Character Education & Mentoring

Mentoring: Evidence-Driven Practice

Plato states "all learning has an emotional base". Extensive research on character education has since validated this through robust evidence linking educational outcomes to social and emotional development. Oppidan learns from and contributes to this wealth of research. This chapter outlines key studies that inform Oppidan's approach.

Why character education?

Social and emotional learning (SEL) leads to improved academic outcomes and behaviours. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning have highlighted how research teams consistently find character programmes yield positive results. The most influential research in this domain is the work of Durlak et al (2011), whose meta-analysis of 213 SEL programmes reaching 270,000 pupils found a significant positive impact on social and emotional skills, attitudes towards the self, others, and school, behaviour, and academic performance. This research is backed by a recent EEF systematic review, which highlights the importance and efficacy of SEL programmes (Wigelsworth 2020).

The value-add per student remains long-term. Building on the work of Durlak and colleagues, a meta-analysis by Taylor et al in 2017 conveyed a positive correlation between social and emotional skills and higher levels of wellbeing 18 years later. Durlak and Mahoney (2019) later synthesised the work of both meta-analytical studies to calculate the value-add per student (figure 1). 57% more students would increase in their skill levels and 27% more students would improve academically with the addition of an SEL programme.

These long-term benefits lead to reduced societal costs. A study published in the American Journal of Public Health shows that, when children are targeted early, SEL programmes lead to later reduced costs on public assistance and crime (Jones et al. 2015). Character education ultimately helps develop healthy individuals who contribute positively to wider society.

Employers value social and emotional skills. A World Economic Forum report (2016) highlights how rapid changes in the labour market due to technological evolution will shift the demand of skills away from narrow technical skills which quickly become outdated, towards broader social skills, cognitive skills such as creativity, and process skills such as active listening. This shift towards skills is backed by various studies. For example, the Association for Career and Technical Education, the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2010) highlight how executives believe creativity, communication, collaboration and critical thinking are becoming increasingly important.

% of students who improve with the addition of an SEL programme
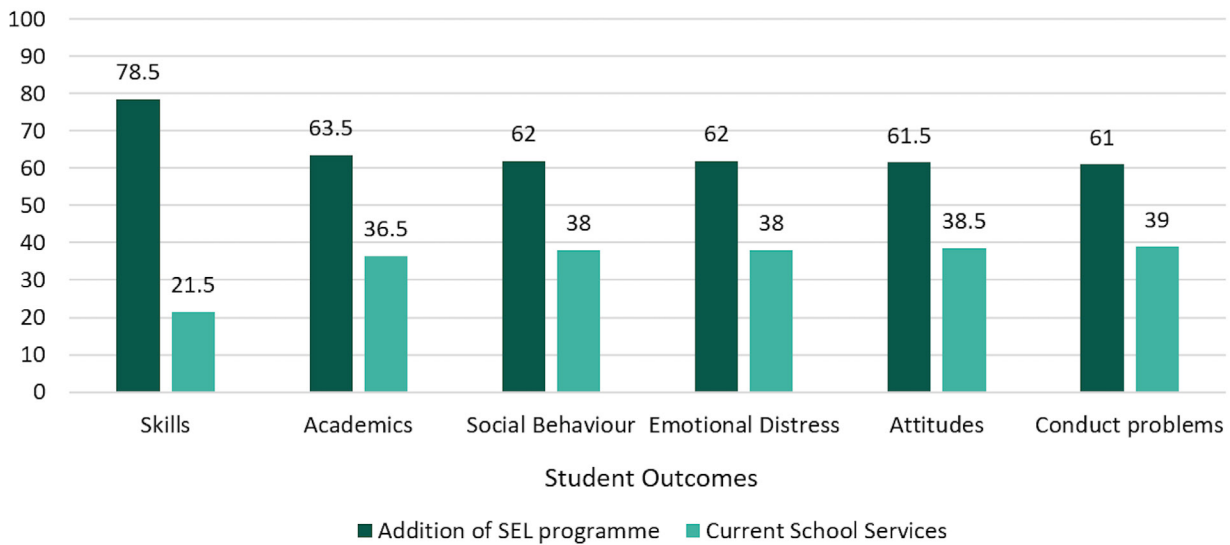
*Figure 1: percentage of pupils who improve with the addition of an SEL programme. Durlak and Mahoney 2019*

Why mentoring?

The best tutors are mentors. Various meta-analytical reviews and individual studies evidence the positive impact mentoring has on pupils' academic outcomes and behaviour. For example, DuBois et al's (2011) study of 73 US mentoring programmes found improvements across behavioural, social, emotional, and academic domains. Similarly, Herrera et al's (2011) analysis of the United States' national mentoring programme, 'Big Brothers Big Sisters' (BBBS), found mentoring improved academic outcomes and selfefficacy. Other studies have found improvements in self-regulated learning (Nunez et al 2013), self-esteem (Karcher 2008), and improved school bonding (Bernstein et al 2009), among other social and emotional benefits. This wealth of research underlines how success in school is catalysed by a whole-child approach that puts student well-being front and centre.

Mentoring enhances school outcomes by providing a secure relationship. Bergin and Bergin's (2009) influential study in the Educational Psychology Review shows how secure attachments are associated with academic achievement, improved social and emotional learning, greater willingness to take on challenges, and lower levels of ADHD and poor behaviour. The authors show how a secure relationship liberates the child, giving them confidence to explore the world. Herrera et al's (2011) study of the BBBS programme highlights how this is particularly important for children lacking a role model in their family, school, or community.

Mentoring improves the child's broader relationships and grows social capital. The social skills developed in interactions between mentor and mentee have a cumulative positive effect: the child uses these skills to improve relations with teachers, parents, and peers. This theory was originally proposed by Rhodes's (2002) Developmental Model of Youth Mentoring (figure 2), wherein Social and Emotional Development leads to positive outcomes through the mediator variable of improved parental/peer relationships. The theory has since been backed by a number of studies that show mentoring improves peer (Karcher 2008), parent (Grossman and Resch 2000), and teacher (Scandone et al 2021) relationships. An ability to build better relationships increases social networks, growing the child's social capital (Bourdieu 1986).

Figure 2: Rhodes's (2002) Developmental Model of Youth Mentoring
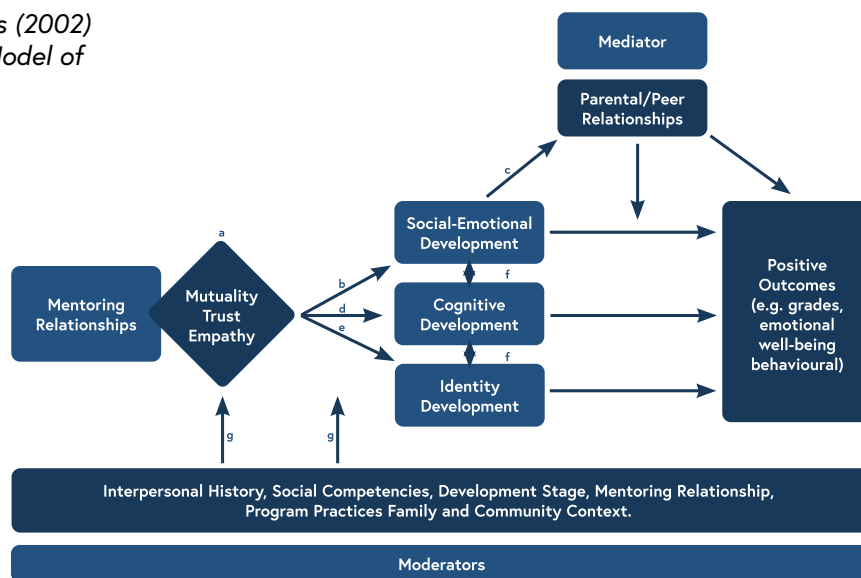
Why Oppidan Education?

Oppidan's programmes are designed to maximise impact. DuBois et al's (2011) meta-analysis notes that the effect of mentoring depends on a) which youth and mentors are involved in the programme; b) the strength of the relationship; and c) the structure of the programme.

Our mentors are committed advocates for character education. DuBois et al (2011) meta-analysis and the EEF's Teacher and Training Toolkit (Higgins et al 2021) note successful mentoring programmes depend on reliable mentors. Mentors must be reliable because drop out has detrimental effects, particularly for pupils who have experienced a lack of support. Further, research shows that mentors should be SEL advocates, promoting kindness and empathy in their wider lives (DuBois et al 2011). Oppidan's school team has carefully selected a small group of diverse yet exceptional mentors who show a deep commitment to character education and exhibit high levels of emotional intelligence.

We provide extensive, ongoing mentor training. Research highlights the importance of mentor training to maximise programme impact, outlined by DuBois et al (2011) and backed by various studies, such as Nunez et al's (2013) analysis of school mentoring programmes in Portugal. Oppidan's school mentor training entails a full-day workshop, 30 minute 1-1s with our Mentor Development Lead, two safeguarding workshops, one workshop on the research behind mentoring, regular programme reviews to troubleshoot problems, and one workshop focusing on mentoring at-risk children. Weekly drop-in sessions through the Oppidan Academy ensure mentors feel continuously supported.

Relationships are at the heart of Oppidan's programmes. Rhodes' (2002) Developmental Model of Youth Mentoring (figure 2) theorised that successful mentoring programmes depend on strong mentor-mentee relationships. Research confirms her theory. For example, Bernstein et al's (2009) national evaluation of mentoring programs funded under the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) Student Mentoring Program suggests the pairing between mentor and mentee is essential for positive impact. Oppidan specialise in cultivating strong relationships. We consider the interests and characteristics of each child, match that child with a mentor, and monitor the relationship throughout.

Oppidan mentors are professionals from a diverse range of backgrounds. This leads to stronger relationships, particularly for disillusioned pupils. Research suggests that using a professional mentor not previously involved in the school (in comparison to using in-house teachers as mentors) means the mentor is not seen as part of the education system that is disaffecting the student, enabling greater trust (Demack et al 2016). A mentor team with variegated careers also provides greater diversity of interests and personalities, enabling us to more closely match the mentor with the mentee.

Oppidan's programmes are structured to maximise impact. Research shows programmes that take the whole-school as the unit of change have greater impact (Gedikoglu 2021). Our prep-school transition journeys engage parents through assemblies, and teachers through teacher development training and the provision of resources that can be embedded into the curriculum. Similarly, our peer-mentoring programmes develop empathetic cross-year interactions, nurturing a kind school culture. Following the EEF's recommendations, the peer-mentoring programmes entail weekly meetings and extend throughout the school year. Further, DuBois et al (2011) note activities should be structured and programme implementation should be monitored. Our mentors follow our evidence-informed mentoring workbook, and participants complete longitudinal surveys that monitor programme implementation and impact.

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