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Reinventing character education: The potential for participatory character education using MacIntyre's ethics.

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Character Education in the UK is often considered controversial through its perceived neoliberal individualising of character, disregarding of young people's moral agency, and blindness to the effect of social structures. This article presents an alternative framework for character educators, focussed on the biographical narratives of the students and the practice of teaching. It draws on the work of MacIntyre as a philosophical basis for a participatory form of character development. This perspective provides an answer to perennial criticism of the Character Education field as overly concerned with deficit models and pathologising the effects of social inequality. The article will conclude by calling for a new agenda within Character Education that is focused in three areas: developing the attributes required to learn well with others, developing the metacognitive skills to function as autonomous ethical agents, and to work with schools to ensure external pressures do not take precedence over the flourishing of students.

Key words: Character Education, MacIntyre, practice, teaching, virtue, biographical narratives

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Character education is controversial in the UK (Kristjánsson, 2020), where it is predominantly constructed as the deliberate attempt to inculcate 'virtue' within young people through compulsory schooling. It invites criticism for the neoliberalising of character (Jerome and Kisby, 2020), individualising of social and structural issues (Jerome and Kisby, 2019), promulgation of socially-conservative values (Allen and Bull, 2018), and the turn away from the more critical citizenship education (Suissa, 2015). These arguments can be overstated (Kristjánsson, 2020), fail to reflect the breadth of character education initiatives, and ignore the effect neoliberalism has on other the operationalising of other curriculum areas, including citizenship (Kennelly and Llewellyn, 2011; Neoh, 2017). Nonetheless, despite nearly ten years of advancing policy work in the area, the counter arguments (which, in the UK, are typically proffered by members of the Jubilee Centre of Character and Virtue) are rooted in rhetoric with limited concrete examples to persuade the critics the field is not rooted within an individualized deficit narrative (Kristjánsson, 2020; Peterson, 2019).

Sayer (2020), however, sought to 'rescue' character education by claiming moral normativity is often justified – the normalising of anti-oppressive practices and resistance to structural inequality, for example. Although he acknowledges the criticisms of the field, Sayer concludes 'we should ask whether character can be theorized in a way that isn't tainted with elitism, individualism, and victim-blaming' (p18) through using the concept of habitus; that is, recognising that we are only responsible for our behaviours inasmuch as the structures around us allow us to be moral.

As with Sayer's critique, this article seeks to present defensible form of character education, utilising MacIntyre's sociologically-informed neo-Aristotelian theory of ethics. It shall do this by, 1) arguing some form of character education is beneficial within a diverse and fragmented society; 2) reviewing some of the dominant sociological critiques of character education in the UK that a participatory form of character education speaks to; 3) introducing relevant parts of MacIntyre's theory of ethics; and 4) highlighting how his theory could create a new model for character education that rises to the challenge of the critics while also maintaining the Aristotelian foundation that many character educators find constructive (Kristjánsson, 2015).

Character Education: A Contemporary Requirement?

Contemporary life for young people requires knowledge and capacity for sophisticated moral inquiry (Bleazby, 2020, p. 84) as they navigate complex ethical debates exemplified by Black Lives Matter, abortion legislation, the #metoo campaign for gender equality, rights of transgender students, climate change and the migrant crisis. Within this milieu of ethical issues, young people are often in contact with those holding values and moral foundations different from their own within the context of increasingly polarized debates (Mathé, 2018). Young people themselves may inhabit multiple ethical landscapes, in which what is considered 'good' or 'praiseworthy' are different. Macintyre elaborates:

> *Someone who, for example, insists upon observing the same ethics of truthful disclosure in every sphere of life, holding her or himself and others accountable for their deceptions in the same way, whether it is a matter of conversation within the family, the pledges of politicians, the presentation of*

> *products by advertisers in the marketplace, or the information given to parents by physicians, will acquire a reputation not for integrity, but for social ineptitude.* (Macintyre, 1998, p. 236)

Character education could be constructed as one attempt to develop the resources required to traverse these complex ethical climates, if it were not dominated by a narrow set of assumptions about what constitutes 'good character'.

Critical Engagement with Character Education in the UK

Character education is politically salient. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue is the dominant research centre in the UK, and have been successful in lobbying the government for character education's inclusion in education policy (Kristjánsson, 2020). The centre is focussed on neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics; that is, facilitating the development of settled dispositions to think and act in ways that contribute to human flourishing. Their work is vast, however here I focus on their research into the work with children and young people of compulsory school age. When the latest Ofsted framework (2019) included the expectation that schools will engage in character education, the Jubilee centre saw this as a direct result of their work. However, although the Ofsted framework does maintain a commitment to Aristotelian notions of moral virtue, it emphasises performance characteristics (such as, resilience and hard word) to improve behaviour and employability within six 'benchmarks'. These benchmarks highlight a shift for character education towards neoliberal values around human capital and employability. Members of the centre have written rebuttals to many UK critics of character education, though predominantly they focus on the more overstated arguments, and seek to defend the integrity of the centre and its neo-Aristotelian philosophy (Kristjánsson, 2020; Peterson, 2019) rather than present a systematic evidence-based rebuke of critics.

This section will not provide a full critique of character education, which has been completed to great effect in other publications (Jerome and Kisby, 2019; Suissa, 2015; White and Shin, 2017). However it will provide three broad and overlapping themes that summarize these debates: the limiting of young people's moral agency; the lack of critical engagement with social structures; and the displacing of citizenship education and resulting individualising of social issues. This section may feel overly focussed on the role of the Jubilee Centre, but in reality they are involved in the vast majority of research in the area in the UK and other large projects (e.g. Narnian Virtues (Francis, Pike, Lickona, Lankshear, & Nesfield, 2018)) have a similar approach.

Character Education and Young People's Agency

Firstly, it is argued dominant forms of character education in the UK limit young people's agency in their role as moral actors, where the overarching emphasis is on ensuring students 'appreciate and comply with rules and regulations established for control and management of their behaviour by others' (White and Shin, 2017, p. 50). Although Kristjánsson (2020) argues this is a behaviourist form of character education that the Jubilee Centre would not endorse, it is also found in Aristotelian-inspired approaches that teach a predefined set of virtues with relatively narrow definitions (Francis, et al., 2018). Suissa (2015, p. 106) decries these lists as a form of 'epistemological arrogance', where the creators of character education curricula assume to know the dispositions a student should develop without student participation. Often the idea of 'universal' virtues (dispositions that are assumed to be praiseworthy across the majority of cultures and contexts) comes from a desire for Aristotelian character educators to demonstrate inclusivity – these virtues are intended to be universally shared rather than one culture enforcing a set of

subjective values upon another (Arthur and Carr, 2013, p. 30; Carr and Harrison, 2015, p. 20; Emde, 2016; Pike, 2015, p. 89). However this is a somewhat simplistic, even misleading. Carr (2019), for example, defends the notion of 'universal' virtues by acknowledging a 'thin' description is necessary to allow greater dynamism is how they are defined and manifest (see also Plummer, 2003). However, Jerome and Kisby (2019, p. 60) highlight this nuanced 'thin description' approach is missing from practice. In their review of the Jubilee Centre's resources, Jerome and Kisby argue the virtues become simplistically operationalized which begets 'Victorian pulpit style' (p64) proclamations. These simplistically operationalized virtues can also confuse socially constructed 'risk factors' (for example, around sex and alcohol use) with morality. Jerome and Kisby (2019, p 69-70) go on to argue that the Jubilee Centre resources impose a specific moral view, rather than enable students to make informed choices about their behaviour and attitudes. Typically, these resources predetermine the framing of ethical issues and provide set moral answers. Therefore, the lack of agency and voice in: framing ethical issues, identifying their own virtues, and narrow operationalising of the virtues limits young people's ability to engage as autonomous ethical actors.

Preparing Students for Critical Engagement With Social Structures

The second theme within the critiques of character education is its failure to tackle social structures that become misdiagnosed as individualized character deficits. To Aristotelian character educators, the aim of humanity should be to acquire the attributes (or 'goods') that allow individuals to flourish. Virtues are one such 'good'. Therefore, it presupposes an engagement with social structures that limit or impede the development of these 'goods', thus limiting human flourishing, will be central to Aristotelian character education. However, while the teleological language

(concerned with ultimate purposes) of Aristotelian virtue has been adopted by many character educators, Sanderse (2019) argues virtues are not conceptualized as being constitutive of a happy life, but as a means to employment through the incarnation of neoliberal values (see also Taylor, 2018). Very little, if anything, is said by the Department for Education or the Jubilee Centre about the effects neoliberalism has on citizen's mental health or about how the pressure of the current education system better facilitates aggressive competition than virtues of cooperation and care. Indeed, rather than acknowledge the effects of the environment on character, they present addictions as moral failures rather than a symptom of inequality (Jerome and Kisby, 2019, p. 66). Current conceptions of character education do not develop the political literacy required for these debates. Walker and Moulin-Stozek (2019, p. 16) summarise this issue:

> *Proponents of character education claim the cultivation of virtues during schooling helps students, schools and society to flourish. However, critics argue that character education programs are insensitive to cultural and social diversity, and implicitly justify inequality by accrediting it to the presence or absence of personal qualities which are in principle unmeasurable.*

Arthur, Kristjánsson, Harrison, Sanderse, & Wright (2016, p. 43) defend Aristotelian Character Education, arguing 'it may seem odd to fault an Aristotle-based paradigm for individualism' because Aristotle prioritized communal and dialogical practices. This defence excludes the possibility character education researchers and educators espouse an Aristotelian perspective whilst operationalising an individualistic Character Education programme. Therefore claiming Aristotle would be a 'social reformer' (Arthur, et al., 2016, p. 42) is misleading without attempting to address the current structural inequalities. Even in the most recent defence of the Jubilee

Centre's work, Kristjánsson (2020) acknowledges there are resources available via its website that are demonstrated not to work (e.g. resources on gratitude), however he is not clear which specific resources help students and teachers engage in the kind of political action required to bring about a society in which individuals can develop the characteristics required to flourish.

Individualising of Character

Thirdly, while there is little evidence that character education is adequately challenging (or preparing young people to challenge) social structures that limit the flourishing of citizens, there is ample evidence that character education is supporting the individualising of character that supports the neoliberal project. A symptom of the neoliberalising of character can be seen in an excessive individualising of history in character education resources, as social movements are represented through short stories and quotes with limited context (Gill and Orgad, 2018). It can also be recognized in the pathologising of character: that is, character education policy perceives character as an abnormality requiring treatment by professionals (Bates, 2019). Finn, Nybell, & Shook (2013) argue the narratives of 'risk' regarding young people also legitimise the medicalising of behaviour and increased control over young people's lives by social institutions (see also Sayer, 2020). These critique can lack an empathetic approach – recognising that any curriculum delivered through schooling will have to be sympathetic to the prevailing educational values, even if it aims to ultimately resist and subvert them.

If character education in the UK individualizes moral development then, it is argued, there is less space to consider the social structures that affect flourishing and understand the political mechanisms that reinforce them. To this end, character education in the UK avoids any but the most superficial engagement with political

education (Suissa, 2015, p. 105). In particular, dominant discourses in the UK fail to articulate the conceptual difference between political and moral questions, thus conflating the 'good person' with the 'good citizen' (Suissa 2015, p111). As long as character education appears to focus on the promulgation of specific virtues, and morality is conflated with avoiding socially constructed 'risky' behaviours, it is in danger of being perceived as a neo-conservative, traditionalist agenda, which is seeking to instil particular traditional values within individuals rather than meaningfully develop moral reasoning that will lead to flourishing (Walsh, 2016).

Kristjansson (2015) argues against this strict individual versus collectivist argument, claiming virtuous individuals create societies in which all can flourish (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017), although no evidence is offered that this is the case. Sandese (2019, p. 2) summarises the debate thus: 'while virtue ethics may *in theory* challenge the current educational status quo, *in practice* character education programmes seem to be used by governments to advance other agendas, such as enabling young people to develop resilience to be successful in the current job market'.

To summarise, character education as promulgated by the DfE, OfSTED and the Jubilee Centre fundamentally assumes that the current systems are permanent, and the individual must adapt to fit within it, rather than develop the resources to challenge and change it (Jerome and Kisby, 2019, p. 71), using language of individual rather that state responsibilities (Burman, 2018, p. 2).

Settled Dispositions Limited by Social Factors

Not all debates around Character Education are so polemic. Sayer (2020) recognises the inherent opportunities in Character Education, and argues

sociologists both decry notions of virtue while also highlighting vices (such as, the lack of respect and empathy characterising discriminatory practices). In his attempt to 'rescue' the notion of character, he argues that virtues and vices that make up a character are encouraged or discouraged by social structures, including institutions and norms, and that it is difficult to develop some virtues if you inhabit in a culture that rewards vice – therefore if moral development of students is the aim, then moral concern should be directed to the social contexts as well as individuals. For the remainder of this article I seek to develop that argument further while referring back to the three dominant criticisms of character education. I do this through drawing on the work of virtue ethicist, MacIntyre.

MacIntyre's Theory of Ethics

In this section I present a summary of MacIntyre's theory of virtue ethics before relating it to character education. MacIntyre has a considerable reputation for reigniting an interest in virtue ethics in the late 20th century. His socially constructed virtue ethics fundamentally acknowledges that we inhabit many roles with different ethical norms, and our understanding of what it means to be a 'good person' as (for example) a doctor, parent, friend, and Sunday-league footballer create a fragmented set of ethics.

Philosophers of education have already interpreted MacIntyre for the practice of teaching (e.g. Dunne, 2003; Dunne and Hogan, 2003; Higgins, 2003, 2010a; Wain, 2003). This article progresses their ideas by specifically considering where character development would be placed within a MacIntyrian theory. It also progresses Sayer's (2020) ideas by providing a framework for character education that would be recognisable to Aristotelian character educators.

To summarise this argument in advance: MacIntyre recognises ethical discourse is situated within social practices (teaching, I argue, is a MacIntyrian practice). Therefore, one can only understand issues of character and morality if one understands the practices a person inhabits. Practices can be corrupted by institutions – social structures designed to protect practices but potentially corrupted by the pursuit of power or status. School is one such institution. Engaging in practices produces 'internal goods', which can be the development of virtues and other attributes that contribute to human flourishing. In this section I am arguing that the current simplistic aim of character education as the development of predefined 'universal' virtues should be replaced with three discrete aims of character education:

1. The development of the goods required to be a 'good student'.
2. The development of goods required to engage in specific disciplines
3. The development of metacognitive skills to critically engage with current and future practices and traditions outside of school.

To do this, teaching must first be protected from a culture that prioritises the acquisition of external goods, the agency of young people must be acknowledged, and the messiness of young people's (fragmented) ethical reality must be understood. Therefore character education should become participatory – it should recognise young people's agency as independent moral actors, and listen to their lived experiences before seeking to influence their character.

Teaching as a practice

MacIntyre argues the key to human flourishing is the development of certain 'goods', including virtues (MacIntyre, 2011). These 'goods' develop through engagement in 'practices', which he uses as a technical term for complex, self-contained human activities. For example, medicine, architecture and parenthood are practices.

However a practice would not be an activity lacking complexity, such as bandaging a patient, drawing a picture, and reading bedtime stories. Equally ‘social care’ (if referring to everything from midwifery to palliative care) would not be a practice as it is too broad with many different excellences (some of which are mutually exclusive). A practice is large enough to be complex but small enough to be a whole, and therefore the term is somewhat nebulous.

I contend teaching is one such MacIntyrian practice, however MacIntyre asserted teaching is not a practice at all, but resides in the practice of the specific discipline. That is, to MacIntyre teaching maths is not a practice. However Mathematics is a practice, and therefore a maths teacher is engaging in one expression of Mathematics. Without rehashing old arguments (Dunne, 2003; Higgins, 2010a), I propose with Dunne (2003) that MacIntyre was mistaken about teaching not because his conception of a practice was wrong, but he did not recognise teaching has its own set of ‘goods’ separate from the ‘goods’ of the subject being taught.

If practices are the sites in which we develop goods, including virtues, who decides what is considered virtuous within a practice? Firstly, practices are part of a tradition with established excellences, which are reminiscent of Witgensteinian ‘ideal types’. That is, teachers hold a collective awareness of what is means to be an excellent teacher. Secondly, MacIntyre argues behaviours in a practice should be a ‘minor premise’ contributing towards the development of internal goods that build towards the ‘major premise’ of human flourishing. This maxim protects a practice from harmful norms perceived as being ‘excellences’ (Higgins, 2010b, p. 237). For example, ‘overwork’ may be a norm within many practices however if it detracts from flourishing it cannot be an internal good. Therefore, a practice informs ethics without being relativist (MacIntyre, 2011, p. 317).

Young people may inhabit multiple practices, one of which is the practice of being a student. Those practices may have different 'goods', and navigating those different goods to create a coherent whole requires a set of metacognitive resources typically overlooked by character education. This is considered in more detail below, however MacIntyre considers this project of amalgamating myriad practices and 'goods' to be creating a 'narrative unity' in their lives (Keeney 1996, p. 152) .

The Fruit of Practices: Internal and External Goods.

Within MacIntyre's theory, virtues are an 'internal good', a benefit practitioners receive for excelling in their practice that tends towards human flourishing. A practice is therefore a place where a specific set of resources that contribute to the practice's *telos* (aim) can flourish (Higgins, 2003, p. 286). Different practices develop and require different goods, including different virtues.

These internal goods aid in identifying an 'excellent' example of a practitioner (Hager, 2011, p. 556; Higgins, 2010b, p. 246; Reinders, 2008, p. 636) and the achievement of these goods benefit other participants and wider community (McLaughlin, 2003, p. 342). Internal goods, therefore, place teachers in a relationship with norms and traditions of the practice of teaching and include: certain virtues a teacher requires to perform well, pastoral care of students, and well-educated and motivated students capable of independent reasoning.

While those first two 'goods' of teaching are self-explanatory, the last may require some exposition. To some extent a natural consequence of good teaching is the development of students' character. Just as a good teacher in the right circumstance will develop patience and good pastoral care of students, so too will they develop students who can learn with others. As learning in the classroom is a cooperative

activity, students must possess certain virtues (for example, curiosity, wisdom, respectfulness, cooperation and care) to engage as 'good students'. So, to some extent, the process of good teaching will facilitate the natural development of certain positive characteristics to help students excel in a learning community. Others have considered character education as a natural consequence of good teaching (for example Lapsley and Woodbury, 2016), indeed James Arthur, the director of the Jubilee Centre, has expressed that few resources are required as character development is a natural outcome of good teaching (BBC Radio 4, 2018). However these discourses rarely consider the threats to this ideal – we are aware not all students flourish through their schooling, therefore what limits the potential of this relationship?

MacIntyre provides a framework to understand how these relationships can become perverted. We see internal goods are the positive attributes one can develop though engaging in a practice. External goods, by contrast, are caricatured as a practice's lure away from its *telos* (Hager, 2011, p. 552) and include money, prizes, status or power. External goods may contribute to the flourishing of others, provide an environment in which flourishing is more or less likely, and maintain the practice – however if they become dominant, they corrupt the practice and prevent internal goods from flourishing. External goods to teaching can be financial incentives and awards, OfSTED grades and exam results. Overly authoritarian, competitive, and exam-focusses (i.e. neoliberal) cultures may create an institutional environment detrimental to the development of the goods required to excel in the practice of teaching because they prioritise the accumulation of external goods. Therefore in this argument I am moving further than this 'Character Education as Consequence of Good Teaching' model, contending excellence in teaching necessarily requires and

creates an institutional environment facilitating the development of ‘good students’ (and by good students, I mean developing the ethical and social competencies to be able to learn well in community with others. To be clear, this is not synonymous with compliance to behaviour management policies).

Internal and external goods can also become conflated when translated into the benefit of hard outcomes, for example ‘resilience’ is typically an internal good, but if it becomes associated with external measures of ‘success’ such as improved exam grades or increased wages (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Lapsley and Woodbury, 2016, p. 200) it becomes an end in itself, a lure aware from the aim of teaching. When character education is to reduce specific behaviours from young people, and its measure of success is substantially based on quantitative metrics, character development becomes conflated with external goods (Lapsley and Woodbury, 2016, p. 200), even if it claims to be Aristotelian. This begs the question, how can the pursuit of external goods come to replace internal goods?

Institutions – the corrupting influence of character education

Institutions are social structures that prioritise the development of external goods. Institutions exist to protect practices, advance the cause of the practitioners, and champion the external goods necessary to sustain the practice. Schools are institutions that house the practice of teaching. At their worst, schools as institutions become the quintessential faceless organisation seeking compliance from teachers and students through rewards and punishments. Institutions are a form of social structure that produce a set of norms, rules, and relationships that can prioritise the needs of the powerful (or even the institution itself) at the expense of the best interests of the student. Here the external goods of exam results, inspection grades

and measurements of pupil behaviour can take priority over the internal goods and *telos* of teaching.

Therefore institutions are necessary to protect a practice but schools can introduce a corrupting influence if they fail to create an environment where the internal goods of teaching can flourish (Brant and Lamb, 2016; MacIntyre, 2011, p. 226). If the *telos* of the practice becomes secondary to the preservation and expansion of the institution then the work of practitioners can be limited. This can result in conflict between maintaining standards and the unnecessary limiting of practitioners in order to safeguard the institution (Oakley and Cocking, 2001); this tension is often epitomized in the struggle between professional autonomy and 'managerialism' (Reinders, 2008).

The work of Geoff Moore is helpful in understanding how an institution can protect a practice. He argues virtuous institutions: allow virtues to flourish, focus on internal goods, defend practices against its own pursuit of external goods, and protect itself from the corrupting power of other institutions. Moore (2008) argues this kind of practice-institution would need a good purpose that recognises: it sustains a practice; the practice is a moral activity; external goods should sustain and develop the practice without becoming an end in themselves and it must resist corruption from other organisations in the same sector (Moore, 2002, 2008). In the UK, perhaps the practice of 'off-rolling' students (excluding 'troublesome' students who decrease the school's average grade) is evidence of the institution's need to maintain good average grades and attendance figures at the expense of engaging all students in a sound education (Baird and Elliott, 2018).

In summary, teaching a practice, but one of many different practices. Each practice has a set of internal goods that members can develop, but these tend to be in a unique combination. In teaching, particular characteristics that make a teacher a 'good teacher' are internal goods, but so is the development of students and their ability to learn well with others. If a teacher develops their own sense of pastoral care or patience, but do not ultimate succeed in facilitating the development of learners, they have not fulfilled the practice of teaching.

We can take away two arguments from this discussion so far: firstly, that there are many practices a young person may inhabit (being a student is just one of those), secondly that in a limited way, the development of a student's character into a motivated and capable learner *is* within a teacher's remit.

A MacIntyrian Character Education

This discussion on MacIntyre highlights three discrete 'ends' for character education. Firstly, teachers and students are engaged in the practice of teaching. As such, there are some internal goods required to teach and learn well in community with other learners. It seems appropriate for teachers to facilitate the development of those specific goods. This provides a limit to the claims of universalism – the aim of the character educator is not to impart specific narrowly defined virtues that are claimed to be of benefit to a person in every situation, but rather they are specifically focussing on the goods that allow a young person to be a 'good student'. That may be a healthy curiosity, the ability to cooperate with others, wisdom over what constitutes 'knowledge', communal virtues of care, trustworthiness, and respectfulness in the context of learning, and the capacity for critical engagement with subject matter.

Secondly character education should prepare young people for engagement in specific disciplines (e.g. through the subject of students engage in the practice of teaching and the practice of science, which has a set of internal goods around integrity and the scientific methods). These contextualise virtue, they provide a rational for teaching them, and provide nuanced understandings of virtue. Currently character education resources overstretch their definitions of virtue in an attempt to fit every context, however a scientific idea of 'objective' honesty derived through the scientific process is different from, say, the more 'subjective' honesty in interpreting historical events.

Thirdly, if there is a place for discrete teaching in character education separate from 'academic' subjects, it is in the development of metacognitive skills. Young people will be inhabiting communities and practices outside of schools, with norms and goods that may be harmful, or with internal goods that may be incompatible with each other. School is an environment in which young people's ability to engage in a reasoned understanding and critiquing of those norms and goods can be developed. Acknowledging young people lead ethical lives outside of the school, and that this needs to be understood to properly support the development of character, appears to be missing from the work of the Jubilee Centre. MacIntyre calls this complex mix of community, tradition, and practices a person's 'biographical narrative' and to attempt to create a 'narrative unity' greater care needs to be taken within character education.

Finally, character education is futile without an institutional environment prioritising the flourishing of young people. It can be difficult within our current education system to see where curiosity for curiosity's sake is rewarded, how individualised and

competitive grading systems contribute to cooperation, and where critical thinking skills are developed, but these should be the limit of teaching pre-defined virtues.

A MacIntyrian character education framework provides contextual information for the manifestation of virtue. However much character education is focussed on preferred virtues or behaviours detached from student's biographical narrative and the practice of teaching (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 12). To see how this may affect how future character education is constructed, consider Kristjansson's quandary (2015, p. 155): why do children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to score lower on measures of moral development and prosocial attitudes? It may be there are structural inequalities causing 'lower' moral development, but it may be the measures used to test character are devised by academics or teachers who inhabit a particular set of practices, with a particular set of expectations about what 'pro social behaviour' or morally praiseworthy attitudes look like. That is, the assumption the creators of virtue measures know which virtues students should pursue biases those measures (and curricula) towards the people who inhabit a similar biographical narrative.

For these three ends of character education to be developed, however, there first needs to be a recognition that relationships within the school can be corrupted if the pursuit of external goods, which includes the neoliberal fascination with exam grades and other measurables, takes precedence. That is – character education is an endeavour doomed to failure if the culture promotes vice over virtue.

A MacIntyrian Response to the Critics of Character Education

How does this MacIntyrian framework contribute to the 'rescuing' of character (Sayer, 2020)? This section shall take the three themes presented by critics in turn:

individualising of character, young people's moral agency, and character education's (lack of) critical engagement with social structures.

Individualising of Character

While MacIntyre offers an alternative vision for socially constructed virtue, Keeney (2016) argues there is a tension between a MacIntyrian approach to education and the liberalism on which much western education is based. This distinction is perhaps best understood as the conflict between the individual and the community (see also Bauman, 2000):

> *By narrowly focusing on the individual and private at the expense of the communal and public, liberalism fails to account for the necessarily social nature of the educational engagement and thus inevitably erodes those shared understandings and publically articulated virtues on which a liberal education must, necessarily, rest (Keeney, 2016, p. viii)*

The UK government's character education policy is preoccupied with pathologising the character of individuals and promulgating a deficit narrative rather than alleviating inequalities that affect character. This is typically responded to with a circular argument that a 'fair society' begins with individuals displaying the virtue of justice (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 156), however this reinforces a narrative that individuals are responsible for unjustifiable institutions rather than the structures of the state (Burman, 2018; Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 1; Walsh, 2016, p. 2). A MacIntyrian understanding of character education would avoid this circular argument by focussing on whether the culture young people inhabit is likely to result in the development of virtue and – by extension – their flourishing. Within this framework any systematic flaws in character (such as those David Cameron blamed on the

2011 riots) is a predominantly the product of an environment that does not engender human flourishing.

Young People's Agency

We saw that MacIntyre (1999, pp. 66-67) would move beyond the simple promulgation of predefined virtues – even those essential to being a 'good student' - and argue human beings 'need to learn to understand themselves as practical reasoners' in order to prioritise goods and know how to benefit from them. This, I argue, is part of the remit of the school. Character education curricula do not currently prioritise the development of students as co-dependant reasoners of the goods required to flourish in their given context(s). Therefore a further part of students' development as competent social and ethical actors in a learning community is to invite the appropriate use of the question 'is it at this time and in these circumstances best to act as to satisfy this particular desire?' (*ibid* p67).

A teacher, perhaps with greater life experience and pedagogical knowledge, may be in a place to help students discern their biographical narrative *and* facilitate the development of virtues required for learning. A teacher may also be in a position to instruct on the worthiness of pursuing specific goods. However a teacher in this understanding of virtue is not in a position to assume to know which goods (except those required for teaching and learning) a student should possess without first engaging in a dialogue with the student.

To take an example of two students, both of which are involved in the practice of teaching as recipients of the care and pedagogical expertise of their teacher. One student is a member of an elite sports team. The student could become exceptional at the sport through their own natural aptitude and dedication. The second student is

a young carer, who wakes up early to provide personal care for a parent with a longer term illness. Her loving self-sacrifice is deemed morally praiseworthy by many who hear her story. Through a piece of biographical writing, the teacher learns the balance between being a good student, a good friend, and a good sports star/young carer is causing distress to the students involved. For both students to thrive in their situations different goods may be required. The carer, for example, may need to develop appropriate 'self-care' and prevent a disproportionate sense of guilt. The sports star may increase his dedication and self-control if he is to achieve the kind of success to which he aspires. Self-care, dedication and self-control are goods internal to these practices because they develop through engaging in caring/sport and can be recognised as the kind of qualities exemplars in these practices would possess. However, and this is key, I am not arguing it is the responsibility or role of the teacher to make judgements about the goods a student should prioritise, but rather *it is a teacher's role to facilitate the development of students into individuals who are able to make reasoned decisions about which goods to prioritise, at what time, and in what place*. Teachers, in this MacIntyrian perspective, are to facilitate students' development of the skills, dispositions, and knowledge necessary to allow them to pursue their own goods.

Critical Engagement with Social Structures

It would seem an important theoretical consideration that schools can become institutions that limit the development of virtue and flourishing, and yet there appears little dominant discourse beyond the individual within character education in the UK. Something is amiss if character educators seek to foster virtue but fail to articulate the potential corrupting influence of institutions on students, which can limit students' development as independent reasoners, restricting goods (including virtues) they are

able to pursue, and ultimately diminish their opportunities to flourish. A MacIntyrian approach would require both teachers and students to develop the skills to recognise and resist corrupting influences, and for character education research and policy to develop a strong anti-corruption narrative. Following the advice of Moore, above, a school that considers the primary aim of teaching as developing well educated and motivated learners (rather than exam results), and seeks to protect that aim, will provide a better foundation for character education to occur. A MacIntyrian character education would therefore require teachers and students to become critically aware of the structures preventing flourishing and the political mechanisms through which they can be challenged.

Conclusion

Character education can fail to speak to the dominant ethical issues young people face, ignore the structural issues affecting the development of character, and misdiagnose the cause of any 'deficit' in character development. It can overlook the fragmented nature of contemporary ethics, with young people navigating multiple social practices, in which there are different ideas of a 'good life'. In its place, 'universal' virtues are presented that, in fact, are not as encompassing as the term implies.

Character education in schools could focus on three areas. Firstly, in facilitating the development of characteristics required to be a 'good student' in a community with other learners. This requires schools to have a thorough understanding of its role in housing and protecting the practice of teaching from influences that seek to prioritise external goods of exam results and OFSTED grades at the expense of internal goods which can include curiosity, cooperation, and wisdom. Secondly, in exposing

students to the goods internal to specific subjects. And thirdly, in facilitating the development of young people as independent reasoners able to make decisions about which goods should be pursued, how, and when.

Where does this lead the field of character education? Firstly, rather than assume, without adequate cause, that character education initiatives are providing opportunities to develop broad virtues that are deemed equally useful across a range of contexts, these initiatives should focus on one of the three areas above. This will allow greater focus on the purposes of character education and prevent an over-claiming of its potential.

Secondly, there is a need to redress the balance between the character of individual students and the context that may (or may not) be an environment likely to see them flourish. It would be beneficial for character education initiatives to work with school leaders to recognise that it houses the practice of teaching, and develop strategies to recognise and resist the prioritisation of external goods. This protection of teaching may come through a process of honest dialogue with teachers over how the following of policy have prevented them from engaging in meaningful work with students. For example, school leadership would be able to articulate what internal goods they would protect even if there could be an improvement in exam grades should they be sacrificed. To my knowledge, there is no character education research seeking to resist or subvert the dominant neoliberal values within the UK education system, despite an awareness that systems and structures influence character.

Thirdly, we would see character education theory and research take seriously the personal and structural barriers that may prevent the development of virtue and

human flourishing. Therefore ‘learning how to enhance human freedom and agency’ (Lutz, 2012, p. 14) becomes paramount to the character educator. To this extent, the re-emergence of citizenship education may be helpful.

Finally, there should be an awareness of the context of students who are living in community with others and inhabiting their own practices. This biographical narrative is essential to allow students to make decisions about which goods to pursue at which time. This allows young people to navigate conflicts between practices with mutually exclusive goods (say, as attempting to be a good member of a family, a good friend and a good member of a high performing orchestra). Arthur, et al. (2016, p. 101) do consider this through the example of a clash between prioritising different virtues at home and school, however they frame this tension from the position of those in power over the young person. Here I am arguing the role of the teacher is facilitating development of a young person as an independent reasoner within their own biographical narrative.

Regarding future research, this model of character education has multiple avenues for future work. Firstly, it would appear disingenuous to attempt to examine a ‘MacIntyrian Character Education’ through a curriculum designed entirely devoid of local context. Therefore, it could begin with an initial piece of Participatory Action Research involving students and/or teachers to discern how teachers can understand and use the biographical narratives of their students in the development of students’ own goods. Creating training opportunities and resources teachers can draw upon to aid in the development of students as independent reasoners is important here. The efficacy of curricula designed to facilitate the development of ‘good students’ could then be researched, before seeking to examine whether this has any discernible effect on the character of the student. A similarly

phenomenological piece of research focused on the institution of the school and how it can best defend the practice of teaching would also be beneficial. Regarding outcomes for students, character is already notoriously difficult to measure (Alexander, 2014; Curren and Kotzee, 2014) even when there is a predefined and operationalized set of virtues, therefore I am under no illusion of the scale of the task in devising a measurement for character that (a) judges change in character based on the biographical narrative of the participants involved, and (b) judges character based on dispositions contributing to human flourishing, of which there are myriad routes to myriad ends.

To conclude, while much character education literature borrows Aristotelian language there is a growing awareness in the field the full hermeneutical task of operationalising an Aristotelian virtue ethic is incomplete. The benefits of using neo-Aristotelian MacIntyre as a foundation is predominantly his work interpreting Aristotle for any practice, teaching included. However ultimately this moves Character Education to a new place: as an internal good to the practice of teaching. Fundamentally this article is asking *are character educators interested in creating an environment to facilitate the development of students as autonomous ethical agents to allow them to flourish in any given practice? Or are they more interested in protecting Character Education as a discrete field of study?* A MacIntyrian concept of Character Education (or perhaps more rightly 'participatory character development through teaching') makes the field more complex but I have argued this is a healthier form of character development than the current dominant forms. Making a case for engaging with the social environment that defines virtue and promotes (or otherwise) flourishing places MacIntyrian Character Education in conflict with neoliberal accounts of character that focus almost exclusively on individual risks and deficits.

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