on the accuracy of the hypotheses.

## **6.9 Answering Research Questions**

### **6.9.1 First research question**

The data that was collected during the interviews contains a lot of detail and therefore will be extremely useful in accurately answering the research questions. The first research questions that was posed was *“How do students in Irish schools perceive the relevance of character education to their personal growth and societal responsibilities?”*

After reading the interview with the student, we can draw several conclusions that will help us to answer this research question accurately. The first conclusion that can be drawn from the content of the interview with the student is that the student was enthusiastic and happy to talk about the different topics that were raised in the questions. From the student's reactions and answers to the questions, we can conclude that the programmes offered in the school are having a positive effect and that the students generally have a positive attitude towards the usefulness and value of the character education programmes offered in the school. If this were not the case, the students would not have responded so positively when asked about the different character education programmes in the school. This is the first indication that the students perceive the programmes as relevant and useful to their education.

The second conclusion that can be drawn from the interview with the pupil is that the school provides many opportunities for pupils to gain practical and real-life experience that engages them in the community in a relevant way. For example, the campaign to raise awareness of homelessness gave students a tangible way of seeing the impact of their actions, however small the difference made by the fundraiser. The experience students gain from seeing the difference they make to a real-world problem will help them grow personally and become more aware of the responsibilities they have in a modern society. This conclusion also helps to answer the research question in a positive way.

Finally, the last conclusion that can be drawn from the interview with the student is that the character education programmes have a significant impact on the overall development of the students, both academically and personally. The student in the interview stated that the techniques learned in the S.P.H.E. subject still help them to manage and cope with the stress that arises in relation to exams. The student also stated that they have become much better at dealing with challenges that arise in their daily lives and feel that these techniques will be of great benefit

to them in college. A final way in which we can see that the students have benefited from the character education programmes is through the increased development of their empathy and communication skills. From talking to the students, it is clear that they are confident speakers and passionate about speaking up and advocating for issues that are important to them.

With all these conclusions in mind in relation to the interview with the student, an answer can be formulated for the first research question:

**Question:** “How do students in Irish schools perceive the relevance of character education to their personal growth and societal responsibilities

**Answer:** Students in Irish secondary schools value the character education programmes offered to them. They respect the way the subjects are taught and value the opportunities they are given to develop socially, emotionally and morally.

### 6.9.2 Second Research Question

The second research question that was posed was as follows: *“What are teachers’ perspectives on the role of character education in supporting students’ moral and ethical development within the Irish education system?”*

In order to answer this second research question, the second teacher interview needs to be analysed to understand how teachers perceive the role of character education in their schools. After reading the interview with the teacher, there are several conclusions that can be drawn to help build an accurate answer to the research question. The first conclusion that can be drawn is that teachers who are actively involved in extra-curricular activities and teaching C.S.P.E. and S.P.H.E. are very passionate about ensuring that their students receive a holistic and balanced education. The teacher interviewed understands the need for a balance between character education and academic education and aims to use teaching methods that allow students to grow in both senses.

The second conclusion that can be drawn from the data collected during the interview is that the teacher cares about her students and wants to create a safe, comfortable and open environment where each student can grow morally, ethically and academically at his or her own pace. The teacher understands that each pupil has their own individual needs and wants to create a classroom where each pupil can freely express their feelings and opinions. From the way in which this teacher described her desire to create a safe classroom environment where all students can grow morally and ethically without fear, it can be concluded that teachers have a high level of respect for the role of character education programmes in the Irish education system.

With this analysis complete, we can form an answer for the research questions posed in relation not teachers and their perceptions of character education and its value for helping students grown morally and ethically.

**Question:** *“What are teachers’ perspectives on the role of character education in supporting students’ moral and ethical development within the Irish education system?”*

**Answer:** Teachers in Irish secondary schools have provided a valuable insight into the role of character education in supporting the moral and ethical development of students. Teachers care deeply about the development of each individual student and the impact their teaching will have on each student in the future. They wish to create a classroom environment in which students can safely grow and express themselves, believing that character education



programmes in the Irish education system are vital to the creation of responsible and self-reliant adults who will positively contribute to society.

### 6.9.3 Third Research Question

The third and final research question that was posed was as follows: *‘In what ways do parents contribute to the reinforcement of character education teachings in the home and how valuable do they believe it to be to their child’s moral and social development?’*

The third and final interview with a pupil's parent is analysed in order to develop an answer to the final research question. The main focus of the interview was to find out how involved the parents of the pupils are in the extra-curricular activities offered by the school and how the parents try to reinforce the values taught in the school.

The first conclusion that can be drawn from the interview with the parents is that the school appreciates the help it receives from parents in organising extra-curricular activities for programmes such as Cycle Against Suicide. By involving parents in these activities, it can be assumed that the school is trying to give parents an idea of what their child is involved in at school. This will help parents to take better approaches to reinforcing the values taught through character education programmes.

The second conclusion that can be drawn from the interview with the parents is that parents are more actively seeking to reinforce at home the values taught by character education programmes in schools through activities and regular conversations with their children. This type of activity can make a positive contribution to the moral and social development of pupils, hopefully complementing the development promoted at school. It is clear from the interview that parents are actively trying to include activities in their children's lives that embody the principles of moral, social and ethical development. These activities can have a positive impact on their children's future by ensuring that these values are instilled in them from an early age.

Finally, the last conclusion to be drawn from the interview with the parents is that they believe that the character education programmes offered by the school are invaluable to their child's character development. From the changes that the parents described in their child since the child began attending these programmes, we can see that the combination of an open and safe place to grow at school and a similar environment at home contributes greatly to a child's growth and development throughout secondary school. Parents have mentioned that their child has begun to recommend activities at home that further reinforce the values instilled in them through the character education programmes. This is an extremely positive and hopeful piece of

information, as it shows that the efforts of teachers and parents in the character education system have been extremely successful.

Taking all this information into account, we can now create an answer for the research question that was posed.

**Question:** *In what ways do parents contribute to the reinforcement of character education teachings in the home and how valuable do they believe it to be to their child's moral and social development?*

**Answer:** Parents contribute greatly to reinforcing the character education lessons in the home through the use of activities and discussions. It is clear from the information gathered during the interviews that parents value the moral and social development that their child achieves through participation in these character education programmes. It is also abundantly clear that the programmes, combined with the reinforcement of the same values in the home, contribute to the development of more independent, socially and emotionally aware children.

## **6.10 Assessing the Limitations of the Study**

The purpose of this section is to discuss the limitations of the study that may affect the accuracy or generalisability of the results. No study will be able to cover all possibilities, so when conducting a study, it is best to choose the size and type of sample that is most likely to provide reliable and useful data for the study.

The practical part of this thesis focuses on a qualitative research method using semi-structured interviews with a student, a teacher and a parent to gain an insight into the evaluation of character education programmes in the Irish education system. As a qualitative research method was used, the sample size selected was smaller than that of quantitative research. The fact that the sample size of participants in the interviews was small did not affect the overall accuracy of the information gathered, as all participants had a deep and knowledgeable understanding of the issues discussed.

The main limitation of the study is that of generalisation. As the sample size of participants was relatively small, the results of this study cannot be easily generalised across different levels of schooling or even to other schools. This is the main limitation of the study. However, this limitation does not affect the aim of answering the research questions and therefore proving the hypothesis either true or false.

To conclude the section on the evaluation of the research findings, the interviews provided valuable and insightful information that was extremely useful in answering the research questions accurately and in detail. The limitations of the study are unavoidable given the circumstances, but these limitations have been and will continue to be considered throughout the remainder of the analysis and discussion.

## **6.11 Suggestions for further research**

In the process of studying and researching the issues of character education and character education systems in the Irish education system, many areas of discussion and research emerged that were previously unknown. Many of these topics were considered to be too broad, too large or too ambitious for an bachelor's thesis. However, the topics uncovered during the research for this thesis could be of great interest for further study.

The main area of research that emerged that would be too broad to investigate for a bachelor's thesis was that of the effectiveness of character education programmes in the Irish education system across multiple primary and secondary schools. This study would cover a number of primary schools and a number of secondary schools. Ideally, the study would include a mix of schools located in both affluent and less affluent areas of the country in order to gain insight into the effectiveness of these programmes in different economic areas. By studying multiple schools and conducting multiple interviews, along with other research methods such as surveys and questionnaires, a much more diverse picture of the use, effectiveness and overall value of character education programmes in the Irish education system can be developed.

## 6.12 Discussion

This section of the practical part will focus on examining the research objectives in relation to the research questions, with the aim of determining whether the research objectives have been met based on the information gathered from the interviews and the concluded answers to the research questions.

To revise, the following are the research objectives that were set out at the start of the practical part:

- 1. Investigate the value of character education programmes in Irish schools to the parents*
- 2. Investigate the value of the schools' character education programmes to the students*
- 3. Investigate how teachers teach character education programmes in the Irish education system and how valuable they believe it to be to their students.*

The research questions were then formulated based off the research objectives. What follows are the research questions:

- 1. How do students in Irish schools perceive the relevance of character education to their personal growth and societal responsibilities?*
- 2. What are teachers' perspectives on the role of character education in supporting students' moral and ethical development within the Irish education system?*
- 3. In what ways do parents contribute to the reinforcement of character education teachings in the home and how valuable do they believe it to be to their child's moral and social development?*

Finally, a hypothesis was formed based on the research questions, as a statement that will be proven either correct or incorrect based on the evidence and data collected during the research period. The hypothesis is as follows:

*“Character education programmes in Irish schools are valued by students, teachers, and parents for their role in promoting ethical behaviour and supporting personal development, rather than solely for academic achievement”*

This hypothesis was the statement that guided all the research involved in the practical part of this thesis. The aim of this section is to investigate whether the hypotheses can be proven either correct or incorrect.

Based on the answers to the research questions, which were formed from the analysis of the data obtained during the interviews with a pupil, a teacher and a parent, it was concluded that all the research questions were answered accurately and in a way that supported the sentiment of the questions. We can now review the research aims and determine whether the research question helped to achieve the research aims.

The first research aim was to "Investigate the value of character education programmes in Irish schools to parents". This research objective was complemented by the research question "How do parents contribute to the reinforcement of character education in the home and how valuable do they perceive it to be for the moral and social development of their child". Looking at the analysis of the data obtained from the interview with the parents, we can see that a conclusion was reached about the value of character education to the parents of secondary school children. It was concluded that parents are one of the biggest influences on a child's emotional, moral and social development and therefore it is vital that they reinforce the values that children are taught in school. We saw that this was clearly reflected in the actions of the parents and that the child benefited as a result. This supports the feeling expressed in the hypothesis and helps to prove it correct.

The second research aim was to "investigate the value of schools' character education programmes to students". This research aim then led to the formulation of the research question "How do students in Irish schools perceive the relevance of character education to their personal development and social responsibility? The data collected during the interview with the sixth year student provided valuable insight in answering this question. The student expressed a deep

gratitude for the character education programmes in which they had participated and, more impressively, they were able to recognise that their character had developed significantly as a result of their involvement in these programmes. Having listened to the students' perspective and enthusiasm as they talked about the character education programmes, it is clear that these programmes are highly valued by the students and can have a tremendous impact on the overall moral, social and ethical development of the students. This is again a positive answer to one of the research questions, confirming that the research objective has been met to an acceptable standard. It also means that the hypothesis has once again been supported by positive research finding.

Finally, the final research aim was *"To explore how teachers teach character education programmes in the Irish education system and how valuable they consider it to be for their students"*. This research aim was then translated into a research question to reflect the aim of the aim. The research question that developed from this aim was: *"What are teachers' perspectives on the role of character education in supporting the moral and ethical development of students within the Irish education system?"* This research question was successfully answered using the data collected during the teacher interview. The information provided by the teacher gave some great insights into the different methods that teachers can use to make character education fun and engaging for students. These methods were also seen as ideal for promoting the reinforcement of the values taught at home, by introducing pupils to practical activities while building social and emotional skills. This combined teaching can then be used by the child to further reinforce the values taught at school at home. The teacher stated in the interview that she would recommend to any aspiring teacher to create an open and respectful classroom where pupils can express themselves freely, as this would benefit the overall development of every child in the class. Once again, the hypothesis was supported by an insightful and encouraging response to a research question.

To conclude the discussion section of the practical part of this thesis, it is clear that all the research questions were answered in a very detailed and accurate manner due to the valuable information provided by the interviewees. This then led to the completion of the research objectives as all the aims of the study were achieved. Based on the responses provided by the participants and the resulting answers to the research questions, it can be concluded that the hypothesis



*“Character education programmes in Irish schools are valued by students, teachers, and parents for their role in promoting ethical behaviour and supporting personal development, rather than solely for academic achievement”*

can be confirmed to be correct and true. After researching the topics, conducting relevant interviews, processing the data, and answering the research questions, the hypothesis can be shown to be true and accurate to the data that was collected and the behaviour that was observed.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this thesis was to take an in-depth look at character education in the Irish school system, focusing on its theoretical principles, its practical applications, and the views of the students, teachers, and parents involved. The main aim was to look at what character education is, how it is taught, how people think about it, and how it affects the moral, ethical, and social development of students.

The thesis looked in detail at what morals, ethics, virtues, and values are and how they should be taught as part of character education. Using the work of well-known researchers such as Thomas Lickona, Lawrence Kohlberg and Kristján Kristjánsson, the study emphasised the importance of teaching moral and ethical values. The theoretical part emphasised that character education isn't just about doing well in school; it's also about helping young people develop social and emotional skills, moral reasoning and moral decision-making. These basic ideas highlighted the importance of teaching children qualities such as empathy, resilience, honesty and social responsibility.

The practical part of the thesis used semi-structured interviews with students, teachers and parents to gather qualitative data about how character education programmes are run and how well they work in Irish schools. The responses showed that most people agreed that these programmes were helpful. Character education helped students to grow in many ways. It prepared them for problems they might face in real life and gave them a sense of social responsibility. Teachers emphasised the importance of having an open and welcoming classroom that helps students to grow both academically and personally. They said they were committed to promoting a healthy education that builds character as well as intelligence. Parents noticed the positive changes in their children and emphasised the importance of reinforcing the values learned at school. This created a strong support system for character development.

Character education is highly valued by all parties for its holistic approach to student development, as this study has further demonstrated. It is a very important part of developing students into responsible, moral and caring people who can make a positive difference in the world. Collaboration between schools and families was found to be key to making these programmes work better.

In summary, this thesis makes a worthwhile contribution to the field of character education by providing a thorough examination of its theoretical foundations, real-life applications and hoped-for benefits. The study argues that character education should remain an important part of the Irish school system and emphasises the importance of character education in developing well-rounded individuals. The findings show that character education should remain an important part of the curriculum. This should be supported by teachers and parents working together to make school a good place for children to learn morals and ethics. This thesis aims to encourage teachers to support and promote character education programmes, which will help to raise a more caring, responsible and morally mature generation in the future.

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