REIMAGINING TRANSFORMATION IN PRIMARY EDUCATION THROUGH VIRTUE COACHING: REALISING THE POTENTIAL OF EVERY CHILD TO CREATE SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract: Over thirty educational agencies collaborated on 'The Case for Global Learning' (Global Learning Network and Development Education Research Centre, 2024), urgently calling for a United Kingdom (UK) national strategy for global learning (GL). Central to this conversation is elevating student awareness around sustainability and equity, with renewed hope for current and future generations. Despite this much-needed renewed focus, GL frameworks lack a direct approach to inner student transformation and children's potential to advance in virtue development for the co-creation of hopeful social change. The lack of a statutory primary GL programme reflects a paternalistic notion that children cannot engage with challenging concepts and fails to acknowledge their potential to connect with their higher, more selfless, nature.

Two processes essential to transformation occur at the level of individual and collective betterment. This article focuses on the former process: teaching virtues as building blocks for individual transformation. Teacher-supported inner reflection in a virtues-empowered school culture is proposed, to release each child's potential to create positive change. Although not a key focus, reflexive pedagogy is mentioned as a necessary factor in conscious classrooms empowering purposeful student-agency, without which the effects of inner reflection are limited. Through reflective inquiry and application of virtues, schools could create a culture that contributes to bettering the world, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2017). Critical thinking skills that support dialogue, such as through Philosophy for Children (P4C), can increase students' sense of responsibility. Likewise, opportunities for service-oriented action can support students to apply virtues and widen awareness of the needs of

fellow humans and our planet, empowering small scale, age-related contributions to humanity's global struggles. Observations shared are within the context of thirty years of UK and international primary teaching practice, as well as teaching on the 3-11 Initial Teacher Training undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

Key words: Global Learning; Hope; Inner Transformation; Student Agency; Virtues Coaching.

Introduction: nurturing inner potential for global change

Schools play a critical role in preparing students for an interconnected world and in addressing global challenges through global learning (UNESCO, 2017). To effectively equip students with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours needed to advance social equality, sustainability and justice, a transformative framework is essential (Global Learning Network and DERC, 2024). This article acknowledges that transformation must occur at both individual and collective levels. However, a meaningful shift towards ethical global citizenship requires more than curriculum content – it demands inner transformation: engaging each student's higher or spiritual self to foster critical awareness and a sense of responsibility. This inner dimension remains largely unexplored within the current global learning conversation. Therefore, this article focuses on the individual dimension of transformation, specifically the teaching of virtues as building blocks for inner growth and ethical development.

In the National Curriculum, the Spiritual, Moral, Social, and Cultural (SMSC) dimension offers scope for student reflection, emphasising curiosity about inner values, others and the wider world (Ofsted, 2019a: 59–60; 2019b: 40). Whole-school investment in character education has shown promise, particularly when values are modelled by staff and integrated into the curriculum rather than treated as a standalone initiative. However, initiatives like the emphasis on British values in the 2014 Department for Education policy, risk moving SMSC towards conformity, rather than shared spiritual values that unite diverse cultural and religious groups (Moulin-Stozek, 2020: 10).

Global citizenship, defined as 'an awareness of self, the world and one's position within it' (Kraska et al., 2018: 87), aligns with spiritual values across

faiths. Baha'is, for example, view spirituality as living in our true, higher nature (Clarken, 2024), while humanists describe it as the 'deepest values and meanings by which people live' (Sheldrake, 2007: 1-2). Drawing on Soka teachings, Sharma (2020) underscores inner transformation through spiritual values as a foundation for social progress. Although abstract to some teachers, these concepts reflect familiar pedagogies – such as conflict resolution, growth mindset and collaborative dialogue – that support inclusive learning and widening perspectives. For many choosing the teaching profession, unlocking students' inner potential is core to their role, warranting renewed attention to the spiritual dimension of global learning. Amidst pressing environmental and social crises (Waldron, Mallon and Kavanagh, 2021; IPCC, 2018), UNESCO urges educators to remould learning opportunities for social change and to cultivate new behaviours that support global competencies aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO 2017; 2021).

Whilst tools like the Global Competence Framework – designed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) – assess empathy, respect and responsible action toward sustainability and collective well-being (OECD, 2019: 166), there is no mention of the inner processes required to develop these skills. English programmes for global citizenship (GC) and education for sustainable development (ESD), which promote global competency in secondary schools, remain non-statutory. In primary schools their adoption is inconsistent, often reflecting the values of senior leadership. Critics like Farid-Arbab (2016) argue that educational curricula often lack intent to nurture socially conscious minds, or equip students for critical issues that face them and their world. Dewey stressed the vital role of schools in connecting learning to real-life challenges, warning against the 'isolation of the school – its isolation from life' (Dewey, 1938: 89 cited in Landorf and Wadley, 2021). Without regular, guided opportunities for social action, change tends to remain at the individual rather than systemic level (Storms, 2012). Furthermore, student agency is rarely empowered where action is predominantly teacher-led.

This article explores three key questions. First, how can primary teachers better realise each child's agency for hopeful social change? Regular opportunities to engage with real-world issues combined with critical thinking and

inner reflection can strengthen students' capacity to become co-creators of meaningful, service-oriented action.   UNESCO's *Reimagining our Futures Together* report envisions this as: 'equipping [students] to collaborate with others and developing their agency, responsibility, empathy, critical and creative thinking, alongside a full range of social and emotional skills' (UNESCO, 2021: 56).   Second, what are the building blocks for global competence?   Citizenship programmes often overlook underlying neoliberal values – those that prioritise competition over empathy, consumption over sharing, self-progress over social responsibility and power over justice – thus undermining the transformative potential of global learning (Selby and Kagawa, 2010).   This article proposes a model rooted in virtues, which Aristotle referred to as the building blocks to a set of values.   Echoing this, Gadotti (2008) describes the virtues of justice and compassion as foundational to rebalancing economic priorities over human values.   Third, how do virtues shape student-led social action?   The practical application of virtues can foster in students a deeper sense of responsibility and shared humanity.   A shift in inner thoughts and attitudes is positioned as central to the school's role in nurturing service-oriented, eco-conscious and globally minded behaviours.   By nurturing students' inner world through reflective practice and virtues-focused learning, schools can cultivate sustainable habits that contribute to positive change, locally and globally.

Whilst not the central focus of this article, reflexive pedagogy is crucial in facilitating such inner transformation (Idrissi, Engel and Pashby, 2020). Freire's concept of critical pedagogy has profoundly influenced ESD, underscoring the need for learning experiences that challenge systemic inequalities (Freire, 1985).   Through this process, students can become active protagonists in their communities and contributors to a more just world.   Bourn stresses the importance of global learning programmes that address systemic injustices underlying poverty.   He notes that whilst inner transformation is a gradual process, educators can observe attitudinal shifts as students engage in deeper reflection, dialogue and critical thinking to challenge stereotypes and assumptions (Bourn, 2022).   Unexamined teaching practices and materials can perpetuate power imbalances, evidenced by scholars such as Andreotti (2006), who warn educators of the need for a critical dimension to global citizenship education. Thus, ongoing professional development for school leaders and teachers is vital,

not only to maintain accurate awareness of global issues but also to sustain their role as agents of change. Leadership commitment is essential to supporting educators to model and embed virtues such as fairness, open-mindedness and curiosity. When paired with critical reflection, these virtues empower schools to challenge harmful stereotypes and social inequalities.

Individual transformation: the coaching of virtues

The place for virtues coaching in the curriculum

Considering where virtues coaching may sit in the primary curriculum, superficial mention of fairness and kindness is shoehorned into a school's Personal, Social and Emotional learning (PSHE) programme, often including Social and Emotional Learning, teaching skills for emotional self-regulation and relationships. However, the key aims of PSHE are to develop knowledge and skills for children to make 'safe and informed' choices, not necessarily ethical ones (DfE, 2020). A didactic approach within the English National Curriculum limits opportunities for inner transformation and undermines students' potential as co-creators of a hopeful future (Wyse and Manyukhina, 2024). Arguably, PSHE programmes would be more impactful if complemented with virtues coaching that supports each child in connecting with their higher, more selfless, nature. Sustainability and Altruism through Project-Based Learning (SAPBL) is examined later as an ESD framework that integrates virtues education with sustainable development (Haslip et al., 2025).

Student councils, eco committees and assemblies, provide natural collective spaces for student voices to engage with global citizenship and virtue development. Whilst English lessons in debating, public speaking and persuasive writing strengthen oracy, without virtues such as humility, truthfulness and open-mindedness, these skills risk reinforcing neoliberal values – superficiality and a single-minded desire to be right – rather than fostering self-reflection and metacognition.

Coaching and embedding virtues into school culture

Aristotle's key to a virtuous life was rooted in participatory citizenship practices and the cultural embedding of moral virtues. This vision resonates today with

many primary schools, whose mission statements emphasise such virtues as compassion and truth-seeking, reflecting an aspiration for student transformation. However, translating this vision into a tangible culture requires embedding virtues through whole-school focus and teacher modelling. When virtues are collectively valued as important building blocks to growth, students and teachers can engage in non-judgemental dialogue and foster reflective practice, without evoking shame or condescension. One tool that supports embedding virtues is the 'Framework for Character Education' developed by the Jubilee Centre (2017), which categorises intellectual, moral, civic, and performance virtues. They reject a fixed list of virtues, acknowledging that the expression of virtues varies in intensity depending on individual circumstances and developmental stages. Smith and Pye (2018), co-developers of this programme, trained staff to teach, model and identify virtues in students' actions. Concepts introduced through assemblies were embedded in classroom practice, strengthening positive relationships across the school community. Features of each virtue were taught explicitly using a sequence of lessons from *The Virtues Project*, designed by Popov (2000). Introducing virtues as a child's inner strength, Popov encourages teachers to seek out and acknowledge virtues being developed by each child at their own stage of development. A useful point she makes in addressing challenging behaviour is the importance of student ownership in goal setting, and using sensitive teacher input to cultivate potential in a latent virtue, rather than judge unwanted behaviours.

Inner reflection can deepen further through class discussions or journalling, where students celebrate personal progress in virtues practiced. Peer and adult coaching to 'catch' a virtue supports resilience, essential in overcoming defeatist resistance. Teacher reflection can be assisted through self-assessment tools, such as the Early Childhood Educators' Spiritual Practices in the Classroom (ECE-SPC) instrument (Mata-McMahon, Haslip and Kruse, 2023). The ECE-SPC identifies teacher strengths in supporting students' spiritual nourishment and areas for improvement in nurturing practice. With deeper reflection on school culture, mission statements to create socially conscious, just citizens could become better realised, strengthening inclusive values – such as the oneness of the human race and respect for our shared planet – amongst parents, staff and students.

A depth to teaching virtues systematically

Building sufficient conceptual depth is crucial to create new habits like truth-seeking, alertness to prejudice, consultation and the desire to serve others. Just as progression maps in core subjects support teacher assessment to identify attainable next steps in knowledge and skills, systematic layering in progression and depth of virtues can ultimately build capacity for inner transformation. For example, building virtues of curiosity, patience and responsibility can guide children in higher-order ethical decision-making. The nineteenth-century education activist 'Abdu'l-Baha upheld the belief in children's innate goodness emphasising that it must be cultivated through systematic teaching, exploration and the practice of virtues. His father, Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Baha'i Faith, likened the role of teachers to that of miners. Through critical teaching opportunities, he regarded it as their duty to excavate and refine each child's innate 'gems' (virtues), so they may be of optimal benefit to society. 'Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom' (cited in Bahá'u'lláh, 1978: 260).

In this analogy, the unrefined qualities of a rock-like gem initially remain hidden – its potential to refract light unrealised until mined and polished. Correspondingly, through intentional teaching and daily practice of virtues, students' inner capacities can become visible and impactful. Foundational virtues such as kindness and caring can build on each other to create higher-order capacities like service for others, perspective taking and ethical decision making. This capacity-building mirrors a depth in progression in subjects like mathematics, where understanding foundational operational skills can be applied to solve complex problems involving decimals and fractions. Similarly, a value like generosity may initially appear as simple sharing in the early years but when developed alongside qualities such as patience and tolerance in older children aged nine to eleven years, it could evolve into meaningful acts of local service. Agency and commitment can be further strengthened where empathy supports students to identify others' needs and selflessness fosters service where recognition is not sought after. A systematic depth to teaching virtues supports authentic inner transformation, without which there is a superficial tendency to express virtues when someone else is watching, for manipulative gain. However,

encouragement and recognition of the practice of virtues is a necessary part of the nurturing process for extrinsic motivation to gradually become more intrinsic.

Applying virtues for student-led action

Applying virtues that promote perspective-taking and ethical collaboration are important in adulthood for fostering a united workforce, as shown by a study on the impact of virtues-based training in a social enterprise (UK Baha'i Office of Public Affairs and Apax, 2025). Sadly, many workplaces appear to have lost this alignment with core human values, often prioritising economic outcomes at the expense of social well-being (Giroux, 2022). In schools, while staff training may introduce teachers to virtues such as tolerance and inclusiveness, there is a need for sustained virtues-based professional development. Such training can empower educators to support students in the holistic and practical application of virtues, ultimately preparing them for meaningful social engagement.

An effective virtues-based school programme must provide students with authentic opportunities to apply the virtues they develop in ways that encourage service-oriented and responsible behaviour. The previously mentioned SAPBL moral framework supports this aim by promoting the integration of virtue embodiment with sustainable development. Through collaborative student-led projects, co-designed with teachers in response to local sustainability issues, learners are encouraged to engage with empathy and compassion. These experiences contribute to the well-being of others and the environment, while strengthening altruistic behaviour and fostering development of a global moral identity (Blaisdell et al., 2024). Gradually, students start to identify as global citizens with a shared responsibility for their planet and fellow humans, appreciating 'solidarity, care, and love for all people as members of one's complete human family' (Haslip et al., 2025: 5). Teachers trained in SAPBL have reported greater commitment to teaching challenging ESD issues, as well as raised student and teacher consciousness. A culture of increased kindness has been reported alongside the pursuit of local and global action.

To support the meaningful application of virtues in real-life contexts, higher order critical thinking skills must be developed in parallel. These skills enable students to analyse situations, consider multiple perspectives and start to

evaluate ethical complexities to make informed, principled choices. It is essential that teachers carefully align responsibilities with each student's developmental stage and capacity. By working within the student's zone of proximal development – where new learning occurs just beyond current understanding within an emotionally safe space (Vygotsky, 1978) – educators can sustain engagement, and ensure that participation in social action fosters a sense of hope and agency, rather than confusion or despair. Experiential pedagogies, such as Forest School, create environments where students can inquire, test solutions and reflect meaningfully, while simultaneously cultivating virtues such as compassion, curiosity and patience (Kalla et al., 2022). To illustrate the application of virtues in student-led action, the following examples pair closely related virtues to highlight their subtle distinctions.

Developing the virtues of curiosity and justice

For authentic student-led action, it is essential to spark children's curiosity through inquiry. Teachers who cling rigidly to the role of expert impedes student agency, which occurs best when they step into the role of facilitator. By engaging students with rich provocations, the virtue of curiosity can be stimulated. Giroux and Paul (2022: 8) call on students 'to think, doubt, question, and expand their critical capacities to be reflective about themselves, others, and the larger world'. Students with a weak foundation in critical thinking skills may resist new learning and allow limiting beliefs to sustain neoliberal attitudes. In adulthood, we see how this can exacerbate division and deepen an intent into defending biased and potentially harmful points of view. Curiosity, when not guided by the complementary virtue of justice, may promote self-interest and obscure the ethical implications of actions. The International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (PYP) capitalises on children's natural curiosity, by setting time at the start of each unit to support each student's learning questions. Provocations to spark this may include ambiguous images or posed problems that develop curiosity as children try to create meaning. Question-layering is also used by teachers to deepen criticality, as they plan questions that are factual, conceptual and debateable (IBO, 2020). Examples of debatable questions include: Should we have country borders and immigration laws? What are the perspectives of newcomers versus longtime residents in a city? What responsibilities does a country have towards refugees? Thus, questions arising from curiosity can evolve

into more conceptual inquiries, widening perspectives and factors of causation and fostering a sense of justice.

In the context of climate change, teachers could support students through inquiry to recognise the disproportionate impact of global warming on communities in the global South, fostering dialogue on the profound inequalities in our human family. Case studies showing local organisations collaboratively addressing injustice could foster hope, appreciation of diversity and further curiosity, avoiding paralysing feelings of pity or apathy that often result from crisis-based learning. Sharing stories of youth who act as global agents of change further promotes solidarity and a shared humanity working for justice. Ultimately, applying justice in student-led inquiry can cultivate advocacy and responsible action, progressing beyond passive recognition of unfairness.

Developing the virtues of reflection and detachment

An analysis of discussion-based inquiry suggests that students' initial thinking broadens, allowing greater detachment when considering peer perspectives. However, this requires well-designed small group classroom experiences, with reflection on shared goals (EEF, 2018). Approaches like Philosophy for Children (P4C) enable children as young as five years old to engage in collaborative dialogue, active listening and conceptual reflection, skills necessary for leading social action. Stimuli that can elicit multiple perspectives help students question unexamined beliefs and generate new insights. Unlike debate set-ups, a truth-seeking process is prioritised over winning or absolutist thinking. With clear facilitation, students learn to think critically and creatively in a safe environment – here shame has no place. The ability to reconsider previously held viewpoints without fear of judgement cultivates the virtue of detachment. This enables authentic action, through increased awareness of others' needs and reduced self-centred thinking.

Developing the virtues of empathy and consideration

Empathy and consideration for people and the planet must be integrated into subject content, to invite students to put themselves in others' shoes and switch perspectives, thus prompting solution-oriented social action grounded in authentic inquiry. Harvard's Project Zero educators designed visible thinking

routines to support students' reflective processes (Ritchhart et al., 2011). The 'See, Think, Wonder' routine, for instance, engages students with a stimulus that prompts observation, interpretation and questioning, encouraging deeper reflection and avoiding superficial responses. When learning about potentially traumatic global issues, engaging with empathy and consideration can deepen conceptual understanding and critical thinking, beyond fear or sympathy. However, providing a balance of stimuli that provoke diverse responses and challenge stereotypes is important; teachers must carefully consider how to share important issues of climate change, global poverty and gender equality, in ways that widen perspectives and engage children in metacognition (Bourn et al., 2016). Overexposure to distressing or one-dimensional images – for example, of fearful children in troubled settings – can reinforce harmful assumptions, such as: 'poor people are pitiful', 'safety exists only in familiarity', 'environmental issues affect only those less advantaged than me' or 'these issues are not my responsibility'. Such responses undermine a sense of global citizenship.

Developing the virtues of service and responsibility

Turning inwardly allows students to uncover their core responsibilities towards humanity and the planet, often inspiring the desire to act and serve collaboratively. The Baha'i International Community has documented grassroots social action projects rooted in virtues-based transformation. One example shows youth engaged in a virtues-based programme, who demonstrated responsibility and service during a natural disaster, and were empowered to support their local community armed with hope rather than paralysis (Dugal, 2019). Of course, when exploring service opportunities, teachers must remain mindful of paternalistic attitudes that frame service as charity, rather than mutual learning and the questioning of assumptions (Andreotti, 2006). The potential of transformative education depends, in part, on the teacher's willingness to turn inwardly and examine their own values and unconscious biases when guiding student-led social action.

Conclusion

For decades, nations have addressed global issues through frameworks largely disconnected from the full spectrum of human virtues. The climate crisis is primarily tackled as a scientific or economic issue- approaches that overlook the

spiritual and ethical dimensions for collective action. As Haslip et al. (2025: 4) argue, 'the next generation will not broadly commit itself to the responsibilities of sustainability and human rights without learning to transcend self-interest'. Giroux urges teachers:

> "to guide young people to be informed, active, creative, and socially responsible members of society and the larger world. They have a responsibility to educate young people to be not only knowledgeable and critically informed, but also compassionate and caring, refusing to allow the spark of justice to go dead in themselves and the larger society" (Giroux, 2022, cited in Giroux and Paul, 2022: 167-8).

While educators are united in the importance of teaching beyond knowledge and skills (UNESCO, 2017), global challenges require a deeper focus on how we equip students to develop the building blocks for global competencies. In sum, global learning must be rooted in the cultivation of virtues if it is to inspire meaningful, sustained social action. Primary education has transformative potential – not only to impart knowledge but to nurture student agency. Embedding virtues within school culture, fostering their development in teachers, and modelling them through senior leadership all help create the conditions for service-oriented action. Frameworks like SAPBL offer opportunities for students to critically engage with injustice, and reflect deeply on their role in shaping a more equitable world. Within these learning spaces, grounded in both reflection and action, children can begin to imagine what it is possible to achieve together for collective betterment.

Future research is recommended to measure the impact of virtue-development on fostering student agency and promoting service-oriented action. Additionally, there is a need to design classroom tools that evaluate sustainable attitudes and behaviours, rooted in concepts such as shared humanity, rights and responsibilities from early education onwards (Lopez-Claros, Dahl and Groff, 2020). Longitudinal studies tracking these impacts into secondary education would offer insights for further avenues of research.

To realise the goals of the 2030 Agenda in upcoming years, a wave of new ESD initiatives is anticipated to advance ethical eco-pedagogy. Whilst the wheels of education reform often grind slowly, especially when calling for deep inner transformation, the desire for change towards a more equitable and sustainable education is palpable amongst educators and stakeholders. Ultimately, what higher purpose can education serve than to raise a global citizenship mindset that empowers students to contribute positively and meaningfully to their world?

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