Democracy & Education

## How Teaching Virtues Became a Movement.

A Book Review of *The Rise of Character Education in Britain: Heroes, Dragons, and the Myths of Character*

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The character education movement has a long history, but it has spread like wildfire in the 21st century. Educators and politicians—both conservative and liberal—are enamored with the idea that cultivating habits such as respect, responsibility, grit, and growth mindset will create upright citizens and high achievers. As of 2014, 80% of states in the U.S. had "mandates regarding character education" and interest in schools' contribution to "moral development and character formation" has grown internationally (Nucci, Narvaez, & Krettenauer, 2014, p. 1). Statements and resources supporting character education can be found on countless websites, including those of the U.S. Department of Education, the National Education Association, school networks, and of course the Character Education Partnership, an advocacy coalition of organizations and individuals.

Importantly, character education is interpreted in different ways and takes many forms, including moral development, values education, social and emotional learning, ethics, military training, and service learning. The field is full of controversy, for example, between those that aim to instill traditional virtues versus those that emphasize moral reasoning based on principles of justice (Nucci, Narvaez, & Krettenauer, 2014). Education scholars have challenged specific concepts, such as Angela Duckworth's "grit" (Mehta, 2015; Ris, 2015), as well as research findings. But anecdotal evidence suggests that character education has a strong foothold in the curriculum and may even encroach upon academic subjects such as social studies.
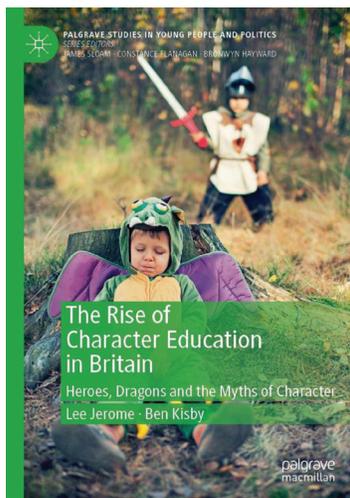
How are we to understand what the character education movement is all about? How did it become so popular? What does its curriculum look like? And what is its educational impact?

Lee Jerome and Ben Kisby answer these questions in a bold and brilliant book called *The Rise of Character Education in Britain: Heroes, Dragons, and the Myths of Character*. Focusing specifically on the character education movement in Britain, they dissect its theoretical foundation, explain its ascendancy, analyze its curricula, and examine its results. They make explicit connections to other countries and the United States in particular. The authors construct a compelling argument that character education clashes with education for democracy. They offer an alternative—democratic citizenship education that develops political literacy and agency.

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The book's core argument is that character education in Britain claims to be a panacea for improving individual children's life chances as well as an array of societal problems. But with its deeply flawed ideology, curricula, and research, it is not just a well-funded, government-supported "land grab" in the field of education. It also is dangerous. In one way, character education harkens back to the Victorian era's use of moralistic lessons, imbued with conservative Christian values and traditional masculinity, to address major social problems such as poverty. But along with its masked indoctrination of certain values, it perpetuates a deficit model in which victims are blamed for problems that in fact represent systemic and structural injustices.

By inculcating the ideology that individuals are responsible for their well-being (or lack thereof), which includes being successful in a highly competitive global economy, the character education movement takes responsibility off the government for social and economic inequalities. Instead, it puts the onus on individuals to change their circumstances by becoming virtuous persons. The fact that character education programs are especially popular in schools serving students living in poverty underscores the insidious intent of politicians who support these programs and espouse this ideology.

The book is organized in three parts. Part I (Chapters 2 and 3) conceptualizes and contextualizes character education. The first chapter critically examines its theoretical underpinnings. Traditional character education is based on Aristotle's virtue ethics, which elevates particular habits as central to a flourishing life. Different from consequentialist ethical theories, the essential question of virtue ethics is "What sort of person should I be," rather than "What should I do?" The aim of education is to instill virtuous habits, such as resilience and bravery.

The authors argue that virtues ethics is problematic for several reasons. First, it does not provide guidance about handling moral dilemmas. It does not recognize cultural differences. It does not account for influences on a person's development that are outside their control nor does it consider the major role that situations play in individuals' moral behavior. It promotes individualistic rather than collective approaches to social and political problems—a person's moral improvement is the path to overcoming adversity.

Jerome and Kisby (2019) explain that the philosophy of character education clashes with that of citizenship in a pluralistic society. John Rawls represented the latter, when he said that rather than ask the ancient philosophers' question of "How should I live?" we must ask, "How can we live together in society given that there are different answers to that question?" The virtues ethics philosophy also conflicts with social justice. Referencing Kohn's (1997) essay, the authors show that character education programs "proceed by attempting to 'fix the kids' rather than advocating structural changes to the broader social environment" (p. 23).

Jerome and Kisby (2019) claim that programs designed to inculcate virtues such as resilience and grit displace attention from real societal injustices (such as racism in employment, housing, law, and education). These programs ignore structural inequalities and align with the "responsibilisation [sic]" agenda of British government: "the need for citizens to take increasing personal responsibility for their own individual educational, health and welfare needs" (p. 24).

Virtues ethics philosophy as realized in character education animates the "no excuses" approach adopted by school networks such as KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program). KIPP is the largest charter school network in the U.S. It serves mostly Black and Latinx young people from low-income communities. Students are held to high expectations for academic performance and behavior, and discipline is strict. Critics of KIPP schools say they are paternalistic and punitive, with high attrition rates. The controversy surrounding the no-excuses approach is politically, racially, and socioeconomically charged (Cody, 2013) and resonates with Jerome and Kisby's (2019) argument.

Chapter 3 chronicles the rise of character education in British education policy since 2010 and links it with the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition government. Funding for character education was rationalized by politicians, who framed it as a solution to concerns about youth attitudes and low achievement in "deprived" areas. This framing was supported by Prime Minister David Cameron's rhetoric in response to the riots of August 2011, which stressed people's weak moral character and the role of education in society.

At the time, Cameron was concerned about global competition. Education Secretary Nicky Morgan (2014–2016) promoted the idea that character education would produce future workers for a new, technology-based, global economy. Concurrently, popular books by U.S. authors David Brooks, Paul Tough, Carol Dweck, and Angela Duckworth touted the "individualization (sic) of success, and therefore failure" (Jerome & Kisby, 2019, p. 37). Support for character education among politicians, psychologists, authors, and policy makers in the U.S. and Britain was mutually reinforcing.

Jerome and Kisby (2019) explain that the center of the "character education community" in Britain is the controversial John Templeton Foundation (JTF), which "supports synergies between religion and science, the development of moral character and the promotion of free markets" (p. 41). Its founder, John Templeton, was an American-born billionaire who escaped paying taxes by moving to the Bahamas, renouncing his U.S. citizenship, and becoming a British citizen. JTF has supported two major initiatives—the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham and the Narnian Virtues Character Education English Curriculum project at the University of Leeds. The Jubilee Centre promotes character education across the country.

Building upon the revealing contextual foundation laid out in Part I, Part II (Chapters 4 and 5) is a fascinating window into teaching resources and programs. The authors analyze character education curricular content as well as evaluations on their impact. Chapter 4 focuses on the *Knightly Virtues* project produced by the Jubilee Centre, which purports to teach the virtues of "humility, honesty, love, service, courage, justice, self-discipline, and gratitude" (Jerome & Kisby, 2019, p. 60). The center's deputy director, Kristjan Kristjansson, wrote an article in 2013 to defend character education against criticisms that he argued were myths. With

numerous examples from project resources, Jerome and Kisby demonstrate the "myths" to be true.

For example, character and virtues have been criticized for being old-fashioned and essentially religious. The chapter looks at a Knightly Virtues resource for secondary students that is replete with moralistic messages. Pointing to textual evidence, the authors conclude that it "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" (Jerome & Kisby, 2019, p. 67). Another example sheds light on "myths" that claim the emphasis on character and virtues is conservative and individualistic. Here the authors highlight a children's story about Rosa Parks that focuses readers on individual emotions (falling in love and feeling frus-trated by racism) instead of the political commitments (marrying an activist, learning strategies for activism, becoming a political organizer) evident in her autobiography.

A third example is a secondary-school five-lesson unit on "Why do good people do bad things?" It looks at a "bewildering array" of cases through activities on the meaning of utopia, the bystander effect, the Milgram experiment, the Good Samaritan, and the London Riots of 2011.

Jerome and Kisby (2019) note:

> . . . *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 attempt to distil* (sic) *some personal virtue targets from this conveyor belt of atrocities, all with the supposed focus of considering why good people do bad things. (p. 77)*

The description of this unit indicates a conceptually and pedagogi-cally incoherent jumble. Events are taken out of context. The messages conveyed about events and people who participated in them are misleading. In fact, the unit is an extreme example of knowledge control as analyzed by Linda McNeil (1981): It distorts knowledge through fragmentation, mystification, omission, and simplification.

Chapter 5 contains three case studies of character education projects, well funded by the JTF or Department of Education (DfE)—the Military Ethos Alternative Provision programs, Premiership Rugby's On the Front Foot, and the Narnian Virtues project. A critical review of the research used in program evaluations reveals lack of clarity in desired outcomes and flaws in methodology. The authors find that positive impact of these projects as defined by the evaluators is limited to non-existent. For example, six Military Ethos programs collected data using different criteria and research instruments. Participants conveyed appreciation for their program but the reasons are ambiguous. Academic gains and attendance were not sustained. The evaluation did not systematically collect data about the development of character.

In Part III (Chapter 6), Jerome and Kisby (2019) explain how character education in Britain advances a narrow type of citizenship. Its emphasis on individual virtue aligns with what Wes-theimer and Kahne (2004) define as the personally responsible citizen (versus the participatory citizen or justice-oriented citizen).

But it goes beyond that to teach that individuals must develop their ability to handle the demands of the global economy and thereby become the "ideal neo-liberal citizen." Corresponding with the movement's rise, citizenship education in Britain has declined due to lack of support. At the same time, a strong research base demonstrates that citizenship education is a more effective vehicle for achieving democratic aims. In contrast with character education, it prepares students with the knowledge and skills to become critical, independent thinkers and socially responsible members of society. Citizenship education teaches young people how to understand public problems and participate as democratic agents of change.

Jerome and Kisby (2019) do an excellent job of organizing the book. Each chapter starts with an introduction that provides an overview. Within each chapter there are signposts along the way that remind readers of where they have been and tell them what comes next. The book embodies good pedagogy as it helps readers process important ideas and follow the construction of the author's argument. The prose is clear, concise, and accessible throughout.

The book offers a treasure trove of knowledge. Its analyses are multifaceted and grounded in evidence and prior scholarship. Numerous citations throughout the book support the authors' claims and provide suggestions for additional reading.

Character education has become a massive industry. So many schools—including those that do not identify with the "no excuses" paradigm—have embraced it in one form or another. I hope *The Rise of Character Education in Britain* generates cross-national debate about what should be a highly controversial issue—that is, how to respond to this movement.

Reading Jerome and Kisby's (2019) book has made me recognize the importance of investigating more deeply the varied versions that character education takes. My own belief is that the model of citizenship education they advocate must be rejuvenated at a time when democracies are being choked by autocratic leaders, corrupt governments, and fake news. With so many competing curricular demands, the scarcest resource for many teachers is time (Pace, 2015). We need to devote time to an education that builds young people's capacity to question, investigate, think independently, deliberate, and take collective action to tackle the moral, social, political, economic, and environmental issues directly challenging our 21st-century existence (Pace, 2021).

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