Lessons in character education: Incorporating neoliberal learning in classroom resources.

Abstract

This article examines a number of teaching resources produced by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, the leading centre for character education in the UK, in the light of the claim advanced by Kristján Kristjánsson, the centre's deputy director, that various criticisms of character education are best regarded as 'myths'. The analysis provided in this article highlights significant shortcomings with these teaching resources, suggesting that far from being mythical, concerns about character and virtue being unclear, redundant, old fashioned, essentially religious, paternalistic, anti-democratic, anti-intellectual, conservative, individualistic, and relative, would seem, at least in the resources produced by the centre at which Kristjánsson works, to be very well-founded.

Introduction

'Grit', 'resilience' and 'character' are current buzzwords for many politicians, educators and authors around the world. A number of bestselling North American books have praised the benefits of individual character development, variously promoting perseverance, curiosity and self-control (Tough, 2013), persistence and resilience (Duckworth, 2016), a growth mindset enabling children to bounce back from adversity (Dweck, 2012), and the nurture of 'eulogy virtues' (Brooks, 2016). Considerable interest in character education has been seen in a number of countries, including Canada, Australia, Singapore, Japan and Taiwan (e.g. Winton, 2008; Cranston et al., 2010; Tan and Tan, 2014; Arthur et al., 2017; Kristjánsson, 2015).

Several UK politicians support character education, most notably former Secretaries of State for Education Nicky Morgan (2017) and Damian Hinds (2019). The Department for Education (DfE) has promoted 'resilience', 'grit' and 'self-efficacy' as part of a social mobility agenda (Morgan, 2017), and has provided in excess of £14 million in grants to character education projects (Marshall et al., 2017). In addition, a chain of Academy schools has been established to promote character (Allen and Bull, 2018), a teachers' association for character education has been established (www.character-education.org.uk), the school inspection service has incorporated character in its inspection handbook (Ofsted, 2019) and the DfE has published benchmarks for schools (DfE, 2019).

The UK's leading centre for the promotion of character education is the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham. By 2017 the centre had received over £16 million from the controversial philanthropic organization the John Templeton Foundation (Allen and Bull, 2018, p.6), which supports synergies between religion and science, the development of moral character and the promotion of free markets (Bains, 2011). Allen and Bull (2018) examine the Jubilee Centre's role in the emergence and development of a UK character education policy community, including a range of politicians, academics, philanthropists and think tanks seeking to influence government policy. They argue that this network's agenda reflects the priorities of the John Templeton Foundation, promoting individualistic, free-market and socially conservative ideas.

To some extent the criticisms of character education in Britain reflect the general arguments against character education (see the discussion of Kristjánsson below) but there are two inter-connected lines of critique that stand out as significant: first that character tends to favour the status quo, and second that it does so through misrepresenting social issues as individual moral issues. These can both be seen as elements of broader neoliberal developments in education policy (and social policy more generally). In relation to the first problem, Suissa (2015) criticises character education for its focus on the development of personal character traits, which tends to promote the idea that individuals must develop the personal capability to cope with adversity. This reflects Kohn's (1997) argument that character education assumes adults need to 'fix the kids' rather than attend to structural inequalities. Such criticism responds directly to UK policymakers' framing of character as a route to social

mobility. In relation to the second problem, Bates (2019) has argued that the individualised focus of character distorts moral education because it detracts from the importance of intersubjective relationships as the basis of moral action. To some extent this reflects virtue ethicists concern with an individual's 'good character' rather than on their actions in context (Jerome and Kisby, 2019). This individualised perspective ultimately excludes a political understanding of social problems, and therefore undermines the possibility of social rather than merely individual change (Suissa, 2015; Kisby, 2017).

Spohrer and Bailey (2018) deepen this critique using Foucault's work on 'governmentality' and 'biopolitics' (see Burchell et al., 1991) which is concerned with the governmental techniques deployed to administer the life of a given population, and which attempt to shape citizen behaviour to create governable subjects. Whilst there are historical precedents in Victorian social reformers' attitudes to the poor (Taylor, 2018, p.6), Spohrer and Bailey (2018) argue that character education in the current British context indicates a shift in the governance of citizens that increasingly draws on biological and psychological understandings of how individuals can improve their own economic position in society (Ecclestone, 2012). This article answers their call for a critical debate about the 'assumptions and values' that underpin contemporary forms of character education. It does this through a detailed examination of the teaching materials produced by the Jubilee Centre so as to scrutinise the ideas driving character educators and how these manifest themselves in these resources.

Kristjánsson's defence of character education

A varied literature defending character education has emerged alongside, and often in response to, this growing critique. One common response is to argue that a closer reading of Aristotle can provide a better balanced model of character education (Hart, forthcoming), for example, Peterson (2019) draws on the concepts of civic virtue and deliberation, to answer the critics' concerns that character education pays insufficient attention to the political realm. Curren (2017) takes a different approach and rejects current policy definitions (such as perseverance and resilience) to embrace a much wider account of character, which (somewhat unexpectedly) incorporates policy promoting fundamental British values. Whilst the to and fro of debate helps to clarify

the points of contention / refine character education (depending on one's perspective), these defences also highlight how the type of character education promoted by its advocates is relatively fast-changing. Whilst one can engage in further theoretical debate about whether these revised models really do overcome the problems identified by critics, it leaves open the question about whether character education programmes ever really embody these increasingly nuanced philosophical solutions.

In order to explore that issue, this article focuses on what Kristjánsson regarded as 'Ten Myths about Character, Virtue and Virtue Education' (Kristjánsson, 2013). By articulating and countering these myths he attempted to establish a robust case in defence of character education. As he is Deputy Director of the Jubilee Centre, we use Kristjánsson's own criteria to critically evaluate some of the classroom teaching resources developed there.

Kristjánsson (2013) defends character education against a number of criticisms: character and virtue are unclear; redundant; old fashioned; essentially religious; paternalistic; anti-democratic and anti-intellectual; conservative; individualistic; relative; and situation specific. In the space available it is difficult to do justice to his whole argument, but the following synopsis provides a sense of the lines he pursues.

First, he argues that education abounds with unclear concepts, and we just have to theorise them, and develop practice around them (p. 270).

Second, he notes that there has been a general a rise in new ways to talk about the self (such as self-esteem or self-efficacy), but we still talk about general qualities such as compassion, fairness, loyalty etc., which indicates some abiding recognition that virtues are significant. From this he draws the conclusion that character is not redundant because it is valuable to provide a vocabulary for naming and discussing these important phenomena (p. 273).

Third, Kristjánsson contends that, far from being old-fashioned, virtue ethics is actually now a mainstream contemporary approach to moral philosophy, claiming that it is now "the moral theory of choice" (p. 274) in medicine and education.

Fourth, he asserts that whilst religions generally include an account of character and virtue, it is equally possible to conceive of them outside of religious traditions, for example through Aristotle's account of Eudaimonia (where our goal is human flourishing).

Fifth, he argues that some form of character education in schools is inevitable because character is formed through interactions with others, which are an intrinsic part of school life. The only real choice is therefore whether one plans a character education programme purposefully, or simply leaves it to chance (p. 276).

Sixth, Kristjánsson does recognise that there is a problematic leap between the "inculcation of character by means of repeated action under outside guidance" and the production of "critical independent moral choosers" (p. 277). He recognises that Aristotle does not sufficiently account for this, but suggests that phronesis, developed through reasoning and reflection on action, is the essential explanation because "truly virtuous persons not only perform the right actions, but they perform them for the right reasons and from the right motives" (p. 277). This need to give reasons also prevents character education, he argues, from being anti-intellectual.

Seventh, Kristjánsson acknowledges that in America character education has often been linked to the conservative right, but he contends that this is not a necessary connection and that virtue ethics is entirely compatible with a progressive or reformist political outlook (pp. 278-9).

Eighth, in relation to the idea that character education is excessively individualistic, he argues that in part this reflects a pragmatic approach to teaching, in that it is simply easier to start with the individual in school than with a discussion about society as a whole (p. 279). He also points out that Aristotle is not an individualist and recognises that we are social animals and that the good life requires participation in a collective public life.

Ninth, Kristjánsson argues that character and virtues are obviously universal, although he concedes specific behaviours may vary with time or place.

Finally, he deals with the situationist critique largely by dismissing the methodology of the situationists, arguing they tend to focus on exaggerated or unusual situations to make their point (p. 282). Whilst it is true that behaviour is inevitably a result of individual characteristics and situational factors, he says, we need to ask what an actor intends and why, in order to truly judge their actions, and this brings us back to character.

Methodology

The Jubilee Centre holds in excess of 5,000 documents on its website, so it is not feasible to conduct a comprehensive analysis of all of the output. Our selection of resources has been driven by Kristjánsson's argument. For each pair of 'myths' discussed above, we have identified some key questions and selected resources that appeared to be most relevant to those questions. We were looking for resources that focused on the issues raised by Kristjánsson and which offered specific activities and material to use in the classroom with students (as opposed to general advice to teachers). Once the selection of resources had been made, we undertook a more detailed second reading, during which the text was annotated to highlight areas where the key question was being addressed, or where the resources reflected particular issues emerging from Kristjánsson's discussion. This approach draws on An and Suh's work (2013) which similarly used questions derived from their critical discussion of the relevant literature to investigate the ideological interpretations evident in classroom resources. To illustrate how we selected resources, in relation to the first category (character is an unclear and redundant concept) we were aware that Kristjánsson has argued that moral educators should revert to medieval and ancient texts because:

> modernist literature has long since given up on the idea of moral didactics and… postmodern literature has relinquished altogether the emancipatory impulse for self-knowledge and self-clarification (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 160).

We therefore selected two of the 'classic' stories from the *Knightly Virtues* pack to explore the extent to which the resources sustained a clear and consistent interpretation of the virtues they were supposed to illustrate. This seemed to us to take Kristjánsson's intentions and educational aspirations seriously.

This approach was devised to focus on some particularly apposite examples, as a form of purposive sampling (Neumann, 2011) to provide a litmus test for the criteria established by Kristjánsson. Whilst the resources selected for review were considered with specific questions in mind (see table 1) there was also a guiding question: do the educational resources fulfil the promise of Kristjánsson's defence?

Table 1. Summary of questions and resources selected for review

[INSERT TABLE HERE]

Problems with the teaching resources

In the next section we discuss our analysis of these resources. We argue that the materials promoted by the Jubilee Centre almost entirely fail to live up to the standards established by Kristjánsson and that far from being myths, these established criticisms of character education guide us to some problems at the heart of their education programmes. In addition, our analysis leads us to formulate a new criticism, that the process of translating virtue ethics into character education lessons may itself be a problematic step – one which is generally overlooked in the literature which is largely concerned with philosophical critique.

Unclear and redundant

One of the starting points for the Jubilee Centre's work is that children lack a language for engaging with character and virtue and so many of the resources aim to explicitly teach relevant vocabulary. For example, *The Knightly Virtues* project is based on the virtues of humility, honesty, love, service, courage, justice, self-discipline, and gratitude (Jubilee Centre n.d. a) illustrated through a series of stories about heroic individuals (Jubilee Centre n.d. b). The evaluation report clarifies that the key objective of this project is to enhance "virtue literacy", comprising virtue knowledge, reasoning, and practice (Arthur et al. 2014, p. 9).

The stories in these resources have been adapted "to highlight certain issues and are not an accurate historical record" (Jubilee Centre n.d. c), for example, in the story of Joan of Arc, some "incidents have not been included in the story presented in the pack as the political and religious dimensions of Joan's trial are very complex and demanding for pupils to understand" (Jubilee Centre n.d. b, p. 104). This is justified by Aristotle's argument that narrative has the "power to illuminate moral aspects of human motivation" and MacIntyre's argument that stories provide an essential context for understanding moral agency (Arthur et al. 2014, p. 9).

As an example of this selectivity at work, the narrator of the Joan of Arc story comments how unusual it was for a girl to dress as a boy and cut her hair short (Jubilee

Centre n.d. b, p. 112), but there is no similar qualification or comment about how usual it was to hear messages from God relayed through the voices of angels. Joan's visions and premonitions are recounted as facts, "Joan had accomplished all that her voices said she would. She had served her country and its King faultlessly" (p. 117). This enables the narrator to conclude that:

> Joan was a true and honourable woman who always put other's needs before her own and gave her life in the service of her country. She was courageous, brave and showed tremendous fearlessness in the face of danger. I hope you… can understand how doing things for the benefit of others, even when you might be scared or nervous, can benefit the greater good (p. 117).

Even these simplified stories fail to sustain a clear focus on the virtues. The story of Joan of Arc is supposed to demonstrate courage, but fails to reflect on the fact that she died for a king who betrayed her, based on a religiously inspired vision, which may well be a symptom of mental illness. The moral lessons are far from clear and elsewhere in the Jubilee Centre's resources they argue that 'over-doing' the virtue of courage could be seen in acts which display "hallmarks of ostentation… which may lead to significant harm and damage for the individual" (Wright et al. n.d. a, p. 6) – this might at least lead one to wonder whether Joan had similarly strayed from the golden mean. These resources seem not to sustain a clear focus on the concepts they seek to promote, indicating that these moralising stories might be more challenging to teach than Kristjánsson implies.

The authors of the *Knightly Virtues* evaluation report argue that mastery of such virtues terminology is essential because "no conduct could be considered truly virtuous without some meaningful grasp of what this, and related moral terms, mean" (Arthur et al., 2014, p. 9). It seems strange then, that the evidence indicates no statistically significant improvement in pupils' knowledge of virtue concepts, but a significant rise in their application of them, which, according to the preceding argument, seems illogical. Regardless, the evaluation evidence demonstrates that there is very little positive impact even in relation to the rather limited aspiration to teach specialist vocabulary through stories.

Old-fashioned and religious

In the secondary curriculum resources a lesson on the virtue of self-mastery starts with this statement: "those who can exercise the virtue of self-mastery particularly well have an excellent relationship with all of life's sensual pleasures, including food, drink and, in its proper context, sex" (Wright et al. n.d. b, p. 1). The resource advises pupils to look for the emotional triggers, which might alert them to the need for this virtue:

> When you recognise a desire for pleasurable things, such as food, drink, sex, amusement or knowledge. If these desires are so strong that you feel overpowered by them, then you need to practice the virtue of self-mastery; or if your desires towards these things disgust or pain you (p. 2).

The authors note that some "failures in self-mastery can be the result of pathological medical or mental health issues, rather than moral failings" and cite examples such as alcoholism, eating disorders or, rather bizarrely, the "wish to eat humans, coal or dirt… Or desire to have sex with blood relatives, children or animals" (p. 3). However, having acknowledged that some behaviours are linked to mental health problems or addiction, the resource swiftly moves on to a paired discussion task in which pupils are asked to consider whether drug addiction, cigarette addiction, and X-box addiction are examples of illness or moral failing. To help them with their deliberations the pupils are prompted to consider what is "the chief difference between an illness and a moral failing?" And, "if addiction can be changed without medication, is it really an illness?" (p. 4).

No further information is provided for the task, which therefore seems likely to simply recycle pre-existing knowledge and prejudices, instead of developing more informed opinions. The three examples of addiction are clearly very different – in what sense is an addiction to gaming the same as an addiction to heroin? Nevertheless, providing the three examples without overtly problematizing that slippery term 'addiction' seems likely to create the impression that all are similar phenomena. The guidance also misleadingly suggests that the definition of an illness is that it is treated with medication. Clearly one cannot treat excessive on-line gaming with medication, therefore if all these cases are equivalent, then the pupil is being led to a similar conclusion about them all. It seems to us that this activity actually serves to marginalise or discount mental illness as distinct from physical illness and it leads pupils to focus on moral failings.

Later in the resource we return to sexual morality with the observation that,

> It is also important to note that to enjoy any wrong object at all is to enjoy it too much. So, if I enjoy… alcohol under the age of 18, or sex outside the context of permanence, then I have erred… They are simply not objects that are fitting for that stage of my life… Similarly, to drink weed-killer for pleasure is to err grossly (p. 5).

This raises several reasonable questions: Why is having a respectful consensual (temporary) sexual relationship erring? Why is having a glass of wine with dinner wrong? And how is either of these comparable to poisoning oneself? This seems to get to the heart of the problem with these resources specifically, and with character education in general. Its attraction is that it enables adults to promote a substantive ethical position, as Kristjánsson explains, it "requires direct teaching about the nature of the well-rounded life," but this inevitably opens up a "can of worms" (2016, p. 485). It may well be that Kristjánsson feels it is possible to navigate these difficulties without defaulting to old-fashioned or religious morality, but it is difficult to see these moral judgements as not simply reflecting the sexual mores of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Perhaps to compound this connection, there is an information box at this point in the resource to discuss the productive nature of shame, which notes that "shame can contribute a great deal to growth in the virtue of self-control" (Wright et al. n.d. b, p. 5).

In brief then, this resource informs pupils that desire is generally a trigger emotion for the need for self-mastery; that sex and alcohol in particular (for children below the age of 18) are always wrong; and that feelings of shame will help them. Further it strongly implies that addiction is generally a moral failing rather than a genuine health problem. By contrast, we would argue that it is perfectly possible to develop a defensible moral position which recognises the sexuality of teenagers and the role of respectful, consensual sexual relationships; and to acknowledge that alcohol consumption should be learned about in social and familial settings. We also recognise that much contemporary policy around addiction recognises it is a health issue rather than a moral one. To assert a position of denial and abstinence is morally contentious and potentially dangerous because abstinence programmes often produce a raft of unintended negative health results (Advocates for Youth, 2007).

Paternalistic, anti-democratic and anti-intellectual

Kristjánsson et al. (2017) report on the impact of a resource pack aimed at promoting gratitude and other related 'allocentric' virtues. This includes a teachers' handbook *Growing Gratitude* (Jubilee Centre n.d. d) and an accompanying student workbook *St Oscar's Oscars* (Jubilee Centre n.d. e), and a second teacher handbook on *Cultivating Compassion* (Jubilee Centre n.d. f) with a related student workbook on *The Good Samaritan* (Jubilee Centre n.d. g). These resources promote a particular type of process, one that might be seen to encourage the reflection and reasoning that is said to develop phronesis. Pupils are required to write thank you letters, keep a gratitude journal, undertake gratitude re-framing exercises, and also to engage in Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM) activities – several of which are drawn from forms of therapy (Zeng et al., 2015).

In these activities the focus is internal and emotional. In one lesson, pupils are encouraged to find news stories featuring people in pain or distress, and then to imagine they are the suffering person, and resolve what they can do to help (Jubilee Centre n.d. f, pp. 17-19). In another lesson, pupils are encouraged to meditate on a golden light and to imagine standing in the warm glow with friends (Jubilee Centre n.d. f, pp. 9-11). In another activity pupils are asked to recall incidents which have been challenging and to "find ways to be thankful for what happened to me now even though I was not at the time it happened" (Jubilee Centre n.d. d, p. 12). Rather than seeking to develop young people's moral reasoning, the activities seem to intensify pupils' feelings to underscore an ethical principle. The moral conclusions are pre-determined – one should empathise with others' suffering, nurture a feeling of common humanity, and find the silver lining in the dark cloud. But none of that opens up the genuinely contentious moral territory associated with these issues – why do people suffer, and why do most of us live our everyday lives without worrying about that suffering? Why are some people's lives blighted with hardship and suffering, and what are the structural inequalities that influence this? What should be done about it individually and collectively?

If phronesis represents a form of practical wisdom, there is little in these resources that seems to seriously encourage it. The ethical conclusions are already made, indeed some of these stories are so one-dimensional that there is really no room for pupils to engage, reflect and form their own opinion. Pupils are led to obvious conclusions, encouraged to reflect on why these are right, and then further encouraged

to identify these right responses with emotional responses. Writing in another context, Kemmis has commented that we can sometimes invoke phronesis as "magical powers possessed by sages and superheroes" (Kemmis, 2012, p. 153) in order to fill the gap between what we know and what we want. In this case it seems that Kristjánsson requires phronesis to bridge the gap between behavioural training and moral wisdom, but on the basis of these resources, that seems unlikely.

Conservative and individualistic

The *Knightly Virtues* pack includes a case study of Rosa Parks, the black American Civil Rights campaigner (Jubilee Centre n.d. b). In the children's version of the story, there is a section that briefly mentions that Parks married and returned to college. But in her own autobiographical account it is much more evident that her marriage and education were overtly political acts – she describes falling in love with her husband because he was the only black man she had met who was not afraid of white people and describes him as the first real activist she ever met. Her decision to return to college was also influenced by her husband's belief that education was vital for black people and she mentions the importance of her educational experiences in the NAACP, thus clearly linking her educational experiences and her political commitment. The rewritten story is not just a simplified text, it is an essentially de-politicised text, in which important life decisions are stripped of their political connection. This means that justice (defined in this resource as having "an understanding of what it is to uphold what is right") becomes a personal characteristic rather than a political issue, or a feature of society.

In this example we see how the focus on individual character and virtues actually distorts the narrative, focusing the pupils' attention on the personal, emotional dimension to the story (falling in love, being brave and standing up) and away from the political dimension (marrying an activist, educating oneself in activist methods, becoming a political organiser). One may seek to justify this on pedagogic grounds (although we would disagree), for example, by contending that the individual motivation and simplified narrative are easier for young readers to understand; but it would be naïve to think that the story does not excessively individualise and de-politicise the events.

We think this problem runs deeper than a misguided attempt to make a complicated story more accessible, as can be seen if we turn to consider a research

instrument employed by the Jubilee Centre in an investigation of character in UK schools (Arthur et al., 2015). Because character education is premised on the belief that there are right or wrong ethical decisions (not just variously sound ethical decision-making procedures), the research includes the Ad-ICM questionnaire (adolescent intermediate concept measure) to gauge pupils' ability to make the right decisions. Pupils are presented with stories and a range of possible actions and justifications for them. Their answers are compared to those recommended by an expert panel and a score is calculated to reflect how close they come to the expert answers. In one scenario a girl is invited to join the school gymnastics team (Arthur et al., 2015, p. 33). Whilst this is a great opportunity for her, she is concerned that the teacher in charge uses photos of the girls he considers to be good-looking to get publicity for the team, and she feels this goes against her beliefs and values. In brief the options presented are:

(1) Quit and explain why.
(2) Complete the tasks but clarify publicly she disagrees with the photos.
(3) Do what her parents think best.
(4) Talk to the teacher to try to stay out of the publicity photos.
(5) Think about the impact on her.
(6) Think about the impact on her friends.
(7) Try to change the publicity photo arrangements.
(8) Carry on.

The justifications available can be summarised as follows:

(1) It's just photos.
(2) It's a great opportunity for an athletics career.
(3) Compromising her values will make her unhappy.
(4) She wouldn't succeed in gymnastics if she was unhappy about the media.
(5) It's better in the long run not to compromise one's values or beliefs.
(6) Others know best.
(7) She has to find a way to deal with such problems.
(8) If she quits someone else will take her place anyway.
(9) Compete, do well, and use her position to negotiate later.
(10) Stand up for her beliefs and strengthen them through sacrifice.
(11) Beliefs come and go but opportunities like this are rare.

It seems to us that there is no right answer, and probably no more convincing justification. One could imagine a young person engaging with this dilemma and devising any number of defensible responses. But what is particularly interesting in relation to this sub-section is that the dilemma is presented as a purely individual one for the girl to deal with. In reality, the problem relates to the male teacher's attitude and action, and the fact that this appears to be condoned by the school management. Indeed, this example brings to mind the horrendous real-life case of Larry Nassar, the team doctor for USA Gymnastics, who was jailed for multiple sexual assaults on teenage gymnasts over years. Accusations by individual gymnasts were not believed and acted upon at the time. In fact, the solution to misogyny is unlikely to be in the hands of a lone teenage gymnast and one might argue that a proper analysis of the problem would require a wider discussion of sexism, of institutional discrimination and prejudice, and of collective action for equality. By posing this as a personal ethical problem, the real solutions and justifications seem to be absent (see also Suissa, 2015 and Winton, 2008). This is not just a focused method, it is a distorted one, and the distortion stems from the focus on character, virtues and the individualised and de-politicised vision this tends to impose.

Relative and situation specific

As we have already seen, character education often relies on case studies and narratives to communicate abiding truths about the virtues, so it seems reasonable to explore how this works in practice. In examining this aspect of the work, we draw on Flyvbjerg's defence of case studies as providing the ideal vehicle for capturing phronesis. He quotes Aristotle:

> Phronesis is not concerned with universals only, it must also take cognizance of particulars, because it is concerned with conduct, and conduct has its sphere in particular circumstances (Aristotle in the Nichomachean Ethics, quoted in Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 70).

This leads Flyvbjerg to conclude that "the judgement, which is central to phronesis…is always context-dependent" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 136). There are two types of approach evident in these resources. Firstly, case studies are distorted and presented out of context, and we have already considered this in relation to Rosa Parks' involvement in

the NAACP; secondly, cases are strewn through lessons like decorations. A secondary lesson on 'Why do good people do bad things?' (Wright et al. n.d. c) provides an example of this second approach. The PowerPoint for this unit starts with a series of activities looking at the meaning of utopia, the bystander effect, the Milgram experiment, and the Good Samaritan before finally alighting on a case study of the London Riots of 2011. The first slide on the riots shows a young person with a scarf over their face and hoody over their head, running in front of a burning car with the starter question "how does what you have learned over the past three sessions help to explain why good people rioted in 2011?" This is followed by the question, "what was lacking in their character?" The lesson then moves directly on to consider the local residents who turned out to clean up the streets the following day, followed by an individual investigation into any resistance movement (focusing on whether one could justify terrorism within that struggle), and then pupils are presented with Niemöller's famous lines about totalitarianism: "First they came for the Socialists and I did not speak out… Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me." Then students are given a definition of tyranny, directed to the Genocide Watch website, and finally asked to reflect on what virtues they would like to develop to help them do good things in difficult situations.

These five lessons set out to guide pupils from initially thinking about moral decisions and the factors that influence us (such as fear of authority), through to the nature of moral heroism, and finally into civic virtues (defined as doing good things in communities). To say the least, this path is plotted through a rather bewildering array of complex case studies – pupils encounter a range of psychological experiments, an example of contemporary urban unrest, volunteering, totalitarianism, genocide, terrorism, political resistance movements from around the world and finally pupils are asked to attempt to distil some personal virtue targets from this conveyor belt of atrocities, all with the supposed focus of considering why good people do bad things. The resources provide almost no context within which actions can be properly understood or judged. By way of contrast, a group of young people affected by the London Riots produced a documentary with young people who were personally involved (Fully Focused online, 2012). This resource provides plenty of scope to reflect on the case study, to consider the actions undertaken and the sense participants made of it. In this context, judging them as good or bad seems rather beside the point.

Conclusion

Spohrer and Bailey's (2018) critique of character education centres on how it is used as a mechanism of neoliberal governmentality, which involves significant state intervention to bring market rationality to as many sites of human activity as possible, with individuals 'disciplined' to act in self-optimising, competitive and individualistic ways (see e.g. Brown, 2003; Gilbert, 2013). Through our critical analysis of teaching resources we have demonstated how they routinely over-simplify and individualise the analysis of social and political situations, and promote an intense form of "self-work" (Gerrard, 2014) blending "emotional regulation, resilience, altruism, [and] responsibility… with positive psychology" (Ecclestone, 2014, p.469). In doing so these resources promote a model of change in which the individual assumes responsibility for their own moral improvement as the precursor to any positive change in the wider world. Justice is rendered a personal character trait, politics largely disappears from view, to be replaced with the search for individual moral improvement. To the extent that the individual is promoted as the main unit of analysis, and political understanding is avoided, we would concur with Spohrer and Bailey's analysis.

Whilst Kristjánsson might believe the resources could be salvaged if they were brought into better alignment with his theoretical model, we believe these flaws reflect some fundamental problems with character education. By focusing on the materials designed for students we have clarified the following lines of critique, some of which have been absent or underplayed in the existing literature. Firstly, we suspect it is difficult for character education in practice not to be excessively focused on individualistic and de-politicised accounts, because these accounts are developed on the basis of individualistic and de-politicised premises, i.e. the philosophy of virtue ethics.

Secondly, we also suspect that the process of 'phronesis' invoked in Kristjánsson's account of character education is providing cover for an inadequate conceptualisation of how a person engages in moral reasoning. Ultimately there is little room for moral reasoning in the classroom if someone else already knows both what a student's answer should be, and what reasons are acceptable. Similarly, there is little incentive for a teacher to develop detailed case studies, reflecting contextually specific phronesis, if they believe that the correct ethical answer is already clearly evident.

Thirdly, it seems to us that there is problematic leap from the foundational ideas in virtue ethics to the practical content of a lesson. McCowan (2009) has observed that

curriculum policy is translated from fairly vague aspirations to increasingly concrete activities and experiences as policy moves from government to mediating institutions, and from those institutions to schools, then through schools to class teachers, and finally from teachers to students. Each of these steps can be seen as a leap from one type of activity to another – from abstract philosophical goals to specific tasks and worksheets. As we have read these resources we have been struck by the idea that, whilst virtue ethics has been criticised for being too vague about what one should do in any given situation (Kisby, 2017) the resources themselves struggle with the opposite problem – they seem all too willing to assert unjustified right answers in any situation. This introduces a new line of critique about the problems of translation and interpretation as one moves from what McCowan (p. 90) calls "ideal ends" to the "real means" of lesson plans and materials. It further suggests that claims to have resolved the problems with character education theoretically should be met with caution, and the materials produced by character advocates should be subjected to equal scrutiny.

Our analysis also raises the question of whether dedicated character lessons should be delivered at all in schools. Interestingly, as Purpel (1997, p.143) notes, advocates of character education often argue that schools inevitably promote values and therefore, directly or indirectly, inevitably engage in character development. It seems then that character educators simply to wish to seize control of how this is done, but the analysis of these resources indicates why such a form of moral education would be deeply conservative. Moreover, as we have argued, their vision of social development is problematic, being premised on the idea that individuals must improve themselves in order to improve society. In contrast, in our view, social progress can best be achieved by engaging young people in collective acts of citizenship, in which political problems are met with political responses.

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