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Parents' Perspectives on Home-Based Character Education Activities

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Abstract

This study investigated parents' perspectives on a taught character education programme implemented with children in their schools and homes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with forty parents of secondary school students participating in the Narnian Virtues Character Education English Project. Parents answered questions relating to the curriculum's home activities which they undertook with their child. A thematic analysis of the data revealed five main themes: mechanics of the project; influence on family life and parenting; influence on children's character development; self-reflective nature of the project; and parent's views on character development. The results suggest that the curriculum positively influences students' character development and is effective for involving parents in their child's character education. The findings have significance for academics, practitioners, and policymakers looking to engage parents as partners in character education programmes.

Introduction

To date, a number of different programmes aimed at educating character have been implemented with children and evaluated for effectiveness. Types of programmes include socio-emotional and character development programmes (e.g. Bavarian et al., 2013; Humphrey et al., 2018; Ruttledge et al., 2016), literacy-based character education programmes (e.g. Davison, Hayes, Harrison, & Higgins, 2016; Leming, 2000), youth social action interventions (e.g. Gorard, See, Siddiqui, Smith & White, 2016), and sports-based education programmes (e.g. Scott & Cadywould, 2016). The purpose of many character education programmes is to teach students the values and virtues required for human flourishing, which can be defined as "the realisation of virtues of thought and character and the fulfilment of other specifically human physical and mental potentialities over the whole course of life" (Arthur, Kristjánsson, Harrison, Sanderse, & Wright, 2016, p26). The goal of the character education programme reported in this paper is similar in that it focuses on six virtues (Fortitude, Integrity, Wisdom, Love, Self-Control, and Justice) and uses activities designed to develop children's character in accordance with Lickona's (1991) integrative Head-Heart-Hand model of character education. According to this theory, character comprises the following components: moral knowing (Head), moral feeling (Heart), and moral action (Hand), and assumes that good character develops by first knowing the good, feeling an obligation to do the good, and then practising the good. The study reported here is novel in that it investigated parents' perspectives on a taught character education programme implemented both in school by teachers, and at home with parents.

The Role of Parents in their Child's Character Development

A number of Meta-Analyses (e.g., Higgins & Katsipataki, 2015; Jeynes, 2012) and Systematic Reviews (e.g., Gorard & See, 2013; Semke & Sheridan, 2012) have shown that there is a causal link between parental involvement in children's learning and children's academic outcomes. However, to date, little research has examined whether involving parents in children's character education influences children's character outcomes. The paucity of research in this area is likely due to the fact that most character education programmes are not implemented in homes (or simultaneously in both school and home), and because conducting an experimental trial in the home is an extremely complex process which poses many challenges. For example, it is often difficult to make contact with

parents, and to obtain informed consent; it is also extremely difficult to achieve standardisation in intervention implementation in a home-environment. To sum, there is a pressing need for evidence-based research in this area.

Children's moral development and moral functioning is facilitated by parenting styles and processes (e.g. Berkowitz & Grych, 1998), providing a rationale for involving parents in character education. According to Berkowitz and Grych, five parenting processes in particular are central: *induction, nurturance, demandingness, modelling*, and *democratic parenting*. For example, parents' *nurturance*, a component of authoritative parenting (a style which involves setting high standards whilst displaying warmth and responsiveness, Baumrind, 1966), is argued to be implicit in the development of conscience, altruism, moral reasoning, compliance, self-esteem, and successful social orientation. Berkowitz and Grych base their theory on evidence from literature on child development. This literature shows that children of parents who are authoritative (i.e. demanding and responsive) are more likely to be confident and socially responsible than children of parents who are authoritarian (i.e. demanding but not responsive) or permissive (Baumrind, 1977). Furthermore, children with loving and appreciative parents are more likely to have high self-esteem than children with critical and less affectionate parents (Coopersmith, 1967).

Parenting characteristics also predict positive youth development (PYD), a perspective which focusses on acknowledging the strengths of adolescents, as opposed to a deficit model of adolescence which views young people as "problems to be managed" (Burkhard, Robinson, Murray, & Lerner, 20). PYD encompasses five constructs (the 'Five C's', e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002): Character (i.e. respect, morality, integrity, and behavioural standards), Competence (e.g., academic skills and abilities), Caring (for others), Confidence (self-worth), and Connection (positive relationships with others). Parental warmth, monitoring, and school involvement have all been found to positively correlate with PYD, as well as with adolescent's intentional self-regulation and their contribution to society (e.g. Bowers, Gestsdottir, Geldhof, Nikitin, von Eye, & Lerner; 2011; Lewin-Bizan, Bowers, & Lerner, 2010). Furthermore, adolescents whose parents are either authoritative or highly involved are also more likely to have higher PYD (Bowers, et al. 2014).

Whilst many would agree that parents continue to play a key role in their child's moral development during the adolescent years, the literature suggests that peers play an increasingly significant role during this stage of development (e.g., Tomé, Matos, Simoes, Camacho, & Diniz, 2010). For example, the literature shows that peers can exert both positive (e.g., Vaquera & Kao, 2008) and negative influences (e.g., Glaser, Shelton, & Bree, 2010) on behaviour, with the latter resulting in risk behaviours such as tobacco, alcohol, and drug use (e.g., Tomé, et al., 2010). Thus, it

is plausible that the negative influence of peer groups, or of peer pressure, may account for the moral decline in adolescence that is sometimes reported in the literature (e.g. Cordero Jr., 2013). It is noteworthy that some maintain that parents are not the most important influence on the development of a child's character. Harris (1998), for example, argues against the parental nurture assumption of child development, drawing on evidence which suggests that genes and peers are the predominant influences on how children develop. Whilst we acknowledge the evidence behind these findings, in this paper we hypothesise that parents can influence their child's character development. Indeed, this perspective prompted us to develop the home activities component of the *Narnian Virtues* curriculum, which aims to provide parents with the tools to support their child's character development within their own home

Character Education Programmes with a Parental Involvement Component

The limited research available suggests that character education programmes have greater efficacy with parental involvement, particularly when there is a joint language of character between home and school (Lovat, Tommey, Dally, & Clement, 2009; Berkowitz & Bier, 2017). Lovat et al. found that having a common language for values enabled students to reflect on and change their behaviour, whilst it also gave parents and teachers a tool for addressing misbehaviour. To the authors' knowledge, there are only two examples of literature-based character education programmes involving parents. Leming (2000) conducted a quasi-experimental study which evaluated the Heartwood Institute's Ethics Curriculum (1992), a literature-based approach to teaching ethics and values, with 965 1st – 6th grade US elementary school students. The study included a parental involvement component in which parents were invited to participate in discussions and activities related to the curriculum topics. Leming found that students at all grades made significant gains in ethical understanding, whilst the older, 4th – 6th grade students also made gains in ethical conduct. More recently, Arthur et al. (2014, see also Davison et al., 2016), conducted the *Knightly Virtues* project, which was a large-scale trial of a literature-based character education programme, involving 1089 primary school pupils (aged 9 – 11), and their parents. Parental involvement in this study was promoted by way of pupil journals (requiring pupils to reflect on how they applied virtues to their own lives) which contained sections aimed at collecting parent's perceptions of the programme. The results showed a near-significant increase in virtue literacy, and a significant increase in student's application of virtue concepts in personal contexts, for the experimental group compared to the control group. Additionally, there was qualitative evidence of improvements in behaviour for students in the experimental group. However, whilst these studies both included a parental involvement component, it was not evaluated independently, making it

difficult to assess the influence of involving parents. Berkowitz and Bier (2005) conducted a national review of character education programmes across the US and found 26 involving parents. However, again, the programmes reviewed typically had multiple components whose impact was not evaluated individually.

The *Narnian Virtues* Character Education English Project

The *Narnian Virtues* Character Education English Project (see also Pike, Lickona, & Nesfield, 2015; Francis, Pike, Lickona, Lankshear, & Nesfield, 2018) was a longitudinal intervention based on three 12-week curricula which aimed to develop students' understanding, valuing, and behavioural application of six virtues (love, wisdom, fortitude, justice, self-control, and integrity), and to involve parents in their child's character education. In creating the *Narnian Virtues* curriculum, inspiration was drawn from the *Knightly Virtues* character education program (Arthur et al., 2014; Davison, Harrison, Hayes, & Higgins, 2016). We expanded such literature-based character education by working with older students, 11- to 14-year-olds, and having them read and reflect on C.S. Lewis' Narnia novels, whose protagonists are similar in age to that of our student readers. The texts themselves were assumed to present a clear moral message which allowed for an exploration of the six virtues, however it did limit the critical reflection on the implicit assumptions within the text that reflect the author's context. That is, the students were not specifically asked to reflect on the normative values displayed in the novel. However, there were attempts to mitigate this with the choice of extracts used as exemplars for the virtues. For example, it used a mix of virtues that could be considered 'masculine' and 'feminine', and used extracts as examples for virtues that are different from the norm (e.g., Eustace is used as an example for love, and Lucy as an example for fortitude). The curriculum included a workbook of character-developing tasks, linked to key English skills, developed by the research team. For example, students were invited to highlight evidence of virtues they saw characters display in the text, which was also developing their ability to collect evidence from the text to create and articulate inferences.

Pupils also completed a workbook of activities (*Character Passport)* at home with their parents/guardians. In project year 1, pupils were asked to complete 10 home activities during the 12-week curriculum, however, feedback from schools (and the parent interview data reported here) suggested that this was too onerous for families, thus, the number of activities was reduced to 6 in project years 2 and 3. Unlike traditional homework, the home activities were designed so that both students and their parents/caregivers complete them together, thereby fostering parental involvement, with some of the activities involving input from the whole family. Table 1 provides a

brief description of each home activity and its goal. The *Character Passport* book, besides explaining to students how to take the lead in home activities, asked them to have a conversation with a parent at the end of each week to assess their progress with the two personal target virtues that they chose, in consultation with their parent(s), during the first home activity.

Table 1 to be inserted about here.

Evaluating the Influence of the Home Activities

The goal of this study was to examine parents' and caregivers' perspectives on the home activities component of a taught integrated character education and English curriculum designed for 11- to 14-year-olds. We specifically sought parents' views on whether the curriculum influenced their children's character given that the Narnian Virtues project aimed to positively influence character development, and because, arguably, parents know and understand their children best, and would therefore be well-placed to notice any changes in character. We were also interested in determining whether the Narnian Virtues curriculum is a useful programme for enabling parents to be involved in their child's character education given the paucity of character education programmes that have been implemented in the home; it was deemed prudent to investigate this question by having conversations with participating parents directly.

By analysing the results of telephone interviews with forty self-selecting parents of children undertaking the Narnian Virtues curriculum, the present study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do parents' perspectives on the home activities component of the Narnian Virtues curriculum suggest that it influenced their children's character development?

2. To what extent do parents' perspectives on the home activities component of the Narnian Virtues curriculum suggest that it is an effective way to involve parents in their child's character education?

Methodology

The *Narnian Virtues* Character Education English project was undertaken during 2016 – 2019 and comprised two pupil cohorts. Cohort 1 comprised a pilot group, whilst cohort 2 formed a quasi-experimental study (i.e. a control group was included in which pupils continued with business as usual) (see Table 2 for pupil and school numbers for each cohort). During the Autumn term of each year, pupils studied a 12-week curriculum based on a novel from C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* (see Table 2). The curriculum was implemented primarily in English classes by English teachers trained by the research team, for two hours a week over the 12 weeks; the home activities

component of the curriculum was undertaken with parents at home. Table 2 to be inserted about here.

This paper reports the results of research interviews conducted in the first two years of the project (2016-2018). In each year, hour-long parent seminars were delivered to children and parents in schools by the research team. The seminars were delivered to all participating schools except for one cohort 1 school in year 1, and one cohort 1 school and two cohort 2 schools in year 2. These seminars provided an overview of the curriculum, walked children and parents through the weekly Home Activities and invited their reactions and questions. Interviewees were predominantly recruited from these seminars, though some interviewees responded to an invitation to participate sent home with the pupils. 49 parents from six of the participating schools volunteered, however, several were unavailable or later withdrew their response. A total of 37 interviews were conducted with 40 parents (of which 33 interviews were conducted with one parent, [5 males and 28 females] and four interviews were conducted with both parents of different genders). 12 interviews were conducted in year 1 with the parents of year 7 pupils from cohort 1, and 25 in year 2 (with ten parents of year 8 pupils from cohort 1, and 15 parents of year 7 pupils from cohort 2). Seven interviews involved repeat-interviewing of parents from year 1 in year 2.

In the first year a more closed set of evaluative questions that attempted to understand what had and had not worked were used (e.g., 'In what ways do you feel the home activities have helped your child's character development?'). In the second year, the questions were more open (e.g. "what challenges, if any, did you face in having [character] conversations?").

A thematic analysis was chosen as it is a useful tool for summarising the key features of large quantities of data with greater flexibility than some other prescribed methods (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006). We followed a procedure similar to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework for trustworthiness in thematic analysis, and went through a process of open, axial, and selective coding (Robson, 2002). In year 1 the researchers read the data and independently documented initial thoughts and codes on three transcripts, then met to discuss the way the transcripts had been coded. Generally these codes attempted to reflect the language used by participants to avoid too much early interpretation and inference (Rivas, 2004). Although many parts of the data had been drawn together in a similar way (which was evident through similar areas being highlighted), different language had been used to describe them, and therefore initial discussions were focussed on developing a shared language to describe the data. The remaining interviews were split between the two researchers and analysed independently, before discussing

and agreeing on the final set of codes. The data was then re-read to ensure each example of these final codes was captured. After initial codes were developed, each researcher independently created their own themes, where codes that referred to common concepts were grouped together by category (Rivas, 2004). Again, the themes were close, and codes grouped similarly, but each researcher described them with slightly different language. A consensus was then reached on how to best describe the underlying constructs, based on capturing the meaning using language as close as possible to participants' expressions. It was at this point that material that was not coded into those themes was excluded from further analysis (Seal, 2004). In year 2 a third researcher was employed to analyse the data using a code book from the first year. They found one code that was no longer supported, and therefore not included in this paper. They also found evidence that nuanced the interpretation of the findings however the remaining initial themes were all represented in the data, with no new dominant themes to be added. The coding and conceptualising of themes was carried out with the aid of NVivo (version 11). Reminiscent of Nowell et al.'s (2017) model, the themes were then reviewed by returning to the data and rereading all transcripts to (a) ensure all examples of those themes had been captured and (b) to ensure that our themes reflected the data.

Results

The thematic analysis revealed that five dominant, overarching themes emerged out of the interview data; we report the findings from all five themes in this paper: (1) the mechanics of the project (that is, how it worked in practice), (2) the influence of the curriculum on family life and parenting, (3) the influence of the curriculum on children's character development, (4) self-reflective nature of the project, and (5) a collection of parent's perspectives on character education more generally. Theme 1 largely mapped onto the second research question in that it enabled understanding of the way the project worked in family homes, thereby allowing us to infer the effectiveness of the curriculum in involving parents in their child's character education. Theme 3 directly mapped onto the first research question, that is, it provided data on parents' perspectives of the curriculum's influence on their child's character development. The data in themes 2, 4, and 5, related to both research questions to differing degrees.

Theme 1: The Mechanics of the Project

The data helped us understand the way the project was working in practice. The particular time when students and parents worked on the home activities, and the amount of time they spent on them, was individual to families. The general busyness of family life made it difficult for some families to find time to complete the home activities with some suggesting that they were too time-consuming and onerous on parents, and that there needed to be flexibility in the tasks to match

family life. Additionally, not all activities were seen as practical, or indeed did not work, with younger children. In one family the family meeting did not work because, they said, 'we've got young children, it was very, very hectic and the babies did not want to… there's two under two, it just did not work' [Interview 5]. Parents also commented that there was not as much communication as there could have been between school and home [Interview 11] and felt the project could be improved with a "regular feedback loop" [Interview 19]. Other parents commented on what they saw as repetition between activities. When that occurred, they said, their child tended to think or talk about the same things:

> …the only one we didn't like was Turkish Delight, because it was the same thing [family mission statement activity] again. I mean he had to put down the same thing about not hitting his brother. [Interview 12]

However, other parents felt that the connections among activities made them more meaningful:

> … when we went through that family mission statement, it sort of framed everything for us and put it into context. [Interview 8]

Several parents said they particularly valued having time to talk and debate:

> The mission statement was better because we had more time. We really talked and we really discussed, and all the areas we said we would work on in the Turkish Delights came up in that one again. [Interview 7]

Parents indicated that age and year group might result in different levels of engagement and that timing was a factor that made the project more difficult to incorporate into family life.

> There's a lot more homework in year 8 and that just seemed to be a bit of extra stress that we had to fit in to our week…I guess the novelty maybe has gone [Interview 20]

Parents noted that some children were not as engaged in the second year of the study as activities in the second year felt repetitive. It was also notable that factors beyond the scope of the project mediated how it was received at times.

> "Well I'm not doing Narnia tonight" because he had too much to do. So, if he had maybe only one piece to do, he actually quite enjoyed doing this and I got a lot more out of him [Interview 13]

Other parents reported that some family members didn't enjoy certain activities. Overall, however, the criticism was light compared to the positive feedback.

Theme 2: The Influence of the Home Activities on Family Life and Parenting

Although the home activities' perceived effects on family life, and their effects on parenting are very much intertwined, we focus now on each in turn in order to illuminate what parents saw as their distinctive influence.

A. The Home Activities' Effects on Family Life

Parents indicated that within family life, the home activities affected three aspects of family interactions: family communication, family cooperation and bonding, and a shift in the power differential between parent and child.

Family communication. Parents suggested that the home activities not only created *structured* opportunities for reflecting together on family values and character-related issues but also fostered *unstructured* opportunities for such discussions in response to situations arising spontaneously in the home (e.g., arguments amongst siblings). Parents said repeatedly that the home activities helped them talk about topics they would not normally talk about with their children. These discussions, they said, enabled them to ask questions they wouldn't normally ask and to broach difficult subjects in a non-confrontational manner. A typical parent comment:

> *It's given us an opportunity to talk about issues we were having [and] to concentrate*
> *on the things that weren't going so well in our home without actually bringing it up*
> *as an issue.* [Interview 5]

In a similar vein, parents reported that their children opened up more about issues that were troubling them:

> *She doesn't come upstairs and talk in her room as much now, she actually sits down*
> *and talks to us.* [Interview 10]

Moreover, parents explained that the discussions about virtues often took place in the whole family and that this benefitted the participating student's siblings:

> *My 6 year-old son would often listen to the conversations that we were having about*
> *it all, and his understanding and his development believe it or not had actually come*
> *on a lot more than my child that was doing the activities.* [Interview 15]

Increased family cooperation and bonding. In the eyes of parents, the home activities also brought about greater cooperation by giving the family a chance to practice teamwork. In one family, for example, the children all helped to plan the 'family meal' activity, set the table, and reminded each

other of the virtues they had chosen to work on. One parent described how the activity of 'doing a daily good deed' helped their child understand that housework is not a 'chore' but part of being a family.

The home activities also appeared to strengthen family bonding. One parent said: 'We're all more aware of how we were behaving, of what wasn't always good for the family. It's made us interact more and be closer'. [Interview 9]. Another parent described how the 'family mission statement' prompted them to devise a family motto to be 'kind to each other, think about other people's thoughts'. [Interview 12]. However, the family mission statement task did not always facilitate family bonding; in one family the task did not work because family members contributed unequally:

> …I think the thing that went down least well here was our family mission statement because I don't think we all contributed equally to it. So I think in order for it to work it should be the person that's doing the homework make their boundaries quite specific and parents do it. [Interview 1]

Parents spoke of the project enabling them to discuss things before issues arose, laying down some prevention measures to ensure increased harmony within their households:

> *It gave us the opportunity I suppose to discuss things …before they're an issue… to kind of lay the groundwork before that situation arises.* [Interview 11]

A shift in the family power differential toward a greater role for children. A key aim of the curriculum was to have students take a leadership role by engaging their parents in the home activities. Parents also reported that their children reminded them to practise good character:

> *Even if we're out shopping, [child] will say to me when I pick up a rabbit—because I'm mad on rabbits—'Mum, that's your Turkish Delight.'* [Interview 4]

This aspect of the curriculum had a mixed reception from parents, some commented that it gave children a voice who would not normally have a say in family meetings [Interview 12] whilst others reacted negatively to this aspect of the project, complaining:

> *It's their homework, why do we have to do it?* [Interview 13]

Some parents spoke of their children growing in self-confidence and finding their voice in the family:

Harrison has become more confident in himself. He doesn't mind giving his opinion on things instead of sitting in the background listening. He seems to have found his voice when he wants to input anything into the family. [Interview 10]

Some families used the family mission statement activity in particular to empower their children to take on a more adult role in the family. When one family wrote the mission statement, its members took turns chairing a formal meeting, with the child creating written documentation. In a similar vein, one parent recounted a conversation in which the child negotiated when he would practice his chosen target virtues, as opposed to the parent dictating this.

B. Effects on Parenting

The shift in family dynamics to give children greater voice represent what parents experienced as a change in their parenting style. Doing these activities changed how they interacted with their child; parents reported that they were now doing more explaining of concepts, and 'coaching' their child, as opposed to simply dictating. One parent described this shift in parenting from what the research literature calls an 'authoritarian' style to 'authoritative':

It's a more personal interaction and a more proper interaction, if you like . . . I'm being less dictatorial and final about things and being, for me, a bit more of a listener, as much as a teller. [Interview 6]

One parent commented that while they already taught their children to have good morals in a general sense, the home activities helped them work on specific virtues with their child. A number of parents also said that the curriculum provided them with tools to help manage misbehaviour. They reported asking their children, during incidents of misbehaving, to remember their chosen personal target virtues, what those represented, and the purposes of the Narnia curriculum. In this way, the curriculum provided a 'framework to work within and a reference point' when discussing children's behaviour and character-related matters. [Interview 8]. Finally, parents said the home activities prompted them to reflect on, and work to improve, their own character:

…never before have we had to really look deep down and decide what is our Turkish Delight and I put that mine is my car because I take the kids to school and the corner shop, you know, literally I'll pop in the car. So I've made a more conscientious effort to walk places and to be honest with you, I didn't realise how reliant upon the car I was. [Interview 4]

The curriculum made parents aware of the way in which they had been parenting and making decisions and enabled them to see opportunities to do things differently going forward:

It goes back to what I said before about involving the children more in family decisions,
rather than just being a parent deciding and kids having to go along with whatever we
decide. So that's been an education for myself as well as for the kids. [Interview 15]

Theme 3: The Influence of the Home Activities on Children's Character Development

Parents reported that as they and their children moved through the series of *Passport* activities, the child's understanding of its goals increased. For example, the guide recommended a weekly parent-child conversation to assess the child's progress on the two personal target virtues. This facilitated gradual growth in children's understanding of the purpose of that undertaking. That, in turn, helped the child improve in the actual behavioural practise of his or her two target virtues. Parents also said that the new virtue vocabulary their children were acquiring was helping them to better understand their own character as well as that of others:

It gave her the vocab to say, 'Actually it's about self-control and developing those sorts
of characteristics of how I can control those emotions'. [Interview 8]

As well as increasing students' ability to articulate such understandings, the home activities appeared to positively influence how children thought about everyday events. One parent commented on their daughter's developing ability to see the positive, not just the negative, in any given situation:

She does have a tendency to instantly see the bad in a situation. [Keeping the
Gratitude Journal] forced her to see the flipside of the coin. [Interview 11]

Another parent explained how the home activities had enabled their son to think more about his actions and how these impacted others:

Because he's got to work on the love towards his brother, he's thinking now when he
actually starts to pick on him, that he's not doing his character [virtues], it's doing a
vice. [Interview 12]

Parents gave examples of children taking more responsibility for their belongings and for household tasks. The 'good deeds' home activity in particular helped students think of others less fortunate than themselves. One girl chose to donate her old toys to charity rather than sell them. Parents gave other examples of their children becoming more aware of the thoughts and feelings of others in that they were making deliberate attempts to be nicer to friends and family. One parent said that after doing the 'Turkish Delight Box' activity together, their child was 'making a conscious effort to be kinder and more aware.' [Interview 9]

Finally, some parents offered concrete examples of how their children's efforts to improve in two 'personal target virtues' had produced observable progress. One parent said that their child, as a result of choosing fortitude as one of his target virtues, was now doing extra football training in order to improve his skills, whereas previously he would become frustrated and "tended to give up" if he was not selected for the team. The same parent described how their child was becoming less frustrated and exhibiting more positive behaviours during difficult Maths lessons as a result of opting to work on improving his self-control.

By contrast, some parents were less sure about the influence of the curriculum on their children's character development. This seemed to be due to negative opinions of the curriculum from the onset, feeling that their children had good character already so there was little need for improvement or that they were unsure whether progress was being made due to the curriculum but rather it was their influence or a natural developmental stage. One parent commented that they could not know what progress their child made in work they were not involved with – giving the example of their daughter's Geometry homework. They gave the comparison though that being involved with the Narnian Virtues curriculum meant they could see the progress more.

You're doing it together, (so) you actually know what they're doing and therefore I think we've seen actually more progress. [Interview 16]

For other families, the home activities were perceived to have limited impact due to them already doing similar activities in the home:

…I think it would have had a much greater impact if we didn't have the family meals together, if we didn't discuss things on a daily basis and things. But unfortunately it's kind of the way we already parent and work. [Interview 32]

Theme 4: Self-Reflective Nature of the project

The family activities component of the *Narnian Virtues* curriculum appear to have helped parents and children grow in their relationships and develop in character by providing several key 'ingredients': a vocabulary of virtue, the tools of self-reflection, and a 'space' in their lives—the time, a stimulus, and a reason or 'excuse'—to talk about character.

The home activities helped parents re-evaluate the importance of parent-child communication about things that matter—in particular, character. Taking the time to talk about character led to an increased awareness of character 'flaws'—parents' as well as children's. One parent put it this way:

Because people are so busy and life's so busy I think it's like pressing the pause button and everybody gets to go, 'Do you know what, let's have a think about this and let's have a look at this' . . . I just think it helps you as a whole family to go, "Actually, where can we all improve?". [Interview 8]

Besides giving a reason for family life to slow down and think together about issues of character, structured home activities such as the 'My Character' self-assessment and the Family Mission Statement did something else that was critically important: They gave parents and children the tools for a 'character conversation'. The quote below illustrates how the acquisition of a virtue vocabulary enabled a child to reframe her temper. The vocabulary gave her the ability to self-diagnose an element of her character to work on, in order to limit her 'rage'.

So instead of [the child] saying… 'I don't know why I rage, I don't know why I start shouting at him', it gave her the vocab to say, 'Actually it's about self-control and about developing those sorts of characteristics of how I can control those emotions and try to say to myself 'Stop doing this'. [Interview 8]

Parents were also able to use the curriculum as the basis to notice and highlight children's positive behaviours. Some parents spoke of how 'problem' behaviour became a 'teachable moment' rather than the parent being 'judgemental'. In such situations behaviour became, in the words of one parent, 'areas to work at' [Interview 7]. Narnian Virtues provided a point of reference, perhaps even legitimacy, to parent's thoughts:

Rather than it's just 'mum's going off on one again', it's 'let's talk about this, let's talk about the virtues, how do you think it's going?', getting her engaged, talking about it. [Interview 8]

These non-confrontational evaluative techniques were not part of the curriculum, in that we did not ask parents to make sure they were being positive or child-led. Nevertheless, judging from our interviews, such interactions were common place and were not just about 'correction'; they provided a way to discuss character. Discussions could be utilised to address poor behaviour and timed to reflect upon events within the family when family members were calmer. Parents also talked about how the project allowed children to see that the development of virtues is valued in other contexts, not just within their own families:

I think [child] thought that was just my expected level as a parent because I'm quite strict, I expect a lot from my boys, but because it came through school, he realised that that's actually how every child should be behaving; it wasn't just my rules. [Interview 13]

Theme 5: Parents' Views on Character Development

A clear message emerged regarding our second theme: Parents believe that the people their children spend time with and talk to have the most influence on their character development:

She spends so much time with us, and we are a family which talk about stuff on the news and all that [is] going on. It's because of the way we interact with each other as a family. [Interview 8]

Parents also believed that they are the most influential because their children do not talk to teachers or peers about issues the way they can to parents:

I know they spend a lot of time in school [but] in the end they come home and you talk about issues and help them to make whatever decisions they need to—which they don't necessarily discuss with the teacher or with peers at this stage. [Interview 7]

Many parents also discussed that they were aware that their child was entering a new developmental stage in which sources outside the family become more influential:

I think we're the ones that have got them the longest from birth onwards, so you kind of start helping them develop their character from day one. Peers become more important the older they get. I think I'm influencing the most I guess. [Interview 7]

Parents frequently commented on how the timing of the project aligned with children making the transition from primary to secondary school and this meant that the project was helpful in giving them opportunities to maintain closeness and support their children through a time of change but also presented challenges in that children were sometimes disinterested because they were preoccupied with peer groups. Some felt it was intrusive at times because their child's age meant they were less keen to speak to their parents.

It's like getting blood out of a stone a lot of the time when you talk to him about stuff, so it made him sit down and have a conversation with me. [Interview 21]

In some cases the project seems to have been better received by their child in the first year but in year 8 children were less enthusiastic about it, in other cases parents commented that their child gained a deeper understanding of the application of virtues over time by participating in the project for a second year and said that the project helped them remain more involved as their child settled into year 8 and needed them less.

It's nice to have permission to be involved. [Interview 18]

Where the project encouraged families to have conversations they might ordinarily not have, some parents expressed gratitude that the project legitimised important conversations that their children might otherwise have been less receptive to:

The children like something which is from school, not myself asking them…this project, because its from school, he's quite happy. {Interview 17]

Some parents felt the project was less relevant to their families because they already had strong communication with their children, a number of them also compared their families to others saying that there were some who did not support the project and that the children in those families might have benefitted most from the project. It was notable that some parents resented the project because they felt it was encroaching on areas that parents should work with their own children on.

I just didn't really want it to happen, although I think people's hearts have been in the right place, I'm not quite happy with it as a piece of English work or even as an approach from a school because it seems to be a parenting job. [Interview 11]

Some parents who noted progress in their children's development of virtue were uncertain who to attribute that change to. For example, when citing an example of how their daughter would come forward saying "I know I shouldn't have done that" or "I know that wasn't a good choice", they felt that they didn't know if not doing the project would have resulted in her daughter taking longer to get to that point. [Interview 18]. Another highlighted that the trajectory of the development of virtue was not straightforward:

His self-control is more like a wave, it's not a progression or line. [Interview 13]

Others believed parents are important because they set the example from when their child was a baby and there were few other influences. In particular, parents saw the early years as important for setting boundaries for their child's behaviour and character. But parents also acknowledged that their influence will change, or has already changed, and some spoke about that change with a tinge of melancholy:

I think, sadly, it would be peers. That wouldn't be my choice but I think it's his peers that probably has the most influence on him now he's a bit older. I hope that some of the groundwork's in place but I certainly think his peers are having more of an influence on him now than ever before. [Interview 3]

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Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate parents' perspectives on a taught character education programme implemented with children in their school and home. Of particular interest was whether the home activities component of the *Narnian Virtues* curriculum is an effective resource for involving parents in their child's character education, and whether it influenced children's character development.

Overall, the data suggest that the curriculum had a positive influence on student's character development. This was explicitly stated by parents, and was also implicit in the data. Specifically, there was evidence to suggest that some students' attitudes and behaviours towards others improved, that they grew in confidence and became more helpful and independent around the home, that they were more considerate of those less fortunate than themselves, and that they displayed a growth in the virtues they chose to work on. This outcome corroborates the work of Arthur et al. (2014) who found that students reported being more self-disciplined and more helpful toward others, whilst parents reported that their children practiced the taught virtues more, after studying the *Knightly Virtues* curriculum. The findings also lend support to a previous study by Theokas and Lerner (2006) which showed that collective family activity is positively correlated with Positive Youth Development and adolescents' contributions to society.

Our data suggest that the process whereby change occurs seems to involve multiple aspects of a complex system incorporating both psychological and environmental components. The aspects include an increased awareness by parents and children of virtue and character, a willingness to engage with character, a transformation in thought processes, and having the space and opportunity to talk about character. We argue that the positive change in student's character is aligned with Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's (1994) Bio-Ecological Systems theory of development in that the change was facilitated by an increase in the quality of proximal processes. That is, the curriculum enhanced the potential for character development by providing both the space and opportunity (*the environment*) to develop, and by influencing the quality of *reciprocal interactions* between student and parent. Fundamentally, we argue that the Narnian Virtues curriculum, which explicitly teaches virtues and the principles of good character, led to a caught model of character education in which changes in student's character were associated with changes in family interactions and family ethos.

The authors note that there were some mixed findings expressed during the interviews regarding the effectiveness of the curriculum and that the attitudes of individual parents and individual children to the curriculum seemed to mediate their conclusions about the project's utility.

Parents with a pre-existing positive perspective towards the curriculum tended to make more positive comments about the project's impact. Negative responses to the project were concentrated on the parents of children in year 8 and participating in the curriculum for a second year. Some parents commented that their children had already read the books, that the books would be more suitable for younger children, or that their families already had family meals and engaged with learning about virtues through attending church or having a culture of openness and reflection within the families. We provide a fuller discussion of the limitations of the study later in the paper.

The increased awareness of virtue and character occurred by way of parents and children intentionally engaging with notions of character in everyday life. We think the parent interviews offer evidence that having a virtue vocabulary and related concepts play a significant part in this. Having a shared virtue vocabulary between home and school enabled students to reflect on their character with their parents, which in turn enabled parents to support their child in their character development consistent with school. We also found that the vocabulary and concepts provided parents with a tool for addressing behavioural issues. These outcomes support the findings of other studies of character education involving parents (e.g., Lovat et al., 2009; Berkowitz & Bier, 2017).

Our data suggest that the process of change also necessitates a transformation in thought processes. For example, we saw that the curriculum enabled students to start thinking about difficult situations in a positive, character-related way, and that it led them to think about how their actions and behaviours impact others. Moreover, the structured family activities and the character-centred conversations that became more common in family life helped students to see the world through an ethical lens, one which allowed them to reflect on what the appropriate response would be to everyday situations. These findings suggest that the curriculum facilitated student's ability to empathise and are consistent with literature which shows that children with higher levels of empathy display more positive social behaviours and are better able to control their emotions (e.g., Meuwese, Crone, de Rooij, & Gŭroğlu, 2015). The findings also suggest that the curriculum facilitated the development of theory of mind, that is, the ability to understand mental states of self and others and to predict self and others' behaviour accordingly (Premack & Woodruff, 1978). Whilst theory of mind is generally assumed to develop in early childhood (e.g. Wimmer & Permer, 1983), recent studies suggest that it evolves during adolescence as social relationships become more important (Kenny, Dooley, & Fitzgerald, 2013). We believe our findings provide further evidence for this.

A further key component in the process of change is in providing families with a space and opportunity to talk about character; we saw that some families used the curriculum as an 'excuse' to

do so. We found that having character as an 'official' piece of school work makes parents (and children) less confrontational and judgemental when character flaws emerge in family life. Although some of the activities may have felt artificial to some families, in that most families would not have engaged in them without the curriculum, the effects of doing these activities together seemed to soon spill over into general family life. The data suggested that in some families, there was a shift in the balance of power towards the child which appeared to be the result of the reciprocal activity between the student and their parents in working on the home activities together. In line with the predictions of Bronfenbenner (1979), we believe that these findings suggest that the curriculum enabled optimal conditions for students' character development.

We also know that the curriculum facilitated a shift in parenting style from authoritarian to authoritative for some parents. This is a highly positive outcome since research suggests that adolescents with authoritative parents are more likely to be confident and socially responsible (Baumrind, 1977), and to have higher Positive Youth Development (Bowers, et al. 2014). The potential of the Narnian Virtues project to change parenting style provides not only an innovative and significant contribution to the literature, but also offers a mechanism for promoting positive changes in family dynamics within the home. To sum, we believe that our work has identified an important area for future research.

In terms of how our findings situate within the wider research literature, we are aware that 'character education' has both advocates (e.g., Lickona, 1991; 2004; Arthur et al, 2016) and critics (e.g., Suissa, 2015; Allen & Bull, 2018; Bates, 2019). Critics of character education point to problems of reducing character to lists (Suissa, 2015), whilst others see it as too individualistic and often highlight the neglect of a focus on interpersonal relations (see Bates, 2019). We are also aware of the tensions regarding the notion that virtue development is required not only for individual flourishing but also for creating and maintaining a successful society (e.g., Arthur, et al. 2016). Specifically, we acknowledge that this notion is problematic if it implies that societal problems (e.g., poverty and unemployment) may be attributed to individual character traits, whilst ignoring the structural aspects of these issues (see Taylor, 2018; Allen & Bull, 2018). Whilst our findings suggest that there are benefits of a taught character education programme on students' individual development, we acknowledge that societal problems cannot be solved by solely focussing on the individual, and also that structural aspects of societal issues can influence character development. We also take on board that in emphasising parenting as an influencer of character development, this can result in parents being blamed as the cause of societal problems (Allen & Bull, 2018). However, whilst we have shown that parents can influence their child's character development (c.f. Harris, 1998), we make no attempt to link this with societal problems.

Limitations of study

In order for change to occur, there has to be a willingness to engage with character. Whilst our data suggest that the students of the parents interviewed were fully engaged with the home curriculum, this group were a relatively small sample of the families in the project. That is, levels of engagement with the curriculum would have likely varied among students (and their parents). We did not collect demographic data for the parents, therefore we have no evidence to challenge the assumption that white 'middle class' parents are overrepresented here (Allen et al., 2013, Crozier, 2005), and we do know that the majority of interviewees were mothers. We acknowledge that this is a limitation of our study; ideally parents would have been randomly selected to take part in the research interviews, however, this was not feasible given that the research team did not have access to parents' contact details. Nonetheless, this limitation of the data collection also appears to echo the limitation of the curriculum. From our seminars with parents and our conversations with teachers, we have no evidence to contradict the assumption that those families who benefit most from Narnian Virtues were those who were either *already* engaged with their school work or character building. We are therefore aware that our findings are based on a non-representative sample of forty parents, and that further research in the form of an evaluative trial is required to establish the impact of involving parents with their child's character development. Whilst the present study was linked to a larger quasi-experimental study which was evaluated quantitatively pre-and-post-curriculum during each project year (see Pike et al., 2020), the implementation of the home activities component was not sufficiently controlled to enable a robust evaluation of its impact on students' character development.

Some might argue that novels such as *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis, whose central protagonists are four white middle class English children, fail to adequately provide opportunity for BAME students to feel represented and that this might be significant in terms of inclusion and how schools support all children's character development (Ofsted, 2019). It is important to address the issue of representativeness, both with regard to the texts chosen and the design of the curriculum project itself. The designers of *Narnian Virtues* were aware that as part of a balanced reading diet, alongside 'classic' works, students would benefit from reading a range of multicultural literature (see Chapter 10 'Multicultural English' in Pike, 2015) as part of a broad and balanced English curriculum. The curriculum designers' rationale for text choice included an assessment of the ways in which classic literature might be valued by, and supportive of, learners of whom it is ethnically unrepresentative. In retrospect, more could have been done to interrogate many of the cultural assumptions of the author (in this case, those that are more typical of the

1950s), but as this project owed more to the 'personal growth' than the 'cultural analysis' model of English (Pike, 2004, p. 4), this was left to the professional judgement of teachers of English rather than specified by the curriculum. Equally, with regard to 'classic' children's literature, it is important to recognise that 'relevance is not dependent upon writer and reader residing within the same culture or having similar backgrounds' (Pike, 2015, p. 31) for it is often 'the very difference between today's experience and such texts' that will be morally educative; in other words, it is often the 'difference (be it social, cultural, ethnic, religious, moral or linguistic)' between the world of the text and that of the reader, that can justify the presence of such works 'in the curriculum for ethnically and socially heterogenous schools in the twenty-first century' (Pike, 2015, pp. 30-31). According to the largest proponent of character education in the US, Character.org (and its predecessor, the Character Education Partnership), 'core values' that enable students to flourish, are widely recognized, 'transcend religious, cultural and ethnic differences' and 'express our common humanity' (Character.org, 2019) and this was the ethos of the *Narnian Virtues* project.

As we have just discussed, when designing the curriculum we relied upon the professional judgement of teachers. Thus we did not seek to differentiate the curriculum for specific abilities or demographics or to make it available in alternative languages, nor did we as curriculum designers make specific adjustments for refugee and migrant children or their parents. However, within the classroom we encouraged teachers to make the kind of adaptations to the curriculum they would usually make appropriate to their context. To aid this, from the second year of the curriculum, we created a framework that allowed teachers to easily swap activities that met the same aim (see Pike et al 2020). In terms of the home activities, we are aware that teachers made provisions to include the use of after school clubs and library clubs to allow children to work with adults to complete the Character Passport.

Another issue of inclusion was our use of the term 'parents' throughout the curriculum. We were aware a significant proportion of our students may not live with either biological parents, and the majority were likely to inhabit non-traditional family arrangements. We acknowledged that many previous character education programmes had failed to engage sufficiently with parents, thus authors Hart, Pike and Paul provided after-school seminars for parents and carers throughout the project. We also modified the timing of curriculum tasks to enable children who did not live with both their parents to visit one of their parents at the weekend – so that both parents could support the character development of their child. While using the term 'parents' could have marginalised some students, we also took lengths to explain in the teacher training and Character Passport that 'whenever we say parent(s), we are referring to all adults in the home who are serving in the role of the parent'.

We carefully ensured that ethical guidelines for conducting educational research were strictly followed at all times. Parents were invited to take part in the interview through letters distributed by schools or at parent seminars run by the Narnian Virtues team. Parents were informed of the right to withdraw at any time, and provided consent for anonymised responses to be used in our analysis. If, after signing up, a parent did not respond after three emails or phone calls, we assumed they had withdrawn from the study and did not contact them further. This meant that we only just managed to recruit our sample of forty parents.

Implications of study and future work

Our findings have a number of key implications for ways in which practitioners and academics can engage parents in their children's character education. First, by involving parents in their child's character-based homework this not only increases awareness of character education in parents but also means that students act as the bridge between home and school, which may be more effective than working with parents separately. Academics (e.g., Lickona, 2004; Brannon, 2008; Arthur, 2014) suggest that the ideal model for teaching character education is one in which schools consider parents as partners. Whilst parent seminars were organised in schools to talk parents through the key concept of character education and to offer tips on how to complete home activities, future work could involve parents at curriculum planning stages, and include co-production strategies for fostering a closer home-school partnership.

We have also shown that introducing a shared understanding of concepts is crucial for turning character development into a conscious and intentional activity at home and for enabling family conversations on character so that parents can identify, reflect (and act) on ways to facilitate their child's character development, thus future initiatives should ensure that a rich vocabulary of virtues and character is available to both students and parents. Parents have shown that this curriculum can legitimise communication about character through creating time and an 'excuse' to begin the conversations. It also provides a shared vocabulary between students, home, and school that implies a shared set of values.

To conclude, we believe we can say, based on these parents interviews, the *Narnian Virtues* family component is an effective means of involving parents in their child's character education, and that parents perceive positive effects of this experience on their parenting style, family interactions in general, and their children's character development. We acknowledge this form of curriculum is particularly beneficial to engaged parents who are amenable to resources to help with conversations in the family, but we have no evidence this form of character education curriculum will engage those who are on the margins. However, we believe there is benefit to students and families in including

specific and discrete activities that legitimate character conversation at home that may otherwise feel artificial or 'awkward' and provide the tools (particularly, vocabulary) to have those conversations.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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