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## Character development through the curriculum: teaching and assessing the understanding and practice of virtue

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### ABSTRACT

This article reports on the differential impact of a curriculum intervention on students' understanding and practice of virtue. The research is germane given Ofsted's new requirement that its inspectors should assess how the curriculum in all schools in England and Wales supports students' character development. Results are reported here for a total of 1226 eleven- and twelve-year-olds assessed at the beginning and end of their first secondary school term: 822 children in nine program schools, where students experienced the Narnian Virtues character education English curriculum, and 404 children in eight control schools that did not experience the intervention (2 lessons per week over 12 weeks). Mean scores for knowledge and understanding of virtues (wisdom, love, integrity, fortitude, self-control and justice) in the experimental group showed a significant increase from pre- to post-test, which was not the case for the control group. Although scores pre- to post-test for the experimental group declined on a number of (self-assessed) character measures, this decline was not as pronounced as it was for the control group. That children's understanding of character improved rapidly in the experimental group is important, as knowledge of virtue generally precedes behavioural application.

### KEYWORDS

Ethical; moral; curriculum; virtues; character (5 words)

### Contextualizing character education

In England the Education Inspection Framework (OFSTED, 2019) states that school inspectors will: 'make a judgement on the personal development of learners by evaluating the extent to which . . . the curriculum and the provider's wider work support learners to develop their character' (OFSTED, 2019, p. 12 *our italics*). Foregrounding the importance of character development in the English school inspection criteria follows decades of work by academics to gain an acknowledgement of the importance of addressing this through the school curriculum.

The importance of 'character education' has been emphasized in the UK by politicians on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. The increasing attention to educating for character has also come from academics and educators in the US (see, for instance, Lickona, 1991; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999) and organizations such as Character.org (until 2015, the Character Education Partnership) and, more recently, in England from academics at Birmingham University's Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (see, for instance, Arthur, 2002; Carr & Harrison, 2015; Kristjánsson, 2013, 2015) as well as others (see, for instance, Pike, 2013, 2017; Pike et al., 2015; Felderhof & Thompson, 2014).

Among the signs that character is a focus of increasing cross-cultural attention and educational intervention was the publication, by the American Psychological Association, of Character Strengths and Virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which presents evidence that virtues conducive to human flourishing are prized and promoted across diverse cultures as goals of character education (see also Lickona & Davidson, 2005). Further indications of growing global interest in character development and



character education include the International Handbook on Values Education and Student Wellbeing (Lovat et al., 2010) and Happiness and Virtue Beyond East and West (Ryan et al., 2011) with contributions from scholars around the world.

Although there is a broad and growing consensus that ‘character education’ is an essential part of the mission of schools, scholars and educators debate issues such as how ‘character’ should be defined, how schools should seek to foster character development, how it might be measured and how one should view the relationship between individual character and societal factors (Allen & Bull, 2018; Davis, 2003; Dishon & Goodman, 2017). Regarding societal factors, education must certainly recognize that these impact individual lives (see Allen & Bull, 2018; Taylor, 2018) and that societal ills and inequalities associated with poverty or unemployment are not to be blamed, in ways that confuse or conflate causation with correlation, on an individual’s lack of ‘character’. Rightly understood and rightly implemented, character education promotes both the personal character development of the individual and the development of virtuous communities that support individual flourishing in the real world (Arthur et al., 2017).

In the design of the Narnian Virtues curriculum and research, we acknowledged individual moral agency and personal responsibility (our primary emphasis) while at the same time recognizing that human beings live in, and are influenced by, families, communities and wider society. For instance, when addressing the virtue of ‘justice’, the curriculum emphasized the importance of respect for private property and freedom from arbitrary arrest, with reference to Magna Carta, while looking at how a particular character in the novel was subjected to such injustice.

We found a helpfully broad definition of character education to be: ‘those educational practices that foster the development of student character. Character is, then, defined as the set of psychological characteristics that motivate and enable the individual to function as a competent moral agent, that is, to do “good” in the world’ (Berkowitz, 2011, p. 153) although the very specific educational benefits and personal development associated with character education have also been noted:

Character education has been demonstrated to be associated with academic motivation and aspirations, academic achievement, prosocial behaviour, bonding to school, prosocial and democratic values, conflict resolution skills, moral reasoning maturity, responsibility, respect, self-efficacy, self-control, self-esteem, social skills, and trust in and respect for teachers (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004, p. 75).

Berkowitz emphasizes that the purpose of schooling is to enable students to flourish as whole human beings rather than the more utilitarian ends of academic success and providing applicants to colleges and universities and workers for the economy. Berkowitz, in common with many character educators, follows Aristotle (1987) for whom ‘virtue’ is intrinsic to the nature of an individual required to become fully human. As virtues are character traits that become defining features of an individual (Banks & Gallagher, 2008, p. 52), we defined virtues as ‘good moral habits’. Along with other contemporary scholars and educators, we believed such virtues to be teachable—by example, explanation, reflection, direct and vicarious experience, and guided practice (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Lickona, 2005, 2018; Kristjánsson, 2015; Pike, 2013, 2017; Pike et al., 2015).

### Approaches to character education: from ‘stand-alone’ to ‘integration’

While it would be an oversimplification to suggest there are only two major approaches that schools might take to discharge their responsibilities with regard to character education, it might be helpful to consider these as different ends of a continuum from ‘integration’ to ‘stand-alone’ with regard to practical implementation in schools. The ‘stand-alone’ approach was widely used in teaching ‘Citizenship’ in the UK as a discrete ‘subject’ added to the school’s existing educational programmes

(Pike, 2007; Halstead & Pike, 2006). There are more than 30 ‘stand-alone’ character curricula that have been reviewed (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006) and found to have empirical support. For example, the K-12 curriculum Second Step ([www.cfchildren.org](http://www.cfchildren.org)), used in more than 20 countries, provides sequenced, grade-by-grade lesson plans for teaching social-emotional skills like listening, teamwork, and conflict resolution and has been found to have a positive impact on empathy and interpersonal behaviour. In England, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues has created resources that ‘range from bespoke programmes for both Primary and Secondary age pupils, to full Programmes of Study, which can be used to teach character as a discrete subject, both at Primary and Secondary level’.

At the other end of the implementation continuum is an integrative rather than add-on approach that fosters character development through the existing academic curriculum and wider school life. This approach recognizes that students develop intellectual and moral virtues —and have opportunities to be hard-working, persevering, kind, generous, fair, honest, and compassionate—through their actions and interactions with others day in, day out, at school, at home, with friends, and on social media. They have opportunities to practice virtuous habits as they wait for buses and lessons, listen to others, express themselves online and offline, engage in sport, design and make garments, lead school initiatives on the environment and student voice, participate in trips, engage in service-learning, solve equations, and read good books. In any academic discipline, biographical and autobiographical material can be used to introduce students to people of distinguished achievement and to consider the strengths of character that helped them to achieve what they did. In terms of subject content, some schools may address citizenship and moral education in the science curriculum by considering socioscientific issues (Ryder, 2002), values in mathematics (Bills & Husbands, 2005) and character and virtue through literature and religious education (Pike, 2015; Felderhof and Thompson, 2014).

Virtue literacy is important across the curriculum and has been defined as the ‘knowledge, understanding and satisfactory application of virtue terms, as distinct from the development of virtuous emotions or virtuous behaviours’ (Davison et al., 2016, p. 17). Previous studies have drawn attention to ‘virtue literacy’ as a prerequisite of the understanding that underpins attitudinal and behavioural change (Arthur et al., 2017; Lickona, 1991). It is often claimed that the literature and humanities curriculum not only lends itself in special ways to personal reflection about what it is to be human but also facilitates virtue literacy; it may enable students to understand virtue and inspire them to practice it (Pike, 2015; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 2008; Arthur, 2015).

Stories are integral to educating us in the virtues and to moral education (Pike, 2015; Pike et al., 2015), and the study of English has been singled out as especially conducive to ‘personal development’ and helping young people ‘develop their character’ through learning to understand other people (Goodwyn, 2017). Some scholars have argued that ‘literature has more potential than almost any other subject for expanding the moral imagination and helping students to understand moral possibilities’ (Halstead, 2011, p. 340). Far-reaching claims indeed have been made for the moral efficacy of reading literature (Bohlin, 2005; Carr & Harrison, 2015; Pike, 2015). Martha Nussbaum maintains that reading literature augments our experience of life and that such enhancement is vital because the experience we have is ‘too confined and too parochial’ (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 47).

To be sure, not everyone agrees with such claims about literature’s value for developing good character (see, for example, Currie, 2013; Moya, 2014). One of the legitimate questions raised is whether those who seek out and enjoy reading literature are already more disposed to show consideration for others or whether reading literature increases this. An important question for our research, therefore, was to try to measure the degree to which a literature-based character education curriculum increased positive character outcomes for those who experienced it.



## Rationale for text choice: ethical reading

The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe (Lewis, 1950/2009) was chosen for our curriculum as it depicts the Pevensie children practicing virtues such as courage, fortitude, love, wisdom, humility and self-control and growing as moral agents as a result. This novel was included in Time magazine's 100 best young adults' book list of 2015, as polled by the National Centre for Illustrated Literature, the Young Readers Centre at the Library of Congress and the Every Child a Reader Foundation. In the UK, when the Book Trust presented the best 100 books for children up to the age of 14, The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe was selected as one of the best books in the category for 11-year-olds.

Despite wide cross-cultural affirmation of the virtues depicted by Lewis in The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe and the enduring popularity of the novel, it is not without its critics. Philip Pullman finds the Narnia novels 'loathsome' and 'nauseating' and accuses Lewis of creating racial and gender stereotypes (Ezard, 2002; Hitchin, 2003). However, we maintain that The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe portrays one of the Pevensie girls, Lucy, as stronger, braver, wiser, and generally more mature than her two brothers. Similarly, her older sister, Susan, displays more courage than her brother Edmund initially does. Taken as a whole, the story as it unfolds shows the four Pevensie children coming together to risk their lives in a noble effort to liberate Narnia from the cruel tyranny of the White Witch and restore freedom and justice for all. Another critic of Narnia, Polly Toynbee (2005), writing in the UK Guardian national newspaper, has argued that the Narnia novels are part of a 'Christian plot' to 'invade minds'. In response to that charge, we cite *The Magician's Book: A Sceptic's Adventures in Narnia* (Miller, 2008) which argues that the Narnia novels stand on their own merit for a wide range of readers regardless of religious persuasion. A novel such as The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe can certainly be read as a Christian allegory, but countless readers have enjoyed it as a highly engaging fantasy tale with heroes and villains and important character lessons, the way we approached it with schools.

The virtues and vices exhibited by the fictional characters in the novel and the consequences that flow from their moral choices are all consistent with 'the moral order that is the Tao' (Tankard, 2007, p. 72), a term employed to make a point about the virtues approved in different cultures. Lewis states that 'this conception in all its forms, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and Oriental alike, I shall henceforth refer to for brevity simply as "the Tao"' (Lewis, 1943, p. 16). The Tao (a Confucian term) describes virtues found across different religions, cultures and traditions and includes duties to provide for and nurture children, to be merciful, to exercise justice, to refrain from cruelty, and so on. There are over 60 references to the 'Tao' in *The Abolition of Man* (Lewis, 1943), Lewis' book about the teaching of English in schools, which may be regarded as the moral framework on which the Narnia novels are based. It has been shown that Lewis, in this work, endorsed and advocated a form of 'character education', inspired by Aristotle (Pike, 2013).

According to the largest proponent of character education in the US, Character.org (formerly the Character Education Partnership), 'core values' that enable students to flourish, are widely recognized. These values 'transcend religious, cultural and ethnic differences' and 'express our common humanity' (Character.org, 2019). This was the approach adopted in *Narnian Virtues* as the curriculum was designed to enable children and young people to understand and practice virtues that transcended the Western or the culturally Christian (Ryan et al., 2011). In increasingly plural, multi-cultural societies, when questions are often raised about which moral virtues schools may legitimately teach to young people, who come from diverse homes and communities, we sought a foundation for the project that transcended cultural and religious differences (Pike, 2011).

## Curriculum design for character development

Narnian Virtues was in some ways similar to the Knightly Virtues project (Arthur et al., 2014; Carr & Harrison, 2015) for upper primary school children (aged 9–11). That project developed a literary curriculum and programme of activities based on teaching virtues through four classic stories. However, Narnian Virtues has its own intellectual genealogy, rooted in an appreciation of the Tao and conceptions of applied reader-response theory (Pike, 2011, 2013). From the perspective of the latter, a curriculum should be designed to prompt readers to perceive the connections between their own lives and the world depicted in the fiction (Pike, 2015).

Towards that end, we commissioned the Co-Editor of the Cambridge Companion to C.S. Lewis (MacSwain & Ward, 2010), Dr Michael Ward, to scope *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* for virtues and then met with local teachers to consider which episodes (among those lending themselves to considering particular virtues) were most ‘teachable’ in terms of eliciting readers’ personal ethical responses and having the best learning tasks to accompany them. For instance, we selected the passage ‘Edmund and the Turkish Delight’ from chapter 4 of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* where the wayward Edmund does not resist enchanted Turkish Delight as one of the two passages through which children could learn about the virtue of self-control. After an initial pilot (Pike et al., 2015; Francis et al., 2017, 2018) where 12 virtues were studied, we reduced these to six virtues (wisdom, love, integrity, fortitude, self-control and justice) for the main study to facilitate a greater emphasis on, and consolidation through repetition of, each virtue (definitions given in Appendix A).

### From Understanding to Application: Measuring 5 Curriculum Objectives

The curriculum was based on 12 extracts from *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950), each about a page long (see Appendix B). Program classrooms typically had one English lesson, of about an hour in length, each day (five lessons a week). The Narnian Virtues project took up two of these five lessons, with students instructed to read the whole novel outside of English lesson time so they knew what happened in the novel between each weekly extract in class. Two extracts were devoted to learning about each of the six ‘Narnian’ virtues (wisdom, fortitude, self-control, justice, integrity, and love). Prior to asking students to identify virtues and vices in selected passages, teachers used a project-provided handbook to teach students the meaning of each of the virtues so they would have the vocabulary and understanding needed for ethical analysis of passages. The curriculum had five objectives. We wanted students to:

- (1) Understand the virtues and vices and acquire a ‘virtues vocabulary’ for naming, defining, and discussing those qualities.
- (2) Identify the virtues and vices exhibited by the characters in particular passages and how the author has used language to illustrate these qualities.
- (3) Empathize with the story characters and be able to understand, describe and evaluate their thoughts, feelings, and moral decision-making as they display virtues and vices.
- (4) Value the virtues and appreciate the positive consequences of virtues for self and others, realize the negative consequences of vices, and grow in motivation to exhibit the virtues and curb bad habits.
- (5) Apply the virtues and plan how to develop them and hold oneself accountable for doing so through self-reflection and communicating one’s ‘Virtue Improvement Plan’ and progress to others.



Teachers were free to use alternative activities to achieve these objectives. For example, if the curriculum suggested using 'hot seating' (where a student goes into role as a character and is interviewed) as a way for students to achieve the objective of empathizing with a story character, but the teacher believed a diary entry would better suit his or her class, we encouraged this flexibility since the alternative activity still met the objective of having students empathize.

The exception to this was the two 'core activities' that we wanted all students to engage in during the week's lessons. One of these core activities was the highlighting in each passage of virtues (with a green marker) and vices (with a red marker) and a writing task where students were asked to provide a brief example from their own experience of practising or not practising a particular virtue. The nature of the other core activity varied from week to week. Across the 12 weeks, time spent on the five curriculum objectives was approximately Understanding: 10%; Identifying: 20%; Empathizing: 25%; Valuing: 20%; Applying: 25%. Put simply, the curriculum was designed to help students progress from developing a virtues vocabulary to more consistently applying the virtues in their own lives.

### Research design

The framework (from understanding to application) operationalized in our main quantitative instrument ([Appendix C](#)) was guided in large part by a psychology of character, advanced by a number of scholars (e.g., Berkowitz & Grych, 2004; Lickona, 1991; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999). This views character as comprised of three interacting components: cognitive (knowing), emotional (valuing), and behavioural (acting). Our first two curriculum objectives (understanding and identifying the virtues) correspond to the cognitive component of character; our third and fourth objectives of empathizing and valuing, to the emotional component; and our fifth objective of application, to the behavioural component.

Our quantitative psychometric measure ([Appendix C](#)) reflected this conception of character and was designed to assess the impact on students' progress on each of the five curriculum objectives (understanding, identifying, empathizing, valuing and applying virtue). We measured understanding through the two assessments of knowledge and understanding. We assessed the ability of students to identify virtues through their recognition of situations as opportunities to practice virtue. We evaluated empathy by looking at students' emotional responses to situations. We judged the valuing of virtue by looking at virtue as a motive, intrinsic/extrinsic rewards and attitudes towards virtues. All of the subscales comprised Likert-type items (on a scale of 0–4, with 0 = Strongly Disagree and 4 = Strongly Agree) except for the Intrinsic vs Extrinsic Rewards subscale which comprised items requiring a categorical (yes or no) response. Progress on the fifth curriculum objective, applying virtues, was evaluated through self-assessment of classroom behaviour and social and interpersonal skills. We were aware, however, that measuring character development is generally regarded as notoriously difficult (Curren & Kotzee, 2014; Davison et al., 2016) and of the well-known problems associated with self-reporting (Kristjánsson, 2013) due to inherent subjectivity. Equally, external assessments by parents or teachers were eschewed in this quantitative research as only a proxy for character, such as behaviour, would be most visible, rather than the character itself which is so dependent on internal motive.

Originally our instrument was expected to have 11 subscales. A principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted on all 89 items. We used a loading of 0.4 as the cut-off, and found that 24 items required removing (including two whole subscales). All of our remaining nine subscales had sufficiently high reliabilities, all Chronbach's  $\alpha < 0.60$  (see [Table 1](#)).

The basic research question asked was: To what extent did students following the Narnian Virtues curriculum show gains on measures of understanding, valuing, and applying the six Narnian virtues that were greater than gains demonstrated by students who did not experience this curriculum? A quasi-experimental design was employed that included a matched control group. Rather than having some classes within schools following the program and others left out, this was considered to be more ethical as it avoided the situation of 'haves' and 'have-nots' in the same school (and mitigated the risk of student



and parental complaints as a result of some losing out on an exciting curricular opportunity). It was also considered more accurate as ‘contamination’ of the intervention through schools’ peer culture and visual environment was avoided.

A pre- to post-test design was employed, that is, students’ completed outcome measures immediately prior to the start of the curriculum and after it. The students in the experimental group studied the Narnian Virtues curriculum for *The Lion*, *The Witch*, and *The Wardrobe* whilst the students in the control group did not follow this curriculum in two (out of five) of their English lessons each week. The year reported here is that for which we had data from the largest cohort of students participating in Narnian Virtues with a matched control group. Control schools were matched to experimental schools on the basis of the percentage of students eligible for free school meals, school roll size, school type (i.e. academy, community, or foundation school, and faith or nonfaith).

Students from Year 7 (11–12 years old) were recruited from nine experimental schools. The schools were a self-selecting sample; four were chosen through a pre-existing relationship with

**Table 1.** Nine subscales for the self-assessment of character

Subscale name	Chronbach’s $\alpha$
Classroom Behaviour	0.83
Emotional Responses	0.74
Empathy	0.61
Intrinsic/Extrinsic rewards	0.73
Recognizing situations to practice empathy	0.69
Social/Interpersonal skills	0.71
Virtue as a Motive	0.77
Attitudes to virtues	0.7
Assessing Own Behaviour	0.68

members of the team, with the remaining five schools recruited through a region-wide mailing list. All the schools were in areas of relative deprivation and had higher levels of take-up of free school meals than the national average. Twenty-two per cent received Free School Meals (FSM), an indicator of economic disadvantage, compared to the national average for FSM of 14%. Half the students identifying their gender did so as male and half as female. The results for the year reported are based on data from 1226 students (822 intervention and 404 control students) from 17 schools (9 intervention and 8 control) that provided consent and completed outcome measures at both pre- and post-test.

### Quantitative data

2 x 2 Mixed ANOVAs were conducted on the experimental and control data to examine differences across Time (pre- and post-test), differences between Condition (Experimental and Group), and differential effects of Time by Condition (i.e. interactions). Paired sample t-tests were also conducted to examine the nature of any interactions between Time and Condition. Qualitative data of student responses (Hart et al, 2019) and parental perspectives (Paul et al, 2020) are reported separately in order to devote attention here to the quantitative findings in relation to virtue literacy and selfreported practice of virtues.

### Knowledge and Understanding of Virtue

For the quantitative research, a bespoke questionnaire developed by the research team measured students’ understanding of character and virtue vocabulary. The questionnaire was comprised of two parts. Part A measured students’ virtue literacy and was scored out of 12. Part B measured students’ knowledge of three of the six Narnian Virtues and was scored out of nine. The questionnaire was administered to students in hard-copy format and took students approximately 15 minutes to complete.



Additionally, an item-block measuring students' understanding of all six Narnian Virtues was included in the on-line survey. Specifically, students were presented with four examples of behaviours (e.g., 'Doing kind things for others') for each of the six virtues and asked to indicate the two that were correct examples of a particular virtue. The on-line measure was scored out of 24.

### Character Development

Students also completed a psychometric survey online (Appendix C) designed to measure other aspects of character that consisted of nine sub-scales (65 items in total). Six subscales indirectly measured Empathy, Classroom Behaviour, Intrinsic vs Extrinsic Rewards, Emotional Responses, Recognizing Situations to Practice Virtues, and Social Interpersonal Skills. The other three subscales measured the extent to which the six Narnian Virtues are considered important (Attitudes to Virtues), students' reasons for valuing them (Virtue as a Motive), and the degree to which students report acting upon them in their own lives (Assesses Behaviour). The online survey took students approximately 45 min to complete. Each of the nine subscales had acceptable reliability (i.e. Cronbach's  $\alpha = .62$  or above).

### Quantitative findings

As can be seen in Table 2, with regard to students' knowledge and understanding of character and virtue (last two rows of the table) there was a significant increase for the intervention group in mean scores from pre- to post-test on the Narnian Virtues Knowledge & Understanding Survey Items (Online) and Questionnaire (paper-based). The paper questionnaire objectively tested knowledge and asked students to write definitions of the virtues studied in the curriculum, being redolent of a factual recall test whereas the online knowledge and understanding survey might be regarded as more subjective.

Scores pre- to post-test for the experimental group actually declined on a number of character measures, although this decline was not as pronounced as it was for the control group. In other words, between the start and end of their first term at secondary school, students evaluated their character less highly than they did at the start. However, in our qualitative data reported elsewhere (Hart et al, 2019; Paul et al, 2020), students reported they knew more about virtue, and many were able to speak about virtue in a nuanced way showing that knowledge had not only been memorized but the concept of virtue understood.

With regard to measures of character development, only those who had followed the Narnian Virtues curriculum showed an increase in empathy pre- to post-test that approached significance. For the experimental group, there was no significant difference pre- to post-test in the following subscales: Recognizing Situations to Practise Virtues, Virtue as a Motive, Attitudes to Virtues, and Assesses Behaviour. There was an increase in scores pre- to post-test for Empathy that just narrowly missed significance criteria. For the experimental group, there was a significant decrease in scores from pre- to post-test in the following subscales: Classroom Behaviour, Emotional Responses, Social Skills, and Intrinsic vs Extrinsic Rewards. For the control group, there was a significant decrease in scores from pre- to post-test in every subscale except for Empathy (in which there was no significant difference).

For Virtues Knowledge & Understanding (survey items out of 24 marks) the results of the Two Way Mixed ANOVA showed that there was a significant main effect of Time on scores on the Virtues Knowledge & Understanding subscale ( $F(1, 1182) = 43.26, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .035$ ), with higher scores at post-test than at pre-test. In addition, there was a significant main effect of Condition ( $F(1, 1182) = 38.25, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .015$ ) and a significant interaction between Time and Condition ( $F(1, 1182) = 38.25, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .031$ ). That is, there was a significant increase in scores pre- to post-test for the experimental condition ( $t(781) = -10.12, p < .001$ ), but no significant difference for the control condition ( $t(401) = -.30, p = .77$ ).

For Narnian Virtues Knowledge and Understanding (questionnaire results out of 21 marks) the results of the Two Way Mixed ANOVA showed that there was a significant main effect of Time on total scores on the questionnaire ( $F(1, 215) = 156.06, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .42$ ), with higher scores at post-test

**Table 2.** Mean subscale scores (and standard deviations) for each condition (experimental and control) at pre- and post-test.

Survey Sub-scale	Experimental			Control		
	Pre	Post	n	Pre	Post	n
Classroom Behaviour	2.67 (.58)	2.51 (.68)	795	2.76 (.62)	2.51 (.69)	403
Emotional Responses	2.99 (.65)	2.91 (.69)	801	3.11 (.59)	2.98 (.69)	403
Empathy	2.55 (.59)	2.58 (.65)	799	2.60 (.60)	2.64 (.63)	403
Recognising Situations to Practise Virtues	2.93 (.59)	2.92 (.63)	801	2.93 (.64)	2.95 (.64)	403
Social Skills	2.98 (.56)	2.90 (.62)	797	3.10 (.50)	3.00 (.61)	403
Virtue as a Motive	2.88 (.57)	2.86 (.63)	761	3.00 (.60)	2.91 (.63)	401
Attitudes to Virtues	2.85 (.53)	2.86 (.57)	772	2.86 (.57)	2.88 (.59)	402
Assesses Behaviour	2.95 (.63)	2.91 (.66)	750	3.02 (.61)	2.95 (.60)	399
Intrinsic vs Extrinsic Rewards	.93 (.17)	.91 (.20)	786	.92 (.17)	.90 (.19)	401
Virtues Knowledge & Understanding Survey Items	11.23 (2.74)	12.85 (4.12)	782	11.35 (2.61)	11.40 (2.93)	402
Virtues Knowledge & Understanding Questionnaire	1.91 (2.39)	6.55 (3.61)	143	1.32 (1.50)	2.34 (2.04)	74

than at pre-test. In addition, there was a significant main effect of Condition ( $F(1, 215) = 58.93, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .22$ ), and a significant interaction between Time and Condition ( $F(1, 215) = 64.26, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .23$ ). That is, there was a larger increase in scores pre- to post-test for the experimental group ( $t(142) = -15.49, p < .001$ ), than for the control group ( $t(73) = -4.13, p < .001$ ).

## Discussion

The key finding of this research concerns the differential impact of the curriculum intervention on students' understanding and (self-reported) practice of virtue. Although there was a clear improvement in students' understanding of the virtues, albeit from a low base, the psychometric instrument did not show students' (self-reported) practice of virtue increasing to a statistically significant degree.

Such quantitative data are consistent with previous findings from the Knightly Virtues primary curriculum, designed for 9–11-year-olds (Arthur et al., 2014), where improved 'virtue literacy' was reported but evidence of an increase in virtuous behaviour was not reported. As students who participated in Narnian Virtues performed better than those who did not, we might plausibly hypothesize that the intervention ameliorated a decline or, indeed, that the quantitative data on character development may well represent a 'lag factor' in that one would expect knowledge of virtue to precede behavioural application.

The greatest significance of this research, not least given Ofsted's new requirement for its school inspectors to assess how 'the curriculum' supports students' 'character development' (OFSTED, 2019, p. 12), may lie in the questions it raises with regard to situating a character education intervention within the core curriculum. Evaluating the limitations and challenges of the research reported here as well as the advantages and opportunities it provides, is germane given this shift in policy.



## Limitations and challenges: self-assessment, timing and curriculum integration

As assessing virtue is notoriously difficult and self-assessments are necessarily subjective, we should concede that our quantitative instrument may not have been sufficiently sensitive (Kristjánsson, 2013). However, it may also have been affected by the timing of the assessment during the first term of secondary school. Arguably, the transfer from primary to secondary school was a far greater intervention in students' lives than one project in one curriculum subject for one term with just two lessons a week devoted to work on *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. Regression upon transfer from primary to secondary school is well documented (Galton et al., 1999, 2000; McGee et al., 2004; Sylva et al., 2008; Daniels et al., 2019) and it would hardly be surprising if self-perceptions of virtue declined in the first 12 weeks of secondary school given the challenges this presents to most 11-year-olds. In England, children generally transfer, at the age of 11, to large secondary schools (that often educate well over a thousand students, up to the age of 18) from much smaller primary schools where they have been the oldest and most experienced students in their environment.

Most recent case studies of the impact of transfer 'as experienced at the personal level by students' (Daniels et al., 2019, p. 901) have provided valuable insights into the anxiety and disorientation associated with such factors as new rules that are 'stricter', 'feeling small', moving around a larger building and needing to get to know new classmates (Daniels et al., 2019, p. 913). Our survey asked students questions about the extent to which 'Students help each other' or 'treat each other with respect' in the first week of a new school and students may well have assessed themselves favourably when they and their classmates were on their 'best behaviour' and feeling rather daunted by their new environment at the start of their first year. When the 'honeymoon period' had worn off, 12 weeks later, and students were at the end of their first term as 'seasoned' secondary schoolers, it is certainly plausible that they may have formed a more realistic assessment of their virtues (and those of their peers) and rated themselves less highly than previously. This could certainly explain why both experimental and control groups showed a (self-assessed) decline over their first 12 weeks of secondary school.

There are also limitations that derive from the decision to integrate this character education intervention into the core curriculum that are important to acknowledge—or perhaps more precisely, there are gains and losses associated with locating such work within a core curriculum area that demands evaluation on standardized tests. It should not perhaps be surprising that a character education intervention based within English lessons, and delivered by English departments in schools, might turn out to be better at improving levels of virtue literacy than improving students' self-assessments of their character and practice of virtue. The practitioners delivering the initiative were, after all, specialists in literacy and literature and part of each school's English team rather than members of their school's specialist pastoral or behavioural team. Certainly teachers of English are primarily concerned with fostering a love of language and literature (Pike, 2015; Goodwyn, 2017).

It is also important to consider how this curriculum design might be improved. Clearly, the quest to be virtuous cannot be reduced to any simplified list because human flourishing transcends lists of 'preferred virtues' (Shields, 2011, p. 50) as it is influenced by the experience and the situation of the individual. It may be a valid criticism of Narnian Virtues that it was too didactic and prescriptive to maximize the personal engagement of the individual. The notion that the best character development will be specific to the needs of the individual may also pose a challenge to character education curricula such as Narnian Virtues. While all human beings need to understand and practice core character qualities, such as the 'Narnian' virtues of wisdom, love, self-control, justice, integrity and fortitude, the individual student's character development needs may not be addressed in a sufficiently personal way by such an intervention. For instance, a given student may have considerable fortitude but may need to act more justly or vice versa. We asked students to select two virtues they wished to practice over 12 weeks, and then the majority of the instruction, given that we covered six virtues, was on four virtues

they had not chosen. The curriculum would have looked very different if we had designed it to meet the needs of a student seeking to practice justice and integrity compared to another student whose priorities for character development were fortitude and self-control.

Different readers may bring very different experiences to their reading. We should consider the extent to which young readers following the Narnian Virtues curriculum were, in fact, liberated to bring their own responses to the text or constrained by its format. There are certainly gains and losses associated with a guided approach that focusses attention on a particular virtue in a particular passage although application necessarily varies from reader to reader. While Narnian Virtues was highly systematic and comprehensive in helping young people to understand the six 'Narnian' virtues and to see them illustrated with reference to the actions of particular fictional characters, it afforded less opportunity for a more concentrated focus on the more personally relevant virtues nominated and prioritized by the student. Ideally, combining a systematic programme such as Narnian Virtues with a more personal and individualized approach including a coaching 1:1 model in school and with parents would be likely to ensure the best progress. Further, while some readers may have engaged with the passages in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* that we chose, others may have been especially drawn to passages we did not choose. Indeed, it would seem plausible to postulate that where Narnian Virtues was, in fact, most effective it was because particular passages resonated with particular readers. Rather than having every child complete the same 'Character Passport' home tasks, these could become bespoke activities rather than a somewhat 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

#### [Advantages and opportunities: virtue vocabulary, timing and curriculum integration](#)

Given the quantitative finding of the paucity of vocabulary and understanding of virtue terms of most students at the outset, we were encouraged by the rapid improvement in knowledge and understanding over just 12 weeks. Our baseline assessment endorsed findings that young people initially

revealed a 'lack of vocabulary to talk meaningfully about [their character]' (Kristjánsson, 2013, pp. 6–7). To redress such an omission through a high-status area of the core curriculum ensured children's development in this area was prioritized at a critical time in their lives. As primary to secondary school transfer can be so challenging, providing students with the resources to proactively consider their development was important educationally. Arguably, there could be no better time for 11-year-olds in England to receive much-needed input on the development of virtue and character.

Given findings from research (Sylva et al., 2008) that regression upon transfer can be ameliorated through the use of 'bridging materials' between primary and secondary school, this may point to an opportunity to employ curriculum approaches such as Narnian Virtues in new ways. It is perhaps unsurprising that teachers have suggested that it would be profitable for students to follow Narnian Virtues for the last weeks of primary school by reading and engaging with the curriculum for *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* and then in the first term of secondary school to participate in the Narnian Virtues curriculum for *The Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'*. The familiarity with Narnia and its characters, the virtues and the curriculum approach, would certainly fulfil the criteria for 'bridging materials' (Sylva et al., 2008) and given the challenges of a new school could support children in coping with this change.

Narnian Virtues (somewhat unusually for a character education intervention) took place in core curriculum time allocated to 'English', a high-status subject at the sharp end of school and societal accountability measures, rather than during subject time allocated to Personal, Social and Relationship Education. This is significant because it gave a privileged, rather than marginalized, status to 'character development' within a high-status area of the academic curriculum. Assessing the contribution of a core area of the curriculum to character development was important, not least given the far-reaching claims made for the benefits of studying English literature at a time in England when the contribution of the curriculum to character development is to be reported on by school inspectors (OFSTED, 2019).

Of course, a virtue vocabulary is 'good for English' in that it has the potential to facilitate ethical judgement of fictional characters in other texts but this is not always recognized where 'character' is seen as the purview of the pastoral team in school. For instance, when students understand the 'fortitude' or 'integrity' of Lucy in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, that insight provides them with some of the linguistic and intellectual resources to understand other fictional characters in other works. We should not underestimate the significance of children relating personally to the moral struggles, or the virtues and vices, of fictional characters in literary works. If the benefits of reading literature are to be fully realized in a child's education it will, however, be necessary to reconceive of 'English literature' and its assessment at school level so that the 'ethical' in literary works is foregrounded (Pike, 2015; Booth, 2005). What reading and engaging with this literature curriculum offers is the opportunity for a young reader to acquire the language of virtue and to develop an understanding of the motivation for, and consequences of, actions in moral terms. Clearly though, more than a short intervention over one term in one subject will be required if students are to have the opportunity to be motivated to practice the range of virtues in life.

What this research draws attention to, most significantly, is the difference between the understanding and the practice of virtue. Acknowledging that human beings may know what is right and not necessarily do what is right (or at least not fully live out everything they know to be right) is important if 'character education' is not to be confused with indoctrination or conflated with behaviour modification. To offer character education is to respect human agency. Equally though, for schools to fully support their students' choices to cultivate the virtues that constitute good character, would appear to require integration throughout every area of school life, not just the academic curriculum. Such a holistic approach would have the potential to support students' understanding of virtue and also the character development that underpins their flourishing both at school and in life.

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## Appendix A

### Six 'Narnian' Virtues defined

**Wisdom**—The habit of exercising good judgement; being able to see what is true and good and choosing the best course of action.

**Love**—The habit of acting selflessly for the good of another, without seeking recognition or reward; willingness to sacrifice for the sake of others by putting their well-being ahead of our own; doing good for others by being kind, caring, generous and loyal.

**Integrity**—The habit of being true to ourselves and truthful with others; standing up for moral principles and following our conscience; not engaging in self-deception, such as telling ourselves that it's OK to do something that, deep down, we know is wrong.

**Fortitude**—The habit of doing what is right and necessary in the face of difficulty; the mental and emotional strength, the 'inner toughness', to endure suffering and overcome adversity; exhibiting qualities such as confidence, courage, perseverance and resilience when challenging circumstances demand them.

**Self-Control**—The habit of self-restraint; the mastery and moderation of our desires, emotions, impulses, and appetites; resisting temptation; delaying gratification in order to achieve a higher goal.

**Justice**—The habit of treating everyone with equal respect and fairness; fulfilling our responsibilities; taking responsibility for our actions, sincerely admitting when we've done wrong, and making amends; recognizing that no one— including ourselves—is 'above the law'.

## Appendix B

### Virtues taught through extracts from *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*

- (1) Integrity: 'Lucy was Very Miserable' from chapter 3 of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* where Lucy is true to herself and refuses to lie even though this costs
- (2) Self-control: 'Edmund and the Turkish Delight' from chapter 4 of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* where Edmund does not resist enchanted Turkish Delight
- (3) Self-control: 'Edmund Wants More Turkish Delight' from chapter 4 of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* where Edmund is manipulated by the White Witch
- (4) Fortitude: 'Lucy Sticks to Her Story' from chapter 5 of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* where Lucy endures suffering for telling the truth
- (5) Wisdom: 'Peter and Susan Seek Advice' from chapter 6 of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* where they ask the Professor for advice about their sister
- (6) Justice: 'Mr Tumnus' Home is Wrecked' from chapter 6 of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* where Lucy finds her friend's home ransacked by the Secret Police
- (7) Integrity: 'Edmund Betrays Them' from Chapters 8, 9 of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* where Edmund deceives himself and deserts his siblings, wanting the White Witch's Turkish Delight and revenge on Peter
- (8) Justice: 'Peter Owns Up' from chapter 12 of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* where Peter admits to Aslan that he has been unfair to his brother Edmund
- (9) Fortitude: 'Peter Did Not Feel Very Brave' from chapter 12 of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* where Peter faces his fears and fights the Maugrim the wolf (the Chief of the Secret Police)
- (10) Love: 'Edmund is Forgiven' from chapter 13, *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* where Aslan, Lucy, Peter and Susan forgive Edmund for being a traitor
- (11) Love: 'Aslan Instead of Edmund' from Chapters 13, 14 of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* where Aslan takes Edmund's place and suffers instead of him
- (12) Wisdom: 'It Was All Edmund's Doing' from chapter 17 of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* where Edmund fights and defeats the White Witch

## Appendix C.

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## Recognizing Situations as opportunities to practice virtue

I notice opportunities to be kind to others	Likert
I know when people need help	Likert
I understand how other people are feeling	Likert
If I see someone else feeling sad it makes me feel sad	Likert
I see chances to help other people	Likert
Emotional response to situations	
If someone is being treated unfairly, I feel frustrated	Likert
Whenever I see someone being treated unfairly I feel annoyed	Likert
I feel content when other people are doing well	Likert
If I see someone hurting, it makes me feel sad	Likert
Helping someone makes me happy	Likert
Empathy	
When I see someone in difficulty, I want to help.	Likert
When I hear about people who are sad I want to do something to help	Likert
A student has enough schoolwork to do without worrying about other students' work.	Likert
People should work out their own problems by themselves.	Likert
Problems in other parts of the world are not my concern.	Likert
Everybody has enough problems of their own without worrying about other people's.	Likert
Social and interpersonal skills	
I'm good at finding fair ways to solve problems.	Likert
I'm good at working with other students.	Likert
I know how to disagree without starting a fight or argument.	Likert
I listen carefully to what other people say to me.	Likert
I can cheer up someone who is feeling sad.	Likert
I'm good at taking turns.	Likert
Classroom Behaviour	
A lot of students in my class like to put others down.	Likert
Students in my class just look out for themselves.	Likert
Students in my class are mean to each other.	Likert
The students in my class don't really care about each other.	Likert
Students in my class don't get along together very well.	Likert
My classmates care about my work just as much as their own.	Likert
When someone in my class does well, everyone in the class feels good.	Likert
Students in my class treat each other with respect.	Likert
Students in my class help each other, even if they are not friends.	Likert
When I'm having trouble with my schoolwork, at least one of my classmates will try to help.	Likert
Students in my class are willing to go out of their way to help someone.	Likert
Intrinsic and Extrinsic rewards	
I'll only help someone if I get a reward	Yes/No
I only like to help people if I get paid	Yes/No
I'll only do a job if someone pays me	Yes/No
If a teacher leaves the room, I stop doing my work	Yes/No
I'll only do a job if someone is watching	Yes/No
Attitudes to virtues	
It's important to me to follow my conscience even if it means going against peer pressure.	Likert
It's important to me to control my feelings and desires and not let them control me.	Likert
It's important to me to think about my choices before I decide the best course of action	Likert
It's important to me to do the right thing even if it's scary to do it.	Likert

(Continued).

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It's important to me to help other people even if it involves making a sacrifice	Likert
When I see someone being treated badly, I feel bad for them and usually do something to try to help.	Likert
If someone has hurt me, they don't deserve to be forgiven.	Likert
I don't see the need to seek the advice of wise persons.	Likert
When I've done something wrong, it's okay to make myself feel better about it by telling myself it wasn't so bad.	Likert
Virtue as a motive	
I do the right thing because I'd feel bad if I didn't follow my conscience	Likert
I think about my choices when making a decision because I'll get in trouble with my parents if I make a bad decision.	Likert
I help someone being treated unfairly because all people should have their rights protected.	Likert
I try to be brave because it helps me do the right thing even when I'm afraid.	Likert
I like doing kind things for people because it makes them happy.	Likert
I control my desires because it helps me do the right thing.	Likert
I do the right thing only if there's someone around to see me doing it.	Likert
I control my desires mainly if someone gives me a reward for doing that.	Likert
I try to be brave mostly to impress my friends.	Likert
I'm willing to help someone if there's something in it for me.	Likert
I don't help someone being treated badly if they can't do something to pay me back.	Likert
Assessing own behaviour	
I do what I think is right even if it means going against peer pressure.	Likert
I stay in control of my feelings and desires, and don't let them control me.	Likert
I try to do the right thing even when I'm afraid.	Likert
I take the time to think about my choices when I have to decide the best course of action.	Likert
I am willing to give up something or endure a hardship in order to help other people.	Likert
When I see someone being treated badly, I feel I have a responsibility to try to do something to help.	Likert

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