

Character Education and Human Flourishing

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Abstract

Research data from the OECD is showing that 'social and emotional' skills are strongly correlated with life outcomes, often more so than cognitive skills (OECD 2014). Linked to this is the global resurgence in the controversial field of character education (CE) and an increased focus on 'non-cognitive skills' (Gutman and Schoon 2013).

Based on a Master's conceptual dissertation, this paper offers some background and contextual information in the form of critical literature and policy reviews, along with an exposition of the following research questions: What is the research-evidence base for CE? What are the political purposes of CE? Does CE have an underpinning philosophy or ideology? Could the desired outcome of CE, claimed as 'human flourishing' (Jubilee Centre 2013) be better achieved by other means?

The paper shows that CE cannot be justified as a discrete practice in its own right due to a lack of core theoretical principles or practices (Lapsley and Narvaez 2007), it is best understood instead as an umbrella term that may or may not include a variety of practices and approaches (Howard et al 2004), it tends to be implemented by governments in the absence of critical evaluation, and the evaluations that do exist show that while CE shows some promise, it is likely to have detrimental as well as positive results (SCDRC 2010).

The paper also shows that the claimed ideology of the 'traditional' CE movement is one of neo-conservatism that emphasises

stability, maintenance of the status quo, protection of existing power relations, competition, material success and the development of a compliant and industrious workforce (Purpel 1999 and Winton 2008).

The paper concludes that any approaches aimed at the cultivation of character, non-cognitive and/or social and emotional skills should be constructed and understood within a broader sociological framework with clear and explicit commitments to care, democracy, justice, rights and social solidarity.

Introduction and personal reflections

I became interested in the idea of CE when I took up employment with the educational charity Character Scotland in 2013. My role was to deliver a project strand designed to raise awareness of CE in Scotland, to develop a community of interest around the topic and to help that community learn what CE might mean for Scotland, culminating in a conference titled 'Character, Culture and Values' at the end of the project.

The conference consisted of keynote presentations and twenty-four seminar sessions, covering a very wide range of issues and approaches (Walsh 2015). This breadth of issues came about largely due to the enquiring approach adopted for the curation of the conference. I was led by a continuing dialogue with the many people who showed an interest and supported the event. Instead of starting with clear proposals of what

character might mean, I enquired as to what those involved thought about it themselves.

The event was held in University of Glasgow in June 2015 and a conference report, authored by Dr Joan Mowat of University of Strathclyde, found that the conference was a successful event from which many powerful messages emerged, with many implications for further dialogue and activity. Some feedback was also received about a perceived lack of clarity with regard to the concepts of character and character education. The author congratulated Character Scotland for taking the initiative to provide a platform for these discussions and made a number of recommendations detailing how the dialogue could be further developed (Mowat 2015).

The event and the activities preceding it clearly resonated with many practitioners in Scotland. This seemed to be partly due to a positive 'first impression' of CE and that the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive 2004), focussing as it does on the development of values, skills and attributes in young people, appears to link strongly with the idea of CE. There was a feeling that the policy context in Scotland provided an excellent basis for this kind of holistic approach, but that opportunities to fully capitalise on this were being lost (Mowat 2015).

This 'first impression' is also what attracted me to the idea of CE. I have since found however, particularly due to my examination of relevant

research literature, that an exploration of CE is especially complex and that a brave and critical approach much be taken, especially if there are any moves made to implement this agenda on a system-wide basis.

In this paper I will outline some of the main criticisms of CE with the underlying proposition that gaining a critical understanding of CE, including the basis for the criticisms levelled against the movement, has the potential to tell us more about the notion of human flourishing and how this might be understood and achieved.

I contend that the CE movement itself has yet to respond sufficiently to its critics and that the development of adequate responses could prove to be advantageous for education more generally.

What is character education?

While there are differing interpretations, the definitions of CE can be categorised in one of two varieties which I refer to here influenced by Alfie Kohn, a vocal opponent of CE, as *narrow* and *broad* (Kohn 1997).

CE in the narrow sense, sometimes referred to as a traditionalist (Molnar 1997) view of CE, tends to define itself quite strictly along the lines of either moral virtues or values and seeks to justify itself as a singular discipline (Lapsley and Narvaez 2007) usually within the overall field of moral education. For instance, from the virtue perspective, Walker et al

(2013) understands CE as “any approach to moral education that foregrounds the cultivation of moral character and moral virtue” (Walker et al 2013: 1) and Lickona, from a values perspective, defines CE as “the deliberate effort to help people understand, care about, and act upon core ethical values” (Lickona 1991: 51). As such, character is understood to be educable through a combination of direct teaching or instruction and efforts to develop the appropriate ethos within institutions ie character is both ‘taught and caught’ (Jubilee Centre 2013).

McLaughlin and Halstead (1999) assert that approaches in the narrow categorisation (or what they refer to as non-expansive) are “often seen as part of the neo-conservative social and cultural agenda and linked to the call to return to traditional values and teaching methods” (McLaughlin and Halstead 1999: 138). Concerns such as these are echoed by other reviewers (see Purpel 1999, Winton 2008, Davis 2003, Lack 2011, Noddings 2002 and Noddings 2012).

CE in the broader sense on the other hand does not attempt to justify itself as a singular discipline. It is understood instead as an umbrella term for a variety of approaches and as an outcome of any method aimed at the development of ‘good’ personal qualities, the prevention of unwanted behaviour such as bullying, or the general positive development of young people in a holistic sense (Berkowitz and Bier 2004).

McLaughlin and Halstead (1999) offer an altogether more positive review, contending that CE of this ilk tends to be more flexible in terms of disciplinary boundaries, it is based around the requirements of citizenship in a 'liberal democratic society' and it goes beyond a strict dedication to fundamental or core values. The message appears to be that traditional or narrow CE should be abandoned in favour of the broader version (McLaughlin and Halstead 1999).

In search of a substantive theory for CE

The confusion around the various definitions of CE leads Leming (1997) to conclude that CE "lacks either a theoretical perspective or a common core of practice" (Leming 1997: 41).

Researchers at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, a research institute in the University of Birmingham, have suggested that Aristotelian virtue ethics offers the most palatable solution in terms of a substantive theory for CE (Jubilee Centre 2013). In his treatise on CE, the Director of the Jubilee Centre, James Arthur, broadly endorses Aristotelian virtue ethics as a robust theory base. He establishes that virtue ethics has seen a recent resurgence and is being increasingly understood a viable alternative theory of morality to deontology or utilitarianism (Arthur 2003).

Arthur accepts however that there are some notable weaknesses in the virtue theory of Aristotle. For instance, Aristotelian notions of virtue are linked with the aristocracy and the elite of society. Aristotle claimed that mothers were inferior to fathers in terms of character. Arthur also accepts that there is an inherent vagueness about how virtues relate to one another in the Aristotelian model (Arthur 2003).

As part of her critique of CE, Nel Noddings (2012) raises concerns about the Aristotelian approach to ethics. She points out for instance that Aristotle defended slavery and that there is an emphasis on traditional values and authority, echoing the concerns of the authors cited earlier in this paper with regard to traditionalist versions of CE. Aristotle had particular ideas about who should flourish and who should not.

It is concerns such as these that give rise to CE being criticised in various ways, summarised here by Kristján Kristjánsson, Deputy Director of the Jubilee Centre, as being “unclear, redundant, old-fashioned, religious, paternalistic, anti-democratic, conservative, individualistic, relative and situation dependent” (Kristjánsson 2013: 269). Kristjánsson dismisses these criticisms in turn by characterising them as ‘myths’ arising largely as a result of questionable attempts made in the United States during the late twentieth century in the field of CE – attempts that he appears to be critical of himself. After arguing that these concerns are indeed myths and can therefore be dismissed on that basis, he concedes that there are some ‘well-founded misgivings’ associated with CE especially in terms of

previous failed attempts, a lack of clear methodology and a lack of robust evaluation.

Clearly, coming to a full understanding of CE is a complex task. It would seem that this warning from Arthur is well judged:

“To enter a discussion about character and, even more, about character education is to enter a minefield of conflicting definition and ideology” (Arthur 2003: 1).

The potential for confusion therefore, particularly with regard to well-meaning but uninitiated practitioners or policy makers who are considering adopting CE in their work, is considerable. Added to that, it is difficult to generate a critical analysis of CE as it is such a disparate and contested concept.

A review of CE policies in the United States, Canada and the UK as part of my research has revealed that the criticisms above are not mentioned or addressed as part of the justification for the introduction of CE programmes (see APPG 2014, Ontario Ministry of Education 2008, UK Department for Education 2015, U.S. Department of Education 2005), nor are the available evaluations of such programmes, many of which suggest that these programmes have no significant impact on outcomes for young people, particularly beyond academic attainment, and they can also have detrimental effects (see SCDRC 2010, Hartshorne and May 1930, Tuttle et

al 2013). This would indicate that there is a lack of critical analysis among policy makers with regard to CE.

Nel Noddings describes the tendency to avoid critical examination of CE thus: "The courage of a warrior may, for example, be so admired that members of the society do not think (or dare) to criticize war itself."

(Noddings 2012: 167)

The advantages of critiquing character education

A common thread that exists across all forms of CE, whether narrowly or broadly conceived, should be recognised. This is that all of the conceptualisations of CE wish to make improvements, principally, to the character attributes of *people*, with a commitment to the idea that a natural consequence of this approach would be an improvement in society.

Critics of CE, as outlined above, are not satisfied with this approach. They contend that this runs the risk of elevating the importance of the distinctive attributes of people over those of the structural contexts and sites in which they operate. Martha Nussbaum asserts that certain philosophers "have not always devoted enough attention to the way in which the desire of a dominant group to retain power can enter into the very articulation of basic ethical and social categories." (Nussbaum 1997: 40). This criticism could equally apply to the CE movement.

As an illustration, the CE movement does not explicitly seek to address the particular character of poverty, but that of the people affected by it. In his review of KIPP Schools in the United States, a large network of schools that prioritises CE, Brian Lack (2011) observes that the approaches used by KIPP schools "...are inherently undemocratic and smack of an individualistic orientation that ultimately rewards and punishes students to the extent that they themselves are willing and able to work hard to overcome the conditions of poverty." (Lack 2011: 75)

Kristjánsson (2013), while not responding directly to Lack, dismisses the general concern of individualism as a myth on the basis that CE programmes are ultimately aimed at 'social change'. While this may be true, this analysis does not sufficiently recognise and explore the main contention of the CE movement, which appears to be that social change or a flourishing society comes about as a result of individual members of that society bettering themselves by means of instruction they receive in the development of character. A flourishing society, therefore, is arguably presented as a responsibility of citizens and not of the state.

While I broadly agree with the critics of traditional CE, my research suggests that analysing both sides of this particular argument can help to gain an understanding of the relationship between individual citizens and structures of power. I have found that this is particularly true when the analysis is conducted while 'looking in' on CE from the outside using literatures of social and political theory as opposed to concentrating on CE

research literature itself. This line of inquiry can also help to illuminate the role of political and social ideology in arriving at any conclusions about the purpose of education in the context of a broader project of social reform.

Human Flourishing

In this section I will explore the theme of human flourishing from selected authors using a sociological perspective. It is beyond the scope of the paper to offer a full analysis of each perspective; the intention rather is to provide some examples of sociological frameworks that could help to locate the role of education in terms of the development of what might be referred to as 'character'.

Author Richard Sennett laments the 'corrosion of character' in the title of his book, but unlike CE proponents, he does not interpret the cause of this as a decline in moral standards. Instead he outlines that the cause of this is linked to what he calls 'the new capitalism', and that the characteristics of this system have led to the erosion of social bonds and values such as commitment, loyalty and trust (Sennett 1999).

This represents a starting point which is completely opposite to the traditional CE narrative. The proposition is that systemic and environmental factors are the main cause of a decline in values (and subsequently wellbeing, justice and equality), not a lack of personal

character, and that the remediation would involve challenging and reforming those systemic contexts.

Similarly, in his exposition of what he refers to as 'thin communitarianism', Mark Olssen (2004) asserts that neoliberalism presents a challenge to democracy and, by consequence, to education. He asserts that "The purpose of education is to help construct a socially established normative culture that provides security and builds the capabilities for democracy. These might include techniques of debate and legal eristic, of meeting procedure and political activism." (Olssen 2004: 263)

There is potentially some agreement with the CE movement here as Olssen goes on to argue that "education is essentially important in its role of constructing democratic civic norms...It is not a case of 'brainwashing' or 'socialization' but of teaching skills and establishing models of civic conduct based on tolerance, deliberation, conflict resolution, give and take, and trust." (Olssen 2004: 266-267) Olssen's argument however would specifically locate the role of education in developing such skills, capacities and values within what might be described as a critical democratic framework.

While some CE proponents recommend an Aristotelian framework, Stephen Ball (2015) calls for a process of Socratic self-examination; a kind of "...self-formation through engagement" and "a continuous practice

of introspection, which is at the same time attuned to a critique of the world outside" (Ball 2015: 8)

Whereas traditional CE posits that we should aim to become virtuous agents, it is by thinking "in terms of what [we] do not want to be, and do not want to become" that enables the care of the self (Ball and Olmedo 2013: 86). In other words it is by actively resisting unethical norms, questioning unjust power relations and finding our own responses to these challenges that we realise the fullness of our own being, we discover truth and we flourish.

Perhaps a question for educators in response to this might be 'how often do we encourage students to engage in the practices of resistance and refusal?'

The thinking of Olssen and Ball, along with other authors such as Henri Giroux (2004), advocates that we should try to gain an understanding of how society operates and perhaps a 'sociology of human flourishing', as well as understanding the role of individuals and communities in terms of building social cohesion and taking informed action. Their perspective also suggests that any attempts to do so should be underpinned by clear and explicit commitments to moral purpose, rights, justice and equality as well as a refusal of the structures of power that act as barriers to those aims. This would also recognise the role of political activism and protest – something that the CE movement fails to do.

The CE movement makes no such commitments to society-level principles, nor does it contribute to an understanding of the relationships between individuals, communities and society. Rather, it makes the assumption that a flourishing society is created as a consequence of each individual member of that society pursuing their own understanding of the good life and the virtuous agent.

Final discussion and conclusions

My research has led me to conclude firstly that character is best understood as a *concept* as opposed to something that exists in the real world. It does not seem possible to establish with certainty that character is an observable entity that exists as part of the human condition, as proponents of CE tend to claim as part of a naturalist position (Kristjánsson 2013). Lapsley and Narvaez (2007) suggest in their review that human behaviour is determined in the main by situations, social factors and psychological schema, rather than an indelible 'mark' of one's character. Viewing character as an open-ended concept offers the possibility of constructing understandings of the development of *both* human and social capital: character could act as a lens that allows us to focus on the 'distinctive qualities' of people, contexts, power and the spaces between. As such I remain optimistic about the possibility of the concept of character being constructed as a vehicle for Socratic dialogue

that can be used in schools to support learning while also helping to make improvements in education and society in general by engaging young people in informed active citizenship.

Secondly, I have concluded that character is a concept worth exploring because it raises difficult issues that may otherwise remain implicit. The concept of character can be put to work in ensuring that education is understood as being more than the acquisition of traditional bodies of knowledge and competencies, measured crudely by standardised assessments (Mowat 2015). I remain concerned about narrow or 'traditional' approaches to CE as not enough is known to establish either the efficacy or the appropriateness of these approaches. However I recognise the value in grouping practices together using the broad thematic title of 'character education', as it can help efforts to establish communities of interest that might not otherwise exist.

Thirdly, I have concluded that great care must be taken in any inquiry around the concept of character and how it should impact on education and society. Such an inquiry would need to be carried out in a way that recognises but also moves beyond the level of the 'individual'. This means that an inquiry and any resulting framework must coherently and explicitly recognise the role of social and structural forces and should therefore be informed by social, political and economic theory.

In summary, I contend that 'traditional' approaches to CE that tend to focus on the inculcation of prescribed virtues or values in individual people, should not be the starting point for an inquiry relating to the development of character in education. Instead, I suggest that a shared understanding of the concept of character should be constructed by means of dialogue informed by a variety of inter-disciplinary theoretical perspectives. These perspectives should cover a number of conceptual 'levels' including individual, relational, social, environmental and practical. This would allow the concept of character to be 'reclaimed' in education circles with clear commitments to principles such as justice and equity.

If human flourishing is dependent on our pursuit, discovery, treatment, realisation and creation of knowledge and truth, then surely it needs to be recognised that it is the social settings and sites within which we operate - our relationships with the world and our fellow human beings - that are the primary arbiters here and not our inner resources of will, integrity or character. If the latter were true, it would follow that those who flourish in society are those of 'good character' and that those who languish are those of 'bad character', and this is self-evidently not the case.

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