

Teaching *Character*

IN THE PRIMARY CLASSROOM

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2 *What is character education?*

In this chapter you will:

- learn what good character education is and is not;
- read an overview of the different types of character virtues that might be developed through character education;
- explore some key principles about how best to teach the subject;
- challenge some of the common concerns and misconceptions about character education.

What is character education?

Before we can consider what character education is, it is important first to establish what is meant by the term 'character'. Character is a contested term and has been variously defined. The word is often used synonymously with other terms including:

- **Non-cognitive skills:** a term that is strongly associated with the work of Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman. Heckman and Kautz (2013) analysed large data sets to show that attributes such as self-discipline and persistence – not just academic achievement – affected education, labour market and life outcomes. It is also the term preferred by the Education Endowment Foundation in the UK.
- **Soft skills:** a term often used by employers to describe a whole range of qualities desired in a young person – these might include things as diverse as being on time, being able to write a report and being presentable. The term is particularly vague.
- **Social and emotional skills:** a term fairly common in the classroom – especially after the multi-million pound SEAL initiative. The term is used to describe a set of 'skills' or perhaps attitudes and beliefs that help young people learn, whilst improving school climate and behaviour, as well as being useful for life and work more generally.
- **Twenty-first century skills:** a term less used in the classroom – but one that is increasingly being used in academic and policy circles. It is often used to describe attributes that are important for young people to develop to survive in the modern world – including information, media and technology skills.

For teachers it might seem that the difference between these terms is simply semantics – that they all mean something similar, or the same thing. However, on closer inspection although the language might be used synonymously, there are important conceptual differences between some of the terms. For example, it has been argued that the use of ‘soft’ in ‘soft skills’ devalues the importance of these qualities (Paterson et al., 2014); and furthermore, that character is best viewed as a subset of personality which is made up of ‘hard’ not ‘soft’ qualities (see Kristjánsson, 2015, p.5). Character cannot be non-cognitive, as the process of enacting the virtues takes a great deal of cognition or thought, and the virtues themselves involve judgements which are by their very nature cognitive. The term ‘non-cognitive skills’ is often employed in the primary classroom simply to differentiate character qualities from ‘academic’ qualities. A more appropriate term for such use might be ‘non-cognitively tested’, or ‘non-examined’ (see Kristjánsson, 2015).

Character is the preferred term used throughout this book as it describes fundamentally what makes us ... us. Character describes a way of being rather than simply a set of competencies or skills that we can learn. Character is the virtues we possess and the habits we have incubated. As this book adopts a largely Aristotelian virtue ethical theoretical base (see Chapter 3), ‘character’ is also a central pillar of this philosophy. Understanding the roots of character in virtue ethical terms ensures that the language is rooted in a strong academic and theoretical tradition which provides real grounding for its use. Further justification for its use, if needed, is that character is a term increasingly being used in UK educational policy and practice discourse.

Character is used, in this book, as an umbrella term to describe a set of qualities or virtues that guide our behaviour and conduct (see Jubilee Centre, 2013). The term ‘character education’ relates to any educational activity, implicit or explicit, that encourages young people to develop character qualities or virtues. The ‘whats’ and the ‘hows’ of character education will be explored in more detail throughout this chapter and others – but it is important to draw out one particular element of this definition at this stage. Character education is both implicit and explicit. It is both caught and taught. It is therefore both a subject and not a subject. It is not something that can be taught, like maths or English, simply in the classroom by specialist trained teachers. Bernard Crick, the eminent political philosopher, described citizenship education as ‘more than a subject’ (Crick, 1998), and character education should be conceived in the same way. Part Two of this book details strategies and approaches for teaching character in the primary classroom – however, true character education is much more than a series of lessons on subjects relating to character. Primarily this is because character is caught as much (or more so) as taught. It is this point that makes character education at times seem intangible – it is often hard to actually ‘see’ it going on in schools. Many primary heads or teachers would struggle to show a visitor to their school their ‘character education’ provision – in fact as a visitor you might be more likely to notice if it is absent.

Character education is as much about how a school is set up (its core values and how these shape its ethos) than a simple series of lessons in the subject. As such character education might be said to be part of the fabric of the school. *Schools of Character* might be described like a stick of rock – cut through them anywhere and you will find character education going on either implicitly or explicitly. The following passage from the *Framework for Character Education* is particularly helpful in this regard:

Character virtues should be reinforced everywhere: on the playing fields, in classrooms, corridors, interactions between teachers and students, in assemblies, posters, head teacher messages and communications, staff training, and in relations with parents. They are critical in extracurricular activities and should translate into positive feelings and behaviour. The process of being educated in virtue is not only one of acquiring ideas. It is about belonging and living within a community – for schools are, together with the family, one of the principal means by which students grow in virtue.

(Jubilee Centre, 2013)

The building blocks of character – the virtues

The way that character education has been described above might for some teachers appear a bit vague. It makes character education seem like something that is hard to get hold of, something that is difficult to shape and mould. It is the building blocks of character – the virtues – that help to make character education tangible and real. Like the term ‘character’ the term ‘virtue’ is also contested and not popular with some people. It is also a term that has dropped out of common usage in many quarters. A variety of other terms are often used instead of virtue – these include:

- strengths
- qualities
- traits
- dispositions
- values

These terms are often used interchangeably and mean similar things to most people. Research with youth social action providers found that most of these did not like the term ‘virtue’, but that this dislike was largely for semantic rather than substantive reasons (Arthur, Harrison and Taylor, 2015). Kristjánsson (2015) has given thoughtful consideration to the lexicon of terms used instead of ‘virtue’ and although he is comfortable with some of the other terms, he argues

that ‘virtue’ is the most useful due to its philosophical underpinnings. ‘Virtue’ is also seen as having more clout and clarity than ‘values’ as well as many of the other terms listed above (see Battaly, 2015). Furthermore, as a term, it perhaps has more substance than either ‘qualities’ or ‘strengths’.

In this book ‘virtue’ is the preferred term, although at times it is used interchangeably with strengths and qualities. It is argued that virtue is an appropriate term to use as it is an important part of an Aristotelian conception of character as conceived in the theory of virtue ethics. Aristotelian inspired virtue ethics is experiencing a revival in moral philosophy globally (and explored in more detail in Chapter 3). In this philosophy, character virtues enable us to do the right thing, at the right time. Aristotelian conceptions of character education are not without challenges, but are arguably the most suited to address concerns teachers might have about character and provide a theory of change that makes a direct link from the education of virtues to human flourishing. Flourishing is the widely accepted goal of human life and therefore character education aims to inculcate the virtues necessary for humans not to only thrive as individuals but also for societies to thrive as a collective.

A sensible question at this point might be to ask why the development of virtues in pupils should be a teacher’s concern. To answer this question it is important to adopt a maximal conception of education, as opposed to something more narrow like ‘schooling’. If true and full education is about preparing young people for their futures, then the development of character virtues is a central part of this preparation. Society demands humans who are, amongst other things compassionate, courageous, resilient, honest and respectful. The benefits of developing virtues in pupils are, however, not simply long term, they can also be more immediate. Teachers and pupils want to work in ordered classrooms where people are well behaved, treat each other fairly, with respect and with care; where courage is demonstrated when learning, and where people are self-motivated and independent learners. These virtues are not only important qualities for young people to possess when they leave school, they are also important for them to possess whilst at school. Virtue ethicists will also argue that, in addition to their instrumental benefits, virtues are part and parcel of any life well lived.

Which virtues?

Having accepted the term ‘virtue’ (or found a substitute that is more comfortable for them) a teacher must ask ‘what virtues should I seek to develop in my pupils?’ This question is hotly debated by those interested in character education both in the UK as well as globally. One way to start to answer this question is to look at how the virtues might be classified. The Jubilee Centre suggests there are four types of virtues plus an intellectual meta-virtue called practical wisdom. These are:

- **Moral:** virtues that enable us to respond well to situations in any area of experience.
- **Performance:** virtues that might also be considered psychological capacities, that can be used for both good and bad ends and which enable us to put moral virtues into practice.
- **Civic:** virtues and skills that are necessary for engaged and responsible citizenship.
- **Intellectual:** virtues that support learning, as well as to critically reflect on our own as well as other people's characters.
- **Practical wisdom:** A meta-virtue that moderates and enables all the others.

(Jubilee Centre, 2013, p. 4)

There is a growing acceptance, in the UK, that this four-part classification is useful for teachers and other practitioners (Birdwell et al., 2015). An adoption of this classification also provides a framework by which to evaluate the variety of approaches to character. Each of these four types will be given more consideration below.

Moral virtues

Examples: courage, honesty, compassion, justice, humility, gratitude

Many argue that character education should be essentially a moral pursuit and therefore the moral virtues should be given the greatest emphasis (see for example Lickona, 1992; Arthur, 2003). These proponents argue that moral philosophy should underpin character education, and that there should be a revival of virtue ethics and of moral traditions emphasising the need to inculcate good habits in individuals in order for them to live moral and flourishing lives. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, whilst not rejecting the importance of the other types of virtues, prioritises the moral virtues as the most important and states:

Whilst human flourishing requires intellectual and civic virtues – as well as generic virtues of self-management, often known as enabling and/or performance virtues – it is the moral virtues that are the most central and important. This is because whilst performance virtues help individuals to succeed, moral virtues enable societies to flourish.

(Jubilee Centre, 2013, p. 3)

Continuing on this theme the Centre contends that:

Individuals can respond well or less well to the challenges they face in everyday life, and the moral virtues are those character traits that enable human beings to respond appropriately to situations in any area of experience. These character traits enable people to live, cooperate and learn with others in a way that is peaceful, neighbourly and morally justifiable. Displaying moral and other virtues in admirable activity over the course of a life, and enjoying the inherent satisfaction that entails is what it means to live a flourishing life.

(Jubilee Centre, 2013, p. 3)

This position is also defended by other well-known character education researchers and academics. These include Lickona (1992) and Ryan and Bohlin (1999) who both stress that character education should be essentially a moral discipline. Hunter (2000) is a strong proponent of the view that the term ‘character’ and the language of ethics and virtue need to be rescued, as in recent times character education has strayed too far away from being a moral endeavour. Hunter states: ‘*Character is not, as the psychologists would have it solitary, autonomous, unconstrained; merely a set of traits within a unique and unencumbered personality*’ (Hunter, 2000, pp.15–16). The most basic element of character is ‘*moral discipline*’ and ‘*its most essential feature is the inner capacity for restraint and the ability to inhibit oneself in one’s passions, desires and habits within the boundaries of a moral order*’.

The New York Times journalist David Brooks (2015) in his book *The Road to Character* makes the distinction between ‘résumé’ virtues and ‘eulogy’ virtues. He suggests that ‘résumé’ virtues are the virtues that you include on your CV to help you get a job – in the main these will be performance virtues such as resilience and adaptability. In contrast, ‘eulogy’ virtues are those we want people to use to describe us at our funeral. These are largely moral virtues such as compassion, courage and being a loving and caring person. David Brooks argues that the pursuit of résumé virtues tends to dominate and in doing so, much of what matters and is important about life is forgotten.

Primary school teachers are emphasising and reinforcing moral virtues every day – whether this is done implicitly or explicitly. For example, Foundation and Early Years teachers might be particularly concerned with ensuring their pupils share and play fairly with each other, whilst Key Stage 2 teachers might be more concerned with ensuring their pupils show academic integrity in their work or humility on the sports pitch. It is probably the case that such ‘moral instruction’ is done without much thought – it is simply part and parcel of being a teacher.

Some primary schools do take a more explicit approach to the development of moral virtues. For example, hundreds of schools each year take part in the popular Thank You Film Awards

and Thank You Letter Awards (see <http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/544/projects/current-projects/thank-you-letter-awards>) which actively encourage young people to think about the virtue of gratitude. By creating films and writing letters pupils are encouraged to think about for what and to whom they are grateful to. Likewise some schools make moral virtues the central planks of their whole-school character programmes – such as West Kidlington Primary School which focuses on a different moral virtue each month and Topcliffe Primary School which places moral virtues at the heart of their five keys to success framework.

Performance virtues

Examples: resilience, grit, teamwork, determination

The most direct challenge to those who promote the view that character education is essentially a moral discipline is to see character as concerning the development of what might be called performance or enabling virtues. These are the types of virtues which might most commonly be associated with terms such as ‘non-cognitive skills’, ‘social and emotional skills’, ‘soft skills’, ‘emotional intelligence’ or even ‘skills for life and work’. One of the most well-known proponents of these types of virtues is Paul Tough, author of *How Children Succeed* (2013). The focus of this book is the virtues of ‘grit’ and ‘resilience’ and Tough is strongly in favour of a predominantly performance virtues-based approach to character development. The book draws on the work in the US of the Knowledge is Power Programme (KIPP) schools, which focus on the resilience and grit of their pupils. This programme has been particularly influential in the UK and increasingly schools are adopting similar approaches to the development of character. Well-known academics such as Carol Dweck (2008) have contributed to the debate about performance character virtues through a focus on growth mindsets. Growth mindset theory is based on the premise that many basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work. Dweck believes that you can teach growth mindsets and this contributes to motivation and productivity in different spheres. Likewise, Angela Duckworth advocates that schools focus on the development of grit and self-control in schools. For Duckworth these are the key traits that predict achievement – as grit is the tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward very long-term goals (Duckworth and Peterson, 2007) and self-control is the voluntary regulation of behavioural, emotional and attentional impulses in the presence of momentarily gratifying temptations or diversions (Duckworth and Seligman, 2005). In particular the focus on grit, and by association resilience, is becoming a more visible feature of many character education programmes in the UK. A visible example of this is the ‘How to Thrive’ programme which teaches the Penn Resilience Programme to UK teachers. To date, over 1,000 teachers have been trained, thereby reaching thousands of young people.

Similar approaches to the development of performance virtues have been advocated in the UK. For example DEMOS commenced an inquiry into character in 2009 and defined character as

a set of capabilities that an individual may or may not possess. The 'Inquiry' report (Lexmond and Grist, 2011) found that the most important character capabilities for individuals to possess are application, self-direction, self-regulation and empathy – the first three of which might be described as performance virtues. These are clearly virtues that most primary teachers would be keen to develop in their pupils. A struggle for many teachers is how to encourage their pupils to work independently and therefore display the virtue of self-direction. Self-direction will enable pupils to think of their own solutions to problems rather than calling in help from a teacher or TA whenever they are stuck. Likewise, application is a skill that many teachers seek to encourage in their pupils, to help them to stick to a task and not give up, for example when they are struggling with a maths problem.

Whilst at the present time the main dichotomy appears to be between moral and performance virtues, two other important types of virtue might be considered important to character education.

Civic Virtues

Examples: service, volunteering, citizenship

Civic virtues might be described as the active, social expression of moral virtues such as compassion and courage. They are the virtues that should be encouraged in young people to help them to become active and engaged citizens. They are the types of virtues that many primary schools seek to promote through school councils, and charity and fundraising events. Most primary schools run regular whole-school events and activities that encourage pupils to experience opportunities through undertaking beneficial service for others. Developing civic virtues is also a core part of the (non-statutory) curriculum subject of citizenship education.

Primary schools are an excellent location (whether in class or through wider school activities) for young people to learn about and practise the virtues associated with positive civic participation. There are also direct benefits to wider society of developing civic virtues from an early age and in primary schools. From an early age pupils can learn about issues that affect their lives, be they local, national and international. Learning about these concerns can be excellent motivators for expression of civic virtues.

Intellectual virtues

Examples: practical wisdom, critical thinking, integrity, open-mindedness, resourcefulness, curiosity

Intellectual virtues are closely associated with learning and schooling environments. They are the virtues that are required for young people to pursue knowledge, truth and understanding. Some of these virtues might be seen as important by teachers to promote independent learning – such as curiosity and resourcefulness. Some might be seen as important to promote

deeper learning – like critical thinking; and some for learning successfully with others – such as open-mindedness and cooperation. Finally, some will support honest learning such as integrity. When they come together, the intellectual virtues enable pupils to pursue new knowledge and information and engage critically with it.

The meta-virtue – practical wisdom

One other virtue perhaps best described as a meta-virtue is particularly important to an Aristotelian conception of character. This virtue is called *phronesis*, meaning practical wisdom. Practical wisdom helps pupils to put the other virtues into practice – as such it should be considered a moderating or enabling virtue. In some cases it might be required to help pupils choose between vice and virtue – for example, should they get involved in a playground fight, walk away from it or try to break it up. However, more often or not the virtue choices pupils make are not between good and bad but between two possible goods – and the ‘right’ decision depends on the context. For example, pupils often have to decide between loyalty to a friend or being honest to their teacher. Do they tell the teacher and ‘grass’ on their friend or not when they have done something wrong? It is the specific context (defined by many factors – social, historical, cultural, individual) that defines what is the right decision in this instance. Practical wisdom helps pupils make these everyday virtue judgements and decisions.

Practical wisdom is something that is built up over time and is always in development. It would be too much to expect primary school pupils to make the wise or right decision every time. In fact it would be too much to expect any of us to make the wise or right decision in everything we do. However, over time one would hope that pupils learn to deliberate on situations they find themselves in and make better judgements about what is the ‘best’ course of action in any given situation. This means that pupils must be given the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them – and therefore careful coaching and encouragement from teachers and other primary school staff is of great importance. Practical wisdom requires young people to look backwards and learn from past experiences, but also forwards to predict the best course of action.

Table 2.1 shows how practical wisdom can be conceived as the moderator of the other four types of virtues.

What virtues should primary schools be developing?

An important question is which virtues are the most important for schools to develop in young people. This is a question that should occupy the minds of headteachers and teachers – particularly when they are developing or revamping their schools’ mission and ethos statements. One place teachers might turn to for inspiration is the Department for Education.

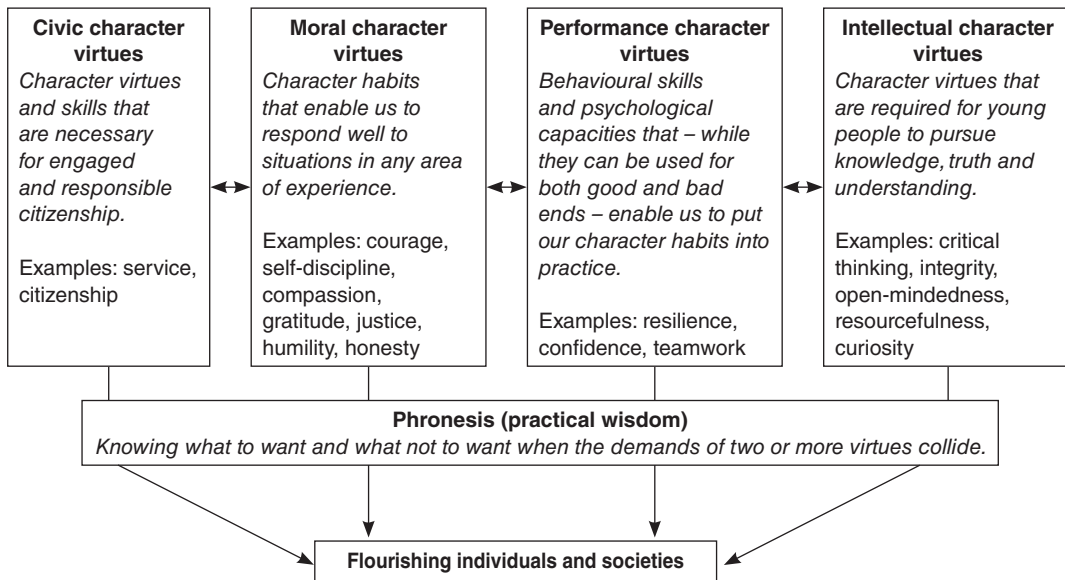


Table 2.1 Character virtues and phronesis (adapted from Jubilee Centre, 2013)

In 2015 the Department listed 21 character traits, attributes and behaviours that it believed underpinned success in education and work (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/character-education-apply-for-2015-grant-funding>). These are listed in Table 2.2, and have been split into the four types of virtues above for convenience.

<p>Performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • perseverance • resilience • grit • confidence • optimism • motivation • drive • ambition 	<p>Moral</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tolerance • respect • honesty • integrity • dignity
<p>Civic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • neighbourliness • community spirit 	<p>Intellectual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • conscientiousness • curiosity • focus

Table 2.2 Department for Education priority virtues by type

The Department for Education has steered away from making any pronouncements on which character virtues from this list or any other that individual schools should prioritise. Teachers might also take inspiration from other well-known virtue lists such as the Values in Action (VIA) classification. This was developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004), who describe it as a comprehensive typology of character virtues, which consists of six virtues – wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence – identified as core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers across time and world cultures. Out of each of these six virtues emerge a further four associated strengths of character – making a list of 24 in all. Peterson and Seligman have developed a free, online, self-report survey which enables individuals to generate a profile of their ‘signature strengths’, i.e. the five character strengths or virtues they display most frequently on a daily basis. Although the measure relies on self-reporting, it is an interesting tool to encourage pupils (and teachers) to think about their own character strengths and weaknesses. There is a specially designed version for children and young people (10–17 years old) with fewer questions which would be appropriate for Years 5 and 6. The VIA can be accessed for free here: www.viacharacter.org/www/The-Survey.

It should be questioned whether or not it is desirable, or indeed even possible, to identify a list of what might be called ‘master’ virtues that all schools should develop. One challenge to this comes from MacIntyre (1981, p.181), who has argued that *‘there are just too many different and incompatible conceptions of a virtue for there to be any real unity to the concept or indeed to the history’*. Likewise, but less radically put, the Jubilee Centre (2013, p.3) believes that: *‘No definitive list of relevant areas of human experience and the respective virtues can be given, as the virtues will to a certain extent be relative to individual constitution, developmental stage and social circumstance’*. The Centre recommends therefore that schools should develop their own list of core virtues that reflects the priorities of the young people and the communities they serve. It might be that some pupils really need a focus on resilience whereas for others issues such as cyber-bullying make a focus on compassion a more immediate concern. A focus on what might be argued are more ‘universal’ character virtues also might sit more comfortably with teachers concerned with the drive towards British values. The government strategy on *British Values* states that all schools have a duty to *‘actively promote’* fundamental British values (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/380595/SMSC_Guidance_Maintained_Schools.pdf). However, teachers might rightly ask what makes the values promoted in the strategy, including democracy, freedom of speech, mutual respect and tolerance exclusively British. The British Values strategy, although seemingly well meaning, has the potential to undermine itself if it does not get teachers on board. It also could be viewed as potentially divisive. A more acceptable approach for many would be a focus on the development of universal virtues such as compassion, tolerance, courage, humility and many others, in their pupils.

Two approaches are suggested below that primary school teachers could adopt when they are considering which virtues their school should prioritise.

Approach 1: Create a list of priority virtues

Start by canvassing the opinion of key stakeholders by questioning governors, parents, community partners and the pupils themselves. The virtues that are deemed to be the most important to these groups are compiled into a list. Satellite virtues, those that closely relate to the identified core virtues, could also be included.

If this approach is adopted it is important that all four types of virtues are represented in the final list. This will give the list balance and ensure that the school is making a public statement that they want to educate pupils who will succeed as individuals but also pupils who will play a full, positive and beneficial role in society more generally. It is also worth noting evidence from Seider (2102) who found, not surprisingly, through conducting in-depth, embedded research in schools, that the type of virtue they emphasised (be it moral, civic or performance) was the type the school was most successful at developing in their pupils.

Approach 2: Focus on developing practical wisdom

A different approach from that outlined above would be to eschew any exclusive list of virtues and instead recognise the unity of the virtues and focus on enhancing the practical wisdom of the pupils. This approach would involve identifying a working list of virtues that are considered to be beneficial to individual and societal flourishing. Rather than encouraging pupils to think about these separately, teachers should instead ask pupils to consider how they interplay with each other. The focus would be on helping pupils to make wise choices when virtue/vice or virtue/virtue dilemmas arise.

Rather than having a virtue of the week, schools that adopt this approach might instead have a weekly reflection session where the pupils think about when they have demonstrated practical wisdom (or not) when faced with a difficult dilemma.

Concerns and misconceptions about character education

Before turning to how character education and the development of the virtues might be put into practice in primary schools it is worth giving some attention to what is *not* character education or at least 'good' character education. Character education concerns some people as it is seen as a vehicle to promote the particular ideologies of any given teacher and/or school. It could be argued that many subjects would fall foul to the same accusation – but there are

perhaps particular concerns about how character education might be construed and delivered by some teachers.

The concerns raised about character education commonly include:

- It is indoctrinating – some approaches to character education might involve teachers telling pupils how to behave in specific areas that are not in keeping with the modern pluralistic world of today. The underlying fear is that the subject is conservative and paternalistic – harking back to a golden age, and not about looking forward to meet future challenges.
- That it is about the promotion of one religion or religion more generally.
- That it is the job of parents not schools.
- That schools should focus on attainment and not character as there is no time or space to do both.

Much work has been done by academics (see Jubilee Centre, 2013) and practitioners (Morris, 2015) to reclaim character education from naysayers by laying to rest the concerns presented above. These concerns have been called ‘myths’ (Kristjánsson, 2013) and need to be challenged if character education is going to be taken on board by primary school teachers. The ‘myths’ can be challenged in the following ways.

Character education should not be indoctrinating

If character education rests on an Aristotelian philosophy of virtue ethics then it should be about helping young people make wise choices when confronted with dilemmas. It is not about telling pupils what to do, or what to think (although guidance is of course important), but about providing them with opportunities and experiences that help pupils to develop their practical wisdom. At the heart of character education is enhancing pupils’ ability to reflect critically on the situations and dilemmas they face. They need to learn to reflect upon and question their own actions and decide themselves what the ‘right’ thing is to do. The Jubilee Centre contends that moral character education, when taught in a particular way, need not be indoctrinating as it is about *‘helping students grasp what is ethically important in situations and to act for the right reasons, such that they become more autonomous and reflective’* (Jubilee Centre, 2013). The ultimate goal of all proper character education is to equip students with the intellectual tools to choose wisely of their own accord within the framework of a democratic society.

Character education, undertaken well, is therefore not about being paternalistic or indeed conservative. It should be about building character strengths in pupils that help them meet modern and future challenges. The motivation for schools to adopt character education should not therefore be based on a desire to ‘fix the kids’ based on, say, a desire to return to Victorian values.

Character education is not necessarily religious

One of the more interesting and potentially controversial issues to unpack is the relationship between religion and character education. Many, in fact most, major religions would subscribe to the development in young people of the moral virtues described above. However, this does not mean that character education must rest on religious foundations. Virtue ethics philosophy, as described through much of this book, also provides a strong foundation from which to develop character education teaching and learning approaches. Adopting a virtue ethics framework allows teachers to sidestep questions they might find uncomfortable about the promotion of a religious viewpoint.

However, it would be wrong to deny that many faith schools see the development of character virtues as at the heart of their mission and ethos. In fact in many religious schools, of all faiths and denominations, the use of explicit virtue language is common. This is of course in keeping with Catholic, Church of England, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh or Buddhist and other religious teachings. Interestingly, evidence drawn from the trial of the Knightly Virtues Programme demonstrated that pupils who attended faith-based primary schools have higher virtue literacy (understood as a knowledge and understanding of virtue terms) than those who attended non-religious schools (Arthur et al., 2014). The explanation for this result might be because pupils attending faith schools are more likely to encounter virtue language in their daily interactions – for example through assemblies, school displays, prayer sessions or preparation for religious rites of passage such as first communion.

The important point, however, is that character education does not have to be religious. When viewed through a virtue ethical lens, it is about the development of a set of core, universally acknowledged virtues that are not necessarily tied to any particular religion or culture and are generally held by society to be good and right. This means that all teachers should be able to find a way into the subject – whether they are religious or not.

Character education is not just the responsibility of parents

Chapter 11 includes a section on how teachers and parents can partner on character education. Rightly, most people believe that parents should be primarily responsible for the character of their sons and daughters. Character has traditionally been viewed as the preserve of parents. However, although this should clearly be the case it is perhaps short-sighted to argue that schools should not have any role. There are two good reasons why perhaps they should. The first reason is the oft-cited statistic that pupils spend a great deal of their lives in schools and therefore the reality is that teachers are ‘in loco parentis’. However, a second more positive reason is that schools offer real opportunities for pupils to develop character. Sometimes, these are opportunities not always available to pupils at home. For example, school trips away that

help develop teamwork, collaboration amongst peers on a charity project and the host of extra-curricular activities that schools offer their pupils. Interestingly a Populus poll (Jubilee Centre, 2013) found very strong support among parents for the idea that schools should be promoting development alongside academic study. Eighty-seven per cent of the parents questioned felt that schools should focus on character development, and 84 per cent of parents thought that teachers should encourage good morals and values in their students. Furthermore, 81 per cent of parents wanted their son's/daughter's school to have a core statement on the values that it wants to instil in its pupils.

Education should be about attainment AND character

The role of schools is regularly questioned. After all, teachers can only do so much. Is it fair to expect teachers not only to be responsible for making their pupils achieve academically but also for building their character? It might be argued that as many teachers are overworked and there is only so much time in the school day a school should prioritise attainment over character. Recent educational policies have helped (both explicitly and implicitly) to strengthen this view. The narrow focus on grades, attainment and progress in school league tables and by schools inspectorates, means that schools are disproportionately judged on how their pupils perform in tests and exams. This has given rise to a widespread belief that schools are becoming exam factories.

This returns us to the question of the purpose of education. Should schools simply be preparing their pupils for a life of tests or in fact is it more important that a full education is about preparing them to meet the tests of life? One danger with placing the spotlight so heavily on attainment is that (perhaps as an unintended consequence) the curriculum is narrowed. Activities that are judged to directly improve attainment are prioritised over those that might be seen as a distraction. For example, it is not uncommon to visit schools that have either reduced curriculum time for subjects such as PSHE in order to provide maths top-up classes, or that have marginalised extra-curricular activities in order to provide 'interventions' to improve exam results. This swap may have been made based on good intentions, but the unintended consequence is that opportunities to develop character virtues through playing chess, or learning a musical instrument, or participating in an environment club have been lost.

There is another way to consider the attainment/character conundrum – to flip it on its head and ask how good character can contribute to attainment. Trials, primarily undertaken in America, have provided evidence about the positive effect of character education on attainment (see, for example, Berkowitz and Bier, 2006). The Educational Endowment Foundation is also conducting similar trials in 2015/16. However, many teachers do not need such evidence to see the link between character and academic achievement. It is clear that many character qualities are prerequisite in good learners. To be a good learner you need to be persistent, courageous, ordered, motivated and independent. The case perhaps needs to be

made with more conviction that character education rather, than distracting from attainment, actually benefits it. Furthermore, if you focus on character pupils will also gain so much more besides.

Anthony Seldon, the former Master of Wellington College, gave an impassioned plea that character education should come before attainment by arguing that the pendulum had swung too far in one direction. In an open letter to Michael Gove (the then Secretary of State for Education) and Michael Wilshaw (head of Ofsted) he stated

Why then do I say that schools should prioritise character-building above exams? Because if you prioritise exams in the way that you are both doing, Michael and Michael, little or nothing will happen with character. But if you prioritise character, exam success will follow, and for the right reasons. The students will behave well in class. They will respect their teacher and each other. They will want to learn, rather than being made to learn. They will want to behave rather than being made to behave. They will probe beneath surface learning to the depths of subjects because they will be more reflective people. (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/events/priestley-2013-anthony-seldon.pdf> p13)

As will be explained in detail later in this book, character education can and should be taught through and within all curriculum subjects. It should not distract from the core curriculum, but reinforce and complete it. For example, stories in English make great opportunities to discuss character virtues of the heroes and heroines (see Carr and Harrison, 2015).

This book promotes a modern positive conception of character education – one we believe would be acceptable to most primary teachers in Britain. It is a type of character education that should prove attractive to primary schools across the country – be they be faith or non-faith based, independent or state, rural or urban, rated outstanding or in special measures by Ofsted. Indeed, extensive empirical research into character education in UK schools has demonstrated all schools have the potential to become schools of character (Arthur et al., 2015).

Chapter summary

This chapter has attempted to answer the question what is character? It has started by considering the semantic and substantive differences between other terms such as soft skills and non-cognitive skills. Next, the chapter considered the building blocks of character of the virtues. It was argued that the virtues are best conceived of in four types: moral, civic, performance and intellectual. Schools should try to develop virtues from across all these types in their pupils if they want both for them to flourish as individuals and for wider society to flourish. Two approaches were suggested for schools looking for strategies

to decide which virtues they should prioritise. The final section of the chapter focused on some of the well-known challenges and misconceptions about character education. A defence was given for the subject from those who argue that it is indoctrinating, promoting of religion, distracting from attainment and the job of parents not teachers.

Further reading

Brooks, D. (2015) *The Road to Character*. New York: Penguin Random House.

This book, written in a very accessible style by the New York Times journalist, explores the difference between eulogy virtues and résumé virtues. Brooks explains that résumé virtues are the ones we strive to get to be successful in our careers. It is the eulogy virtues (what people say about us when we die) that really matter.

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