

Can character education contribute to social justice?

Abstract

This theoretical paper uses a social justice perspective to critically interrogate prevalent definitions and criticisms of contemporary character education, focussing in particular on the Aristotelian approach being promoted by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. Social justice theory is used to critique the political purposes of character education, drawing insight from sociological, philosophical and political theoretical perspectives.

The paper attempts to find a ‘third way’ that transcends the seemingly polarised views on character education, recognising that the debate is symptomatic of the liberal/conservative divide in public policy. While I conclude that the model promoted by the Jubilee Centre runs the risk of supporting a neoliberal agenda that is incompatible with social justice, I suggest that, rather than abandoning it completely, character education could be re-constructed with clear and explicit commitments to social justice, recognising the roles of social context, power relations and politics.

Introduction

Character education has recently experienced a revival in UK educational policy after years of being regarded as deeply unfashionable (Suissa 2015). As discussed later in the paper, its re-introduction was recommended in 2012 by the Riots Communities and Victims Panel¹ in the wake of a period of rioting in London. The recommendations to introduce character education into UK educational policy were further supported by an All Party Parliamentary Group looking at ways to achieve greater social mobility² and by the centre-left think tank Demos³. These events also coincided with the establishment of a new research institute in 2012: the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values (later renamed the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues – hereafter the ‘Jubilee Centre’)⁴. The UK Department for Education introduced a focus on character education by announcing a £5 million ‘Character Awards’ fund, emphasising personal qualities such as ‘grit’ and ‘resilience’, with the awards allocated to 27 schools in total⁵. This appears to have been a short-lived initiative, however, as at the time of writing this paper it has been reported that the flagship character programme will be abandoned⁶.

My interest in character education is informed by both a critical academic interest and my professional biography as I have worked in the past for Character Scotland: a charitable organisation

¹ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20121003195937/http://riotspanel.independent.gov.uk/>

² <http://centreforum.org/live/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/character-and-resilience-web.pdf>

³ <https://www.demos.co.uk/project/character-nation-2/>

⁴ <http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/character-education-apply-for-2015-grant-funding>

⁶ <https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-news/dfe-scraps-nicky-morgans-landmark-character-education-scheme>

that aims to support the development of character education in Scotland⁷. The experience of working in the character education ‘industry’ gives me a unique insight. The charity was formed in 2009 having been preceded by Learning for Life: an organisation that coordinated a programme of educational research that examined the virtues and values of 3-25 year olds (Arthur 2010). Among Character Scotland’s founders were Professor James Arthur (Deputy Pro Vice Chancellor at University of Birmingham and the founding Director of the Jubilee Centre) and Professor David Carr (Professor of Ethics and Education at the Jubilee Centre). Like the Jubilee Centre, Character Scotland has received the majority of its funding from the John Templeton Foundation: a philanthropic foundation based in USA. The foundation is controversial as it stands accused of having a conservative bias and a hidden religious agenda (Bains 2011), and yet the foundation has exerted a considerable amount of influence on UK education policy and approaches to character education in particular – an influence that can be sometimes obscured by misleading narratives that aim to conceal their influence (Allen and Bull 2018, in print).

During this period, I encountered many views regarding character education. For instance, some saw character as a ‘right-wing’, ‘old-fashioned’, or ‘dangerous’ concept. Others saw character education as fundamental to the broader purposes of education, especially the four capacities of the Scottish *Curriculum for Excellence* (confident individuals, responsible citizens, effective contributors and successful learners – see Scottish Executive 2004). A consistent and compelling theme emerged in my dialogue with participants, which was that any attempts to introduce character education should be underpinned by clear values, particularly social justice. It was felt that character education should not be an individualistic pursuit that focuses on the inculcation of traits or virtues, but that it should focus on the structural and relational contexts that might support or distort the cultivation of certain qualities and ways of being. This viewpoint, however, appears to have been eschewed by the organisation in favour of the Jubilee Centre’s virtue-based construction of character education⁸.

In this paper, I use social justice theory in an attempt to find a potential ‘third way’ that transcends the seemingly polarised views on character education. This is informed by the view that social justice is an under-theorised concept in educational policy, and that educational research does not adequately deal with the dichotomous liberal/conservative divide, which is a necessary step in bolstering accounts of social justice in education (Francis et al 2017). I therefore seek to generate a socially progressive critique of character education: an approach that is seen by some as synonymous with conservative moral education. While I have sympathy with many critics of character education, I contend that analysing both sides of this debate can help to gain an understanding of the relationship between citizens and social contexts. This is achieved by analysing character education from outside its own literature base, drawing on insights from social and political theory. I suggest that this line of inquiry is helpful as a means of understanding the roles of political and social ideology, particularly with regard to contestations about character education and the idea of education for democracy and social justice. The paper suggests that social justice theory has the potential to inform a dispositional conceptualisation of the ‘socially just citizen’ and the kinds of knowledge, skills, qualities and values that could be activated through educational programmes, while also providing an understanding of the role of education as part of a broader project of social reform.

⁷ <http://character.scot/>

⁸ <http://character.scot/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Character-Scotland-Framework-small.pdf>

I begin by reviewing some of the key criticisms of character education and the arguments mobilised in its defence and promotion, arguing that there is a need to move beyond these dichotomous positions. Following this, I provide analysis of theoretical approaches to social justice, using this to explore the potential for character education to contribute to education for social justice and democracy. I argue that this would necessitate a fundamental, theoretical and ideological shift in character education, informed by a sociological and political understanding of human flourishing. I suggest that a dispositional understanding of the ‘socially just citizen’ could be developed as a theoretical construct achieve this shift. I conclude that, while current approaches to character education have little to contribute to social justice, engaging in the task of mobilising character education towards a social justice agenda could help to answer a question posed by Francis et al (2017): what does education for social justice look like?

Literature review: a critical appraisal of character education

Character education is not a new idea. The concept of character and its role in education is perennial, global and controversial. Character is perennial because “it permeates the writing of the Greek and Roman classical authors that formed the basis of eighteenth-century education and by which cultural standards were set” (Ahnert and Manning 2011: 1). References to character can be found in UK education policies from the mid-20th century (Advisory Council on Education in Scotland 1947) to the present day⁹. Character is global, because it presents itself in a variety of educational practices reaching across the world (Lee & Manning 2013), and it is a controversial idea that is extolled by some (Carr & Harrison 2015) and fiercely criticised by others (Kohn 1997, Purpel 1999, Noddings 2002, Winton 2008, Suissa 2015).

Character is referenced and debated in a range of disciplines including philosophy, virtue ethics especially, and developmental psychology (Lapsley & Narvaez 2007). It is strongly associated with conservative and communitarian agendas in education (Arthur and Bailey 2000) and is contested on the basis of its efficacy, methods, politics, ideology and relevance, with proponents of character education offering arguments to deflect these criticisms (Kristjánsson 2013). The most prolific writings on character education emanate largely from the philosophy of education, with other works found in commentaries on educational policy and moral education. In the UK, many enthusiastic proponents of character education are based in one research institute, the Jubilee Centre in the University of Birmingham, which ‘promotes a moral concept of character in order to explore the importance of virtue for public and professional life’.¹⁰

While there are differing interpretations, the definitions of character education can be categorised in one of two varieties: narrow and broad (Kohn 1997). Character education in the ‘narrow’ sense, with which this paper deals primarily, is sometimes referred to as a traditionalist (Molnar 1997) view. It tends to define itself strictly along the lines of moral virtues or values and seeks to justify itself as a singular discipline usually within the overall field of moral education (Lapsley and Narvaez 2007). For instance, from the virtue ethical perspective outlined at the Jubilee Centre, Walker et al (2013) understand character education as “any approach to moral education that foregrounds the cultivation of moral character and moral virtue” (Walker et al 2013: 1). As such, character is

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/character-education-apply-for-2015-grant-funding>

¹⁰ <http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/355/about>

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understood to be educable through a combination of direct teaching or instruction and efforts to develop the appropriate ethos within institutions i.e. character is ‘taught, caught and sought’.¹¹

Approaches in the narrow category, particularly as they appear in the USA, are “often seen as part of the neo-conservative social and cultural agenda and linked to the call to return to traditional values and teaching methods” (McLaughlin and Halstead 1999: 138). The significance of social context is often neglected in favour of a forensic focus on the individual and personal virtues. There is a lack of emphasis on liberal democracy and critical judgement, characterised by a failure to acknowledge that there are a range of beliefs about what is true and good (Purpel 1999). There is a tendency to claim that there is a set of ‘universal’ values and that there is a personal responsibility on each of us to uphold these values. This can mask the diversity of viewpoints, limiting possibilities for dialogue about cultural differences, exploration around how values can be exclusionary or how and why they come into conflict (Winton 2008).

In an attempt to resolve this debate, researchers at the Jubilee Centre have suggested that Aristotelian virtue ethics offers the most palatable solution and a substantive theory for character education (Jubilee Centre 2017). Virtue ethics has seen a recent resurgence and is being increasingly understood a viable alternative theory of morality to deontology (a form of ethics concerned with duty but not the consequences of actions) and utilitarianism (a form of consequentialist ethics concerned with the results of actions). There are however some notable weaknesses in the virtue theory of Aristotle. For instance, Arthur (2003) notes that Aristotelian notions of virtue are linked with the aristocracy and the elite of society, and Aristotle claimed that fathers, being superior to mothers, should assume the role of instilling good character in children. While Arthur appears to observe this as a characteristic of Aristotelian virtue ethics, he falls short of critiquing this viewpoint as a privileging of class elites with highly problematic gendered assumptions about who has and can therefore instil good character.

Aristotle “felt constrained to defend slavery because it seemed necessary in a well-run society... even though some of his contemporaries saw the evils of slavery” (Noddings 2012: 167). The writings of Aristotle emphasise traditional values and authority, as “in Aristotelian societies, there is widespread agreement on the roles and functions of each member of society. There may be subcultures, but these are subject to the rule of the larger society. It is assumed that there is consensus or near consensus on the values to be transmitted.” (Noddings 2012: 168). I would argue that, while it may be possible to brush this off as a trite objection or simply a ‘sign of the times’ in Ancient Greece, the importance of the intervention from Noddings is to point out that Aristotle’s theory of a flourishing society depended on oppression, elitism and authoritarianism. It seems that Aristotle had particular ideas about who should flourish and who should not. This remains the battleground of what we would now refer to as *social justice* – and yet there has been no serious attempt to establish whether character education makes a meaningful contribution to social justice or, as its philosophical antecedents might suggest, whether it works against such ambitions.

¹¹ <http://jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/character-education/Framework%20for%20Character%20Education.pdf>

Social Justice and education

Winton (2008) observes that concerns for social justice tend to be the main source of critique in relation to character education. This section of the paper argues for an understanding of social justice that is rooted in desires for the amelioration of social inequality. In particular, I am using a working definition of social justice in education, drawing on Bell (2007, in Mthethwa-Sommers 2014) who sees social justice firstly as a *goal* of equal participation and equitable distribution of resources, safety and security; and secondly, as the *process* of developing a critical understanding of oppressive systems that perpetuate social inequality, and the development of capacities and agency to collaboratively address and remedy this inequality.

Social justice is often understood as synonymous with a refusal of neoliberalism; a market-based approach that influences public policy in a variety of ways. Neoliberalism is characterised by *laissez-faire* economics, minimal government intervention and privatisation (Ward et al 2015). It prioritises the interests of corporations and the wealthy, further side-lining those of marginalised communities, resulting in forms of governance that perpetuate social inequality and injustice (Ball 2016). In education, neoliberal discourses position individuals as consumers of education and require them to act as a creative ‘entrepreneur of the self’. Each individual must learn to adapt to the changing demands on modern living in order to flourish, and a failure to do so is a failure of economic entrepreneurship (Davies and Bansel, 2007). By focussing exclusively on the virtues of individuals, character education risks positioning itself as part of this self-focussed entrepreneurship, thereby perpetuating a neoliberal discourse and the social inequalities that follow in its wake.

Advocates of ‘critical pedagogy’ see the challenge as developing a range of critical literacies that counter the hegemony of a free and apolitical market and the forces it exudes on education (Giroux 2004). The Foucaultian concept of governmentality (the range of techniques that the state uses to exert political control over citizens) establishes that individuals can engage in social change projects and acts of refusal, informed by sense-making practices in education such as critical reflection, developing a common vision of equity and engaging in transformative dialogue (Ward et al 2015). While the case for social justice and democracy continues to be made in education, researchers have arguably not paid sufficient attention to complexities of definition, theory and practical utility. In particular, the literature does not take seek to challenge some of the rather simplistic binary distinctions such as the liberal/conservative divide in public policy. This lack of conceptual clarity means that concerns about social justice in education are too easily dismissed by policy makers as being part of a general defence of ‘progressivism’ that does not take sufficient account of how ideas can be understood and effectively implemented in policy. This results in a polarised debate where, ultimately, the goal of social justice suffers (Francis et al 2017).

The same can be said with regard to character education. It tends to be promoted by those with a politically conservative outlook who tend to see individuals as the locus of change. Conversely, it tends to be rejected by those coming from a liberal or socialist position who call for social change. It has also been demonstrated that when those with a purportedly ‘liberal’ outlook defend character education, the views being espoused are closely related to conservative interests and funded by neo-conservative foundations such as the John Templeton Foundation (Allen and Bull 2018). This leads me to consider whether there is a possible ‘third way’ in this debate. The realisation of social justice is dependent, at least in part, on “...the capabilities of parents, students, teachers, and other local stakeholders; to participate, to discuss, to challenge and critique” (Ball 2013: 4) and on the

cultivation of citizens who have a dispositional orientation to social justice (Westheimer and Kahne 2004). This is where character education could make a meaningful contribution to both the goal and process of social justice. However, this would mean that the development of personal qualities and agency is not the sole focus of character education. Instead, aligning character education with social justice would necessitate a radical reform of social structures of power, with individual agency having an important role in that context. In other words, a ‘third way’ could be found in investigating whether the goal of social justice requires ‘socially just citizens’.

For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to focus largely on the traditional or ‘narrow’ approach to character education, in particular the version being promoted by the Jubilee Centre. What follows is an interrogation of some of the defences and promotional positioning put forward by James Arthur (Founding Director of the Jubilee Centre) and Kristján Kristjánsson (Deputy Director of the Jubilee Centre) in support of character education. In doing so I give particular attention to the arguments employed in the defence and promotion of character education, analysing how the approaches used are compatible with a social justice perspective by considering three relevant categories that are pertinent to social justice: individualism, conservatism and criticality.

The defence and promotion of character education

The re-introduction of character education to UK education policy was the first recommendation made by the Riots Communities and Victims Panel¹² in the wake of a period of rioting in London. The riots took place in August 2011 following a protest linked to Mark Duggan’s shooting in Tottenham (one of the most deprived areas in London) and the subsequent handling of the case by police. Political responses to the riots have been heavily criticised as they characterised those involved as being members of a ‘feral underclass’, condemning the moral character of those involved while deflecting attention away from the social, economic and cultural issues that underpinned the anger and alienation in the lead-up to the riots (Hedge and MacKenzie 2015). The recommendations from the aforementioned panel framed character education as a vital part of the solution to these issues. This arguably strengthened the powerful political myth that poor moral choices were at the core of the problem, rather than more fundamental issues such as class struggle, deepening inequalities and social exclusion (Tyler 2013).

It is important to note that the introduction of character education programmes are often preceded by claims of moral crises or what Arthur (2003) refers to as the ‘litany of alarm’. Arthur himself appears to use this as a basis to promote the need for character education in the UK. Intervening in the public commentary on the 2011 riots, for instance, Arthur suggests that there was ‘no apparent reason’ for the rioting taking place beyond a sense of entitlement to individual rights and the ‘disintegration of traditional morality’ – with a rejection of the idea that socioeconomic factors such as those identified by Tyler (2013) were contributory factors¹³. Kristjánsson (2002), claims that proponents of character education in the USA have similarly sought to take advantage of a ‘moral decline’ narrative to advance the cause of character education and promote its uptake in policy and practice. Neither author offer a critique of this backdrop to the promotion of character education.

¹² <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20121003195937/http://riotspanel.independent.gov.uk/>

¹³ See <https://www.birminghampost.co.uk/news/local-news/james-arthur-lost-god-nation-3919092> and <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/perspective/riots-arthur.aspx>

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Instead, Arthur and Kristjánsson appear to justify such developments as an unfortunate means to a desirable end of character education being adopted in policy.

Kristjánsson responds to some criticisms of character education in two papers: *'In Defence of Non-Expansive Character Education'* (2002) and *'Ten Myths About Character, Virtue and Virtue Education – Plus Three Well-Founded Misgivings'* (2013). In response to one of the central criticisms, namely the claimed universality of basic values, Kristjánsson does not deny that this is a fundamental tenet of character education. He points out that there are in fact various lists of 'transcultural' values referred to by character educators. The admission that character educators themselves cannot find agreement on values brings into question the original claim of 'transcultural' or 'universal' values being espoused, yet Kristjánsson does not offer an explanation for this apparent pluralism within the character education movement. Nonetheless, pluralism of values is seen by Kristjánsson as a threat: a result of ill-conceived and unfettered 'rights-based liberalism', against which character education is the defence. He does not appear to recognise that differences in cultural values can be valuable for society (Winton 2008) or indeed the findings from social psychology suggesting that human behaviour comes about as a result of conflicting values (Schwartz 2012). Kristjánsson claims that there is a broad consensus on values regardless of cultural background and that any differences in values tend to be exaggerated, yet he does not explain why it is necessary to reinforce these values through character education, if it is true that we already share them.

It is evident throughout the 2002 paper that Kristjánsson is not seeking to invite a critical reading of his position. Rather, he is seeking to ward off the possibility of further critique. He makes explicit that he is not seeking to respond to opponents of character education; rather he is providing a narrative that would help character educators to successfully deflect these criticisms. There are many rhetorical devices in this article that aim to achieve the purpose of avoiding critique. As an example; the criticisms referred to by Kristjánsson are explored within and on his own terms, which is to say that he describes everything as a form of character education or promotion of virtues in some form or another. Character education is presented by Kristjánsson as the inescapable result of any educational endeavour. Even if we reject character education, we must be attempting to promote an alternative set of virtues, hence we become character educators by default. The reader is held hostage by a thesis of inevitability from which the only escape is to submit to Kristjánsson's views. If Aristotle's *practical reason* is "the capacity to evaluate and choose between different courses of action" (Kristjánsson 2002: 149), then it would follow that we are free to choose whether to accept the doctrine of universal values or indeed whether to endorse or reject character education.

Kristjánsson develops his defence further in his 2013 paper, in which the 'myths' of character education are summarised as being "unclear, redundant, old-fashioned, religious, paternalistic, anti-democratic, conservative, individualistic, relative and situation dependent" (Kristjánsson 2013: 269). Kristjánsson dismisses these criticisms in turn by characterising them as myths arising largely as a result of questionable attempts made in USA during the late twentieth century in the field of character education – attempts that he appears to be critical of himself. The characterisation of previous objections as 'myths' not only implies that the criticism has been adequately dealt with in Kristjánsson's rebuttal, but that the criticisms were unfounded to begin with. I do not find however that this case has been sufficiently made. For instance, Kristjánsson dismisses the objection of 'individualism' by pointing out that the ultimate aim of character education is 'social flourishing'.

This, however, is a straw man argument. The criticism is not that character education does not make reference to the 'social'; it is directed at the key tenet that the character of individuals is "the basis for human and societal flourishing" (Jubilee Centre 2017). Kristjánsson appears to concede that social context matters, although he does not expand on this, and yet he concludes that it is more pragmatic to change individuals than it is to change society. To Judith Suissa, Kristjánsson's suggestion that we should focus on individual change and his suggestion that social change might not be achievable seems "at best naive and at worst disingenuous". She argues instead for the creation of opportunities for "public political discourse where ideas about what and how to change, and why, are openly debated and argued for". She further argues that "an educational approach that puts all pedagogical emphasis on individuals and their character traits mitigates against this, both reflecting and reinforcing the dominant policy discourse that views the system as here to stay and individuals as to blame for social problems." (Suissa 2015: 114)

The potential for confusion, particularly with regard to uninitiated practitioners or policy makers who are considering adopting character education, is considerable. Arthur (2003) accepts the difficulties associated with any exploration of character education:

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

It is a concern that character education is presented in public-facing promotions as uncontroversial and even straight forward, while in the academic literature the debate quietly rages on. Arthur is quoted in the Times Educational Supplement saying "Character education to me is simply a good education – there isn't anything mysterious about it".¹⁴ This seems far removed from the 'minefield of conflicting ideology' that Arthur refers to in his scholarly work. Nel Noddings succinctly describes the tendency to avoid such critical examination:

"The courage of a warrior may, for example, be so admired that members of the society do not think (or dare) to criticize war itself." (Noddings 2012: 167)

In this section I have sought to illustrate that character education is not adequately defended by its proponents, particularly in their attempts to rebuff the criticisms of promoting individualism and conservatism. Instead, justifications are put forward in a way that risks stifling debate and critique, masking the role of political ideology and the dilemmas associated with a singular focus on the virtues of character. This may indicate that character education has little to contribute to social justice, however such a claim requires further exploration. In the next section, I evaluate whether character education can make a contribution to education for social justice and democracy.

Education for social justice and democracy

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

¹⁴ <https://www.tes.com/us/news/breaking-views/myth-character-education>

runs the risk of elevating the status of personal responsibility while concealing the role of structural contexts in perpetuating social problems such as inequality and injustice.

Approaches to citizenship education could help to locate a legitimate role for character education in achieving social justice. This is explored by Kisby (2017) who argues that, while character education could play a role in addressing issues of justice and citizenship, it should not be allowed to replace citizenship education altogether. He suggests that character education could address the issue of pluralism by utilising the approach of Rawls, who “...sought to shift the question from: how should I live? to: how can we live together in society given that there are different answers to the question: how should I live?” (Kisby 2017: 16). Kisby is more optimistic about character education than I feel is warranted however. He finds that many of the criticisms levelled against character education can be rebuffed on the basis that any form of education can be used for political or ideological ends. While this may be true, it suggests that Kisby sees the problems of character education in relation to implementation, whereas I see them as more fundamental problems of design. While I tentatively agree with Kisby that character education may have the potential to contribute to citizenship education by promoting the ‘values and attitudes’ that are conducive to good citizenship, Kisby understates the fundamental shift that character education would need to undergo in order to achieve this.

An alternative perspective is offered by Westheimer and Kahne (2004), who provide a useful framework that describes three different kinds of citizens that schools in the USA typically try to produce. They refer to citizens who are i) personally responsible, ii) participatory, and iii) justice oriented. The authors illustrate the various kinds of citizen by theorising how each might respond to a humanitarian crisis that involves victims experiencing hunger:

“...if participatory citizens are organizing the food drive and personally responsible citizens are donating food, justice oriented citizens are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover.” (Westheimer and Kahne 2004: 4)

They find that personally responsible citizenship, typified by a character education approach, is the most common approach pursued by schools, while justice-oriented citizenship receives the least attention. When schools promote personally responsible citizenship, they emphasise service, volunteering and a ‘good deeds’ approach to social action – a similar approach is endorsed by the Jubilee Centre¹⁵. Participatory citizenship implies more community involvement, organising and participation in civic life. Justice-oriented citizens, however, are encouraged to engage in critical analysis of the social structures that might give rise to particular issues in the community. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) found in their research that student inquiries included the impact of poverty and how this might result in violence, exploring how they might seek to effect change.

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) categorise character education as promoting ‘personally responsible’ citizenship, thereby offering very little hope that character education can contribute in any meaningful way to a social justice agenda. While the three types of citizen they propose are a useful way to distinguish between various conceptions of citizenship being pursued in education. I am not

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http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/Building_Character_Through_Youth_Social_Action.pdf

convinced, however, that referring to three competing typologies of the good citizen represents a way forward for advancing the cause of social justice in education. We should question the assumption that conservatives focus on personal responsibility while progressives focus on justice, as this may fall into the trap of simplistic binary distinctions Francis et al (2017). Furthermore, we should not underestimate the role of participatory democracy in achieving social justice in education. Approaches to achieving social justice can recognise the views of children and by working with them in the spirit of participation, collaboration and negotiation, creating situations where children can meaningfully contribute to decisions. This, however, would require a radical shift in the politics of childhood and the level of respect and recognition afforded to the views of children, so 'decisions are made *with* them and not *for* them' (Davis et al 2014). Additionally, we should be careful about removing any reference to the 'personal' in social justice. This runs the risk of ignoring the role of qualities such as empathy in empowering young people to challenge injustice (Wagaman 2011). I find instead that social justice should be understood as an overarching principle, so that 'personal responsibility' and 'participation' are understood within the overall context of social justice.

Starting from the perspective of structural remediation takes us back to the idea that neoliberalism presents a challenge to democracy and, by consequence, to education. The purposes of education, therefore, should be seen in terms of building the capabilities for democracy, enabling political activism and establishing democratic civic norms (Olssen 2004). In contrast to the recommendation of an Aristotelian framework from proponents of character education, I find agreement with Stephen Ball (2015) who calls for a process of Socratic self-examination; a kind of "...self-formation through engagement" and "a continuous practice of introspection, which is at the same time attuned to a critique of the world outside" (Ball 2015: 8). Whereas traditional character education posits that we should aim to become virtuous agents, it is by understanding what we should *refuse* to become that enables the care of the self (Ball and Olmedo 2013). In other words it is by actively resisting unethical norms, questioning unjust power relations and finding our own responses to these challenges that we realise the fullness of our own being, we discover truth and we flourish. By starting with a sociological perspective, I am advocating that we should seek to gain an understanding of how society operates – a 'sociology of human flourishing' – as well as understanding the role of individuals, communities and the state in taking informed action.

Traditional character education makes no obvious commitments to social justice as understood here, nor does it contribute to an understanding of the relationships between individuals, communities and society. Rather, it makes the assumption that a flourishing society is created as a consequence of each individual member of that society pursuing their own understanding of the moral agent. It does not seek to make improvements beyond the level of the individual (Kisby 2017). Character education therefore risks propping up a neoliberal understanding that positions the 'self' as the main locus of change while denying that systemic change is necessary or even possible. Against this perspective, it is vital to recognise that citizenship and social justice fall within the purview of the state and not just that of the individual (Biesta 2008). It is not only the responsibility of atomised individuals or communities to act in the name of social justice and the common good. Similarly, social justice is not a character trait in itself or even the ultimate realisation of 'good character', but rather a process of engaging humanistic qualities at individual, relational, social and political levels. I propose that this critique of character education reveals a potential 'third way',

which involves investigating the possibility of a symbiotic relationship between social justice and a ‘socially just citizenry’.

Conclusion

In examining character education from a social justice perspective, this paper makes an effort to work with the promise of character education, namely, that the virtues of good character are the source of human flourishing (Jubilee Centre 2017). However, the paper finds little hope in the traditional form of character education, such as that outlined by the Jubilee Centre, on the basis that it does not make a serious attempt to contribute to social justice or indeed a dispositional understanding of the ‘socially just citizen’. Mobilising character education towards a social justice agenda would demand a fundamental shift in the philosophical underpinnings of character education; something that may well be beyond the ability or indeed the wishes of the character education movement and its proponents, given that a significant amount of resources have already been committed to the iteration of character education being promoted by the Jubilee Centre. In which case, it may prove more sensible to avoid character education altogether and to incorporate the idea of the ‘socially just citizen’ into another field such as citizenship education.

Attempting to align character education with a social justice agenda may seem like an exercise in fitting a round peg into a square hole. Previous authors have argued, quite convincingly, that traditional character education is incompatible with concerns for social justice. However it is precisely this apparent incompatibility that may lend itself to addressing the kinds of dilemmas alluded to by Francis et al (2017) regarding the responses in educational policy to the liberal/conservative divide. This is why, I argue, that we should not ‘throw the baby out with the bath water’. It seems clear that part of the purposes of education should be to equip children and young people with the “knowledge, skills, values and attitudes they need to engage in civic and political activity so as to address important issues of concern to them” (Kisby 2017: 17) and that such efforts can be seen as part of broader attempts to achieving social justice. However, we should also avoid prioritising personal responsibility at the expense of social justice. I find that character education as it currently exists tends to do exactly that.

In this paper, I have argued that social justice theory firstly offers a method of critiquing character education, and secondly offers a framework which could resolve some of the main criticisms directed at character education. I have suggested that it may be possible to use social justice theory to construct a dispositional understanding of the ‘socially just citizen’ which could inform the values and attitudes that educational efforts seek to shape. In reviewing the literature covering some of the main approaches to character education, particularly as promoted by the Jubilee Centre, I conclude that traditional approaches to character education fall short in terms of their ability to contribute to a wider social justice agenda, highlighting some potential risks that character education poses to social justice. My hope is that this critique offers an understanding of the political underpinnings of character education, and perhaps education more generally.

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