'Swimming against the tide': character education and the importance of recognition

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Teaching children about 'desirable' traits is a nice idea but unlikely to succeed

The rise of character education

As education practitioners will be aware, in recent years, character education (CE) has achieved significant prominence in English primary and secondary schools. For example, Ofsted now deem a high level of resilience, confidence and independence as essential character traits to be instilled in all students as part of the curriculum for personal development.

In 2016, then Education Secretary Nicky Morgan declared that character should not be seen as 'soft' and 'a nice thing to do' but rather as a 'vital part of education'. Morgan introduced Character Education Awards for school initiatives such as a 'can do' attitude training for pupils, 'passports' to develop character and good behaviour schemes to help children reach their 'ideal selves'. In 2019, the DfE 'Character Education: Framework Guidance' reinforced this narrative, linking 'clear expectations on behaviour' and 'well-planned provision for character' to schools' promoting 'good mental wellbeing'.

This central government focus on character education is supported by the multi-million pound education market which is awash with digital apps designed to regulate children's emotions and off-the-shelf resources for teaching 'desirable' traits such as resilience or 'grit'. However, as teachers will be aware, these developments in character education are taking place against a backdrop of increasing alarm about students' mental well-being under the pressures of an excessive examination regime and now the Covid-19 pandemic. In this context, mainstream approaches to character education, aimed at 'producing' self-reliant, resilient, high-achieving individuals, are superficial and misguided (Bates 2019). Rather than mitigating the growing psychological pressures on children, they may at best offer temporary relief to some students and at worst be counterproductive.

The problems with focusing on 'desirable' traits

The core aim of mainstream CE is the 'production' of the 'ideal' character through the explicit teaching *about* character and the promotion of the new 'three Rs': *resilience*, *respect* and *responsibility*. However, the preoccupation with

instilling in children 'desirable' traits such as competitiveness, coping skills, self-reliance and 'grit', based on a notion of an idealised individual, carries considerable psychological risk.

For example, consider the impact on children of the contradictory dynamic in which the ramping up of examination pressure takes place in parallel with promoting the individual child's resilience skills to cope. For the low achiever, the unstated assumption is that the individual must bear personal responsibility for dealing with his 'failure' thus risking a further lowering of self-esteem, together with rising anxiety and depression. The 'Good Childhood Report' (2020) found that the UK's fifteen year olds are the unhappiest in Europe and cited 'fear of failure' as a key factor. Conversely, the high-achieving students' self-esteem may be further reinforced but at the cost of them becoming self-absorbed with little regard for others.

No doubt high-profile politicians, corporate executives and high-flying hedge fund managers possess ample reserves of self-confidence and 'grit' but what happens when these 'desirable' character traits become divorced from moral values and concern for others? Current approaches to character education have, in large part, borrowed from positive psychology and emotional intelligence that have powered the so-called 'happiness industry' (Davies 2016). An alternative set of ideas is required in order to construct an approach to CE which rejects this narrow focus on the individual and teaching *about* character. One such attempt is the work of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, which draws on Aristotelian virtue ethics and has expanded its influence on UK character education in recent years. Whilst seeking to connect character education to a moral purpose, it nonetheless repeats the problem of pursuing 'desirable' traits ('virtues') in individuals albeit with a 'moral dimension'. Similar to other mainstream CE approaches, it fails to

take proper account of the interpersonal relationships and social structures *within* and *through* which the character of the child develops.

Putting *recognition* at the centre

Axel Honneth's ([1996](#)) work on *recognition* is presented [in my paper](#) as a source of ideas from which a different, more realistic and more humane approach to character education might be constructed. In agreement with many social theorists, Honneth argues that the identities and characters of individuals are formed through interpersonal relationships of mutual dependence, i.e. interdependence. In the context of nurturing, supportive relationships, a young child experiences a spontaneous empathy for others, before learning to apply a cognitive appraisal of their worth.

This notion of empathetic engagement is radically different from its understanding in positive psychology or emotional intelligence. According to Honneth, empathy is not a cognitive, calculative engagement deployed for the purposes of relationship management or individual gain but a mode of *recognition* where recognising the vulnerability in ourselves and others leads to an appreciation of our mutual dependence. Before the child reaches school age, her basic level of self-confidence has been achieved through her relationship with her parents. If it is a caring relationship, her basic self-confidence will be built. Conversely, the *misrecognition* of her vulnerability through physical or emotional parental neglect will damage her basic self-confidence. Therefore, it is argued, just as good parenting is premised on an appreciation of a child's vulnerability, in the school context, strong emotional support rather than 'regulation' becomes critical.

This understanding challenges popular notions of producing resilient, respectful, responsible, self-reliant individuals whilst neglecting the *recognition* of children as vulnerable. The instilling of 'desirable' traits which lies at the centre of mainstream CE, negates the mutual dependence learnt in infancy and early childhood in favour of regulating or suppressing negative thoughts and emotions, even though they are an integral aspect of everyday human experience. Honneth would argue that this is inherently unhealthy because it neglects the first mode of *recognition*: empathy with the vulnerability of others.

Honneth's argument for the priority of *recognition* contains two other modes of *recognition*: self-esteem (which corresponds to social esteem) and self-respect (which corresponds to cognitive respect). Both of them are vital in supporting students' self-confidence and mental well-being. These modes of *recognition* are dependent on interpersonal and social relations relating to friends, family, school

and the wider community. The development of self-esteem is closely linked to relationships in which the student is recognised for his individual, unique personal qualities rather than for what he is expected to achieve at school. However, mainstream CE conceives of the individual child not in terms of his intrinsic self-worth or unique qualities but in terms of a predetermined set of standardised, ostensibly 'objective' criteria that can be measured in some way. The 'desirable' traits approach elevates positive traits such as self-reliance but inhibits and even disrespects traits and emotions that do not fit with the standardised 'ideal', such as vulnerability, caring or justified anger.

The third mode of *recognition* proposed by Honneth is cognitive respect, which arises in the public realm. This relates to the *recognition* of inclusive legal rights that enhance the development in young people of self-respect and moral responsibility. Conversely, political decisions such as the ending of free university education and the further tripling of tuition fees in 2010 are examples of *disrespect* through a structural exclusion from higher education of young people in less advantaged sections of the community. To learn respect, students need to be respected, as citizens rather than 'customers' in a higher education market. Similarly, off-rolling students who fail to meet the demands of 'zero tolerance' behaviour policies and the ensuing 'scandal of ever increasing exclusions' is a manifestation of an education system underpinned by *disrespect* rather than *recognition*. Such political actions and school practices disrespect the rights of young people as citizens with a right to education. Indeed, the absence of a proper treatment of citizenship in the curriculum is indicative of how the political context in which young people's moral responsibilities develop has been erased from mainstream CE programmes (Suissa 2015).

Character education in an age of crisis

In terms of 'swimming against the tide', the world has rarely looked so bleak for children and young people as it does today. Not only do millions of children experience an education system dominated by an excessive examination regime but on leaving school go on to accumulate university debt or face low-paid, precarious work or unemployment or all three. Little wonder that a mental health crisis amongst children and young people continues to grow. It is clear that reducing character to 'desirable' traits divorced from morality, human interdependence and social context is likely to be of limited value.

So where does this critique of mainstream CE and Honneth's work on *recognition* take us in terms of an alternative approach to curriculum and pedagogy in an age of crisis? Firstly, at the heart of an alternative approach is the

principle of supporting character formation *through* relationships
of *recognition* rather than teaching *about* character in a 'Victorian pulpit style'
([Jerome and Kisby 2019](#)). Secondly, educating students in their legal and moral
rights and obligations calls for a focus on citizenship education, where 'good'
character is a by-product of democratic debate and socially-oriented action.
Thirdly, character education needs to be seen within its social and political
contexts and the manifestations of *disrespect* (as the 'opposite' of *recognition*),
such as those mentioned above, have to be challenged. Improving individual
character cannot be the responsibility of schools alone but must be supported by
government policies that set out to improve students' well-being
by *recognising* their intrinsic worth and respecting their rights as young citizens.

About the author

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