

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Knightly Virtues programme [offers]...the opportunity to creatively explore great stories of knights and heroes and the virtues to which they aspired...The hypothesis is that the traditional chivalric ideals of knighthood provided a particularly noble and exalted distillation of moral ideals that are no less educationally and otherwise relevant to today than they were at the time of their conception.

(Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, undated).

Eustace learns a powerful character lesson when he is transformed into a dragon.

(Narnian Virtues: A Character Education English Curriculum, undated).

‘Grit’, ‘resilience’ and ‘character’ are current buzzwords for a number of politicians, educators and authors, especially in the UK and the US. A number of bestselling books have been published by north American authors in recent years praising the benefits of individual character development, including Brooks’s (2016) *The Road to Character*, which urges readers to focus on developing what he calls the ‘eulogy virtues’, i.e. those character strengths we would like to be remembered for rather than the ‘résumé virtues’, i.e. the achievements and skills which lead to success in the jobs market; Tough’s (2013) *How Children Succeed*, which argues that ‘success’ in life is brought about through perseverance, curiosity and self-control; Dweck’s (2012) *Mindset*, which emphasises the importance of hard work, training and resilience for academic achievement; and Duckworth’s (2016) *Grit*, which claims that persistence and resilience is a bigger predictor of success in life than IQ or talent. Education for character has risen up the political agenda in a number of countries, especially the US and the UK, as governments and educators have sought to find ways to improve children’s life chances and address various societal challenges. Schools are viewed by advocates of character education as having a crucial role to play in improving individual character, and this is regarded as the best means to develop a better society.

The US has seen the development of the Knowledge is Power Programme (KIPP) schools, which have been running since the mid-1990s and which operate in deprived areas and place character development at the heart of their ethos. And both Republican and Democrat

politicians have expressed support for character education. The then US President, Bill Clinton, stated in his 1996 State of the Union address that he was ‘challenging all schools’ in the US ‘to teach character education’ (Clinton, 1996) and George W. Bush significantly increased funding for character education programmes when he was President (Hudd, 2004: 113). Considerable interest in character education has also been seen in various other countries, including Canada, Australia, Singapore, Japan and Taiwan (e.g. Winton, 2008a; Cranston et al., 2010; Tan and Tan, 2014; Arthur et al., 2017; Kristjánsson, 2015). In the UK, a number of politicians have expressed strong support for character education, most notably former Education Secretary Nicky Morgan (e.g. Morgan, 2017). The current British Education Secretary, Damian Hinds, has also made clear his commitment to character education, arguing that it is essential that schools instil ‘character and resilience’ in young people to enable them to deal with the challenges of life. Indeed, in May 2019 Hinds set up ‘an advisory group on how we can best support schools in their work to build character’ (Hinds, 2019) viewing this as a key way of improving social mobility (Snowdon, 2019).

In this book, we take a critical look at this trend, challenging the principles and practices championed by those who promote the deliberate development of individual character-building in schools (e.g. Arthur, 2003, 2010; Kristjánsson, 2015). We build on an existing critical literature (e.g. Kohn, 1997; Purpel, 1997; Winton, 2008b) and an emerging critique of character education in the British context (see Allen and Bull, 2018; Bates, 2019; Kisby, 2017; Spohrer and Bailey, 2018; Suissa, 2015; Walsh, 2018 for criticisms of particular aspects). This book critically analyses the theoretical ideas underpinning character education and the teaching resources produced by character educators in Britain, who put forward the development of ‘character’ as the way to address a very wide range of social problems.¹ As Davies et al. (2005: 349) put it: ‘Almost nothing is beyond the scope of character education.’ However, we strongly reject the idea of character education as some sort of panacea for various social ills, real or imagined. Indeed, as we argue in the book, character education in Britain is best viewed as deeply flawed in both theory and practice.

This book also draws attention to the role played by the controversial philanthropic organisation the John Templeton Foundation (JTF), which has provided, and continues to provide, almost all of the funding that supports the work underpinning the development of character education in Britain, thereby enabling one organisation, created by one very wealthy individual, to exert significant influence over government policy, educational practice, and academic networks in this area. In particular, the JTF has contributed very substantial financial assistance to two major initiatives in Britain, first, the creation of the Jubilee Centre for

Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham, which is the leading centre for the promotion of character education in the UK, and, second, the *Narnian Virtues Character Education English Curriculum* project at the University of Leeds. In the book, we examine the character education teaching resources produced by the Jubilee Centre that focus on the actions of heroic, historical figures and the material produced by the *Narnian Virtues* project at Leeds, which draws on C.S. Lewis's Narnia novels to develop a character education curriculum, as well as resources produced by other character educators.

There is a substantial academic literature discussing character education, which variously addresses the underlying rationale for character education, its relationship to virtue ethics, the pedagogic strategies that could be employed, the connections to other educational agendas, the strengths and criticisms, and the possibilities for evaluating its success. As a consequence, it can be quite difficult to maintain clarity about what exactly is being defended, and the debate can become rather diffuse. For example, Kristjánsson (2015) accepts some of the criticisms levelled against character education as being true of some US-based programmes, but not of the Aristotelian character education he promotes in the UK. One of the benefits of examining the specific examples of character education in the UK, is that it helps to overcome the vagueness that is associated with the construction of theoretical models. Instead of engaging in philosophical discussions about what it could be, this book largely focuses on critiquing what is happening in the UK – what does policy actually say, what does government and philanthropic money actually fund, and what resources are being used in schools? In addressing ourselves to current practices in the UK, we aim to provide a case study of what character education looks like, and also to consider the nature of character education as it is encountered by teachers and students. However, our hope is that this constrained case study will also shed light on some of those more abstract discussions about character education in general.

The Structure of the Book

The book is structured around three core sections. In part 1 (chapters 2 and 3), we set the scene for this national case study by exploring what character education is and why it is problematic, before examining how it has emerged in UK education policy, and which of the problems appears to be most acute in this policy framework. In part 2 (chapters 4 and 5), we turn to review specific examples of character education projects in the UK, with a view to considering what kind of things teachers and students do, and what they are likely to learn, when they enact character education policy. In part 3 (chapter 6), we consider citizenship education as an alternative way to pursue some of the espoused aims of character education and argue that it

actually addresses some of the same concerns far more effectively. Throughout, we engage with the research about impact wherever it is available to ensure that the discussion is grounded in reality and reflects the experiences of children and young people. Finally, in our conclusion (chapter 7), we provide a brief synopsis of the arguments developed in the book and reflect on what can be learned by focusing on the UK as a case study of character education.

Here, we preview some of the main arguments we develop later in the book, in order to help the reader orientate themselves to the key debates. Chapter 2 outlines and critically engages with the theoretical ideas underpinning character education. The chapter sets out the fundamental ideas of Aristotelian virtue ethics, which holds that citizens can become virtuous through the cultivation of certain customs or habits of behaviour. It then argues that there are a number of significant problems with this ethical theory, which underpins the work of the most significant character educators in Britain, in particular, that it does not provide adequate guidance about what someone should do when faced with a specific moral dilemma. It also argues that the understanding of character education put forward by British character educators is problematic because it places undue emphasis on personal ethics rather than public ethics and advances a very individualistic approach to addressing important moral and political issues. Chapter 3 analyses the historical development of character education in Britain. It highlights the significant increase in interest in character-building by British policymakers since the 2010 general election, and the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. The chapter shows that politicians linked the need for character education with concerns about what they perceived as a decline in young people's moral attitudes and a wish to increase the academic success of students from deprived backgrounds. It examines the role played by the JTF-funded character education policy community, which has huge resources at its disposal, in seeking to influence policy in this area and, in particular, the moralistic and individualistic approach to character education that it has advanced.

Chapter 4 focuses exclusively on the teaching resources produced by the Jubilee Centre, which has developed what it calls a *Knightly Virtues* programme, which aims to demonstrate and instil various moral ideals in students through an exploration of the lives and actions of various heroic figures in history. The chapter structure follows that of an article published by Kristján Kristjánsson, the Deputy Director of the Jubilee Centre, in which various criticisms of character, virtue and virtue education that he identified are rejected by him as 'myths' (Kristjánsson, 2013). It establishes, however, that the centre's teaching material fails to live up to Kristjánsson's model and has, in fact, fallen into many of the problems and pitfalls he identifies, in particular, offering individualistic and de-politicised accounts of events that it

discusses. Chapter 5 provides an analysis of three more case studies of character education projects, setting out a descriptive account of the work, and then exploring the rationale behind it. The chapter examines some of the evidence about the implementation of each project and points to various shortcomings with the evaluations and the conclusions drawn that are based on these. This chapter argues that character educators have generally failed to specify exactly what outcomes they want to achieve, and as a consequence they often use inappropriate measures for their research. This chapter re-evaluates some of the evidence that has been cited by advocates of character education and argues that there is evidence of limited or negative impact, and certainly optimistic bias in existing interpretations.

Chapter 6 argues that the resurgence of interest in character education in the UK, and the forms it has taken, reflect a general trend in education to promote a narrow kind of individualised and responsibilised citizenship. The chapter considers character education as a form of self-work, where individuals are expected to develop their individual capacity to confront the demands of the global economy, and to become the ideal neo-liberal citizen. In England in particular, the turn to character education corresponds to the decline in the fortunes of citizenship education, and this chapter argues that this in itself reflects the shifting ideological preferences of a Conservative government. This chapter reviews the evidence about the impact of citizenship education and argues that it is actually more effective in addressing some of the social and ethical problems discussed by character education advocates. It also argues that by addressing the reality of collective political action, citizenship offers the chance to build people's capacity for resisting some of the more destructive elements of neo-liberalism. Chapter 7 summarises the findings of the book and clarifies its three main arguments. First, the book demonstrates that the analysis of character education needs to take account of the context in which such policies and practices are being developed. Second, the book argues that such policies need to be understood as symbolic political actions, as well as educational initiatives. And third, the book illustrates how important it is to undertake detailed analysis of character education as it is interpreted and implemented at various stages of the policy cycle.

Note

1. Readers will spot that we refer at different points in the text to the UK, Britain and England. This reflects the fact that whilst the government in Westminster is elected by the whole of the UK, the Secretary of State for Education in the government generally only governs the English education system, with most educational issues being devolved to the other individual nations of the UK

(Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). However, some education organisations operate in more than one of the nations, and sometimes operate across the whole of the UK. We have tried to ensure that our use of the terms is accurate in relation to the context about which we are writing, so the UK government's austerity programme affects children across the UK, but its character education policy affects students in English schools, whilst the Jubilee centre promotes character education across Britain, but sometimes through supporting organisations specifically located in Scotland. This is one of the many quirks associated with education in the UK and sets the scene for our story of rugby values, *Narnian virtues* and historic tales of chivalry – in some ways a distinctively British take on character education in neo-liberal times.

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