Educating Character: from virtue ethics theory to practice

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Background

As the Director of Development at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues I occupy, what I believe to be, an enviable position. I sit within, and am often first to learn from, a multi-disciplinary research team conducting significant and substantial research into the field of character and virtues. My work is at the apex of theory and practice as it involves developing or instigating interventions that flow out of the research. I regularly experience the satisfaction of seeing a programme researched and developed by the Centre, flourish in schools and other organisations. I am also one of the first recipients of challenging questions from teachers and other educators about how best to apply character education theory into their practice. These questions often relate to a perceived lack of evidence-based character education interventions, strategies and approaches that can be readily adapted and applied. This paper provides a perspective on the development and application of virtue-ethics-inspired character education, drawing on evidence from teachers, as well as researchers employed at the Jubilee Centre. It starts by outlining the opportunities presented when researchers and practitioners work together on the pursuit of similar goals, before going on to discuss two significant and well known 'gaps' between virtue-ethics theory and practice; i) the search for a universally acknowledged and empirically tested model or stage theory for Aristotelian inspired character education; and, ii) the deficiency of robust tools that teachers themselves can use to measure the character development of their students. The paper is based mainly on work being conducted by the Jubilee Centre, although acknowledges the vast amount of research being undertaken by academics and practitioners around the world investigating similar issues.

Opportunities

Why should an enterprise, such as the Jubilee Centre, engage in practice (or indeed policy) related work? The Centre sits within the School of Education at the University of Birmingham where the academic focus has traditionally been on maximising research outcomes. The Universities own strategy documentation makes it clear that world class research is primarily judged on publishing papers that can be submitted to the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The strategy states that the Birmingham Academic is required to 'regularly publish research material or produce other research outputs in a form eligible for inclusion in the REF or for equivalent peer review and of a quality that is clearly recognised as internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour' (Birmingham University, 2010: 4). Members of the Jubilee Centre have been successful in this regard and have published over 75 peer-reviewed articles within three years of the Centre's launch (Arthur *et al*, 2015a). Embedded into the Center's vision has also been a commitment to developing interventions based on this research. This has involved the design and testing of educational programmes that can be applied in classrooms, communities and professional contexts both in Britain and further afield. A good example of this is the Centre's work with the professions. Between 2012 and 2015, project teams conducted in depth research into virtues in the teaching, medical and Legal professions. Between 2015 and 2017 a different team will be developing practical responses to these findings and creating and testing a series of online courses that seek to enhance phronesis in aspiring teaching, legal and medical professionals.

The aim of placing the research and development teams under one roof is to ensure that the relationship between theory and practice remains close. Further, the emphasis the Centre places on research for the purpose of 'real world change' is clear. It is, after all, an ambition of many if not most academics that their work will be applied to real situations and to have an impact 'on the ground'. Few would commit their lives to the endeavour without some hope that it will be transformative, and in some way make a positive difference. At the heart of this vision is a

requirement for the relationship between researchers and practitioners connected to the Centre to be reciprocal. A naturalist position on virtue ethics, largely adopted by the Jubilee Centre, allows for theory to be informed and/or shaped by empirical research (Kristjansson, 2015). It is 'findings from the classroom' that enable researchers to go beyond, for example, Aristotelian textual analysis and to reconstruct virtue ethics to reflect present day realities. As such, many of the practitioners we work with are viewed as 'researchers in situ'. An example of this is the new teachers at the University of Birmingham School who have been trained to support with the Schools of Virtue research project.

The close relationship between theory and practice nurtured at the Centre has started to bear fruit, notably in the field of character education. Perhaps most significantly the virtue ethics theoretical foundation that underpins much of the Centre's work has been soundly tested in the classroom. The convincing case made by moral and educational philosophers (see e.g. Carr, 2008; Kristjánsson, 2015; Curren, 2010; Sanderse, 2012) as to the advantages of virtue ethics as a moral theory that character education interventions can build on, is being put firmly to the test. As the authors of the Secondary Programme of Study (Jubilee Centre, 2014: TG14) attest to, 'even if Aristotle may need some updating, dragging him into our contemporary ethical concerns and issues should make for some interesting and fruitful chemistry'.

The Jubilee Centre has made some significant steps in the last few years laying out and defining the theoretical base and associated principles for character education. These are most clearly laid out in the Framework for Character Education (Jubilee Centre, 2013). The principles laid out in the framework present both an opportunity and a challenge to those concerned with character education practice. It invites innovation and creativity from teachers and others to develop new approaches to character education along Aristotelian lines. It also presents a challenge as to how best to apply these in modern day educational systems where priorities often lie elsewhere. It is to this end that the Centre has developed several teaching and learning interventions that draw on virtue ethics philosophy. Evidence from the classroom is starting to show that with limited adaption they are relevant to, and can be applied in, most schools. These interventions include:

The Knightly Virtues Programme

www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/1548/character-education/knightly-virtues

This educational program seeks to provide nine to eleven year olds with the chance to creatively explore great stories of knights and heroes and the virtues they exemplify. The Programme draws on theoretical approaches to developing character through stories that are consistent with virtue ethics theory (Carr and Harrison, 2015). Aristotle held that stories help illuminate the moral aspects of human life, and MacIntyre argued (MacIntyre, 1981) that stories help us understand our own narratives and therefore contribute to human self-understanding. Through a randomised control trial the programme has been proven to develop virtue literacy (knowledge, understanding and application of virtue terms and concepts) in those who experience it (Arthur *et al*, 2014). The Centre is currently developing a poetry project that follows broadly similar lines.

Teaching Character Through the Curriculum www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/1562/character-education/character-through-the-curriculum

This project, funded by the Department for Education, has developed materials and approaches to teaching character through and within fourteen curriculum subjects. The link between character virtues and the pedagogical practices and content of each subject is being explored. For each

subject, there is a deliberate and explicit attempt made to nurture core virtues closely associated to it – for example fair play and humility in Physical Education and integrity in Science. Each of the series of lesson are expected to enable students to acquire an explicit and clear understanding of the processes involved in acquiring these virtues; namely, virtue *knowledge*, virtue *reasoning* and virtue *practice*.

Primary and Secondary Programmes of Study www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/528/programmes-of-study

These 'taught' courses in character education, produced in collaboration with classroom teachers and other education stakeholders, have been inspired by neo-Aristotelian conceptions of character and virtue. This, the authors explain means that 'elements of Aristotle's account of virtue and character education have been re-interpreted, updated and applied to contemporary problems and contexts' (Wright *et al.*, 2014). The Programmes of Study lay out a systematic approach to the building of character, through a series of lessons relating to a particular virtue or character-based issue.

The programmes described above provide answers to some of the questions asked by practitioners about how to 'do' Aristotelian inspired character education. Some of their success can be put down to the advantages offered by virtue ethics as a foundation for character education. Most promisingly, the moral theory seems to offers satisfactory answers to teachers concerned about their role as character educators. It reassures them, and addresses their concerns, as it robustly contradicts the myths (Kristjansson, 2013) sometimes associated with character education. Importantly, for those interested in applied approaches, the key concepts associated with the philosophy; *eudomonia, arête* and *phronesis*, are useful building blocks for the development of educational approaches to character education.

To illustrate the usefulness of virtue ethics, it is instructive to note how a focus on *eudaimonia* or flourishing has turned out to be a useful starting place for teachers new to character education. Those who work closely with the Centre report that, most usefully, it forces them to question the purpose of education. It helps to get them beyond thinking narrowly in terms of say, strategies for improving attainment, to thinking more broadly about what a full, rich and expansive vision of a good education should be. Teachers, when challenged in this way, often note how a focus on character virtue development has largely been neglected at the expense of a focus on other concerns (Arthur *et al.*, 2015). Education for human flourishing can become a useful rallying cry for those keen to make a stance against what they perceive to be an over focus on the 'command and control' approach to much of today's schooling (Pring, 2012). The Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia* also provides an excellent umbrella and bridge to similar agendas in the character education field – such as wellbeing and positive education. For example, Ian Morris (2015), in the second edition of his book on education for wellbeing, has re-structured the practical advice he provides for teaching happiness and wellbeing under a eudaimonic framework.

Teachers also report that it is helpful to view the virtues as the building blocks of character (see Harrison *et al.,* 2016 forthcoming). Further, there is a growing acceptance, in the UK, that a four-part classification[1] of the virtues as detailed in the Framework for Character Education (Jubilee Centre, 2013) is useful for teachers and other practitioners (Birdwell *et al.*, 2015). Although some teachers report to being uncomfortable with the term virtues, most appear more confident using it after they have had some explanation of it's grounding in virtue ethics philosophy. Interestingly, research with youth social action providers found that although most did not like the term 'virtue',

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[1] The Framework for Character Education makes the case for classifying character in terms of moral, civic, performance and intellectual virtues.

the dislike was largely for semantic rather than substantive reasons (Arthur, Harrison and Taylor, 2015).

Phronesis, or practical wisdom, is also a concept that teachers find useful. Teachers have reported that it allows them to have more complex and sophisticated discussions and debates with their students about moral character. For example, in the Knightly Virtues programme the teachers explained how stories were a good way to enhance *phronesis* (Arthur *et al.*, 2014). The teachers reported that the best discussions they had with students was when characters in the stories had to make difficult decisions about what was the right thing to do in any given situation and where the demands of different virtues seemed conflicting (Carr and Harrison, 2015). A focus on *phronesis*, enabled these teachers to have expansive conversations with their students as well as deconstruct the anatomy of particular virtues which led onto discussions about the golden mean and moral wisdom in general.

It is sometimes assumed that different working practices, cultures, languages, and priorities present stumbling blocks for meaningful joint enterprises between researchers and practitioners on character education initiatives. The discussion above demonstrates that any perceived practitioner/researcher divide need not necessarily be a reality.

Theory to Practice - some gaps

This paper has so far presented a promising and largely unproblematic picture of how Aristotelian inspired character education can be applied in practice. However, applying virtue ethics theory into 'easy'-to-implement interventions does not come without risks and challenges. Perhaps the most obvious challenge is that translating theory into practice in the field of character education can be a difficult and time-consuming enterprise – and there are no guarantees of success. For example, whilst it is fairly straightforward to explain phronesis as a philosophical concept, it is much harder to provide a step-by-step approach that teachers can use to help their students to become more practically wise. <u>Of course to accept such a challenge is also to accept that virtue ethics theory can readily be translated into everyday educational practice. It is also likely to raise a concern from some that</u> it is necessary to 'water down' or hugely simplify complicated conceptions of character in order to be successful.

It is with due regard to this warning that this paper concludes by highlighting two significant gaps in the translation of virtue ethics theory into character education practice. These are well documented spaces where the theory is sound, but teachers and others report a lack of advice, guidance, tools and resources for implementing it. Currently the most pertinent gaps appear to be: i) the search for a universally acknowledged model for character development underpinned by virtue ethics theory; and, ii) a robust tool that teachers themselves can use to measure the character development of their students, based on this model.

Each of these 'gaps' will be discussed briefly in turn below. It is acknowledged from the outset that both these gaps present significant challenges, there are no easy solutions to 'solving' them, and some people are resistance about attempts to even try to do so. It is for this reason, in the limited discussion below, that this paper does not attempt to provide answers. Instead it maps the territory and provides an overview of some work currently being undertaken by the Jubilee Centre to address them. The discussion is presented from a practitioner's point of view, in that the starting point is the desire of teachers and others to have accessible, workable tools that can be applied in classrooms, schools and other settings. Although the paper recognises there is a great deal of sophisticated and significant research previously directed at both these problems – the

paper aims to contribute to these ongoing conversations about how solutions fit for the classroom might be developed.

i) Can, and should a universally applicable model or stage theory for character education, founded on virtue ethics theory, be developed?

Models come in different forms, from stage theories such as the 'cognitive development model' (Kholberg, 1981) to the use of acronyms such as PRIME (Berkowitz and Beir, 2014) and PERMA (Seligman, 2011) which highlight the main features of a particular theoretical approach or body of research. Put simply, these models and others like them, help educators understand seemingly complex theoretical frameworks and research in accessible formats. It is for this reason that an Aristotelian inspired model for character development would be attractive to teachers. However, to date, researchers and practitioners affiliated with the Jubilee Centre have been careful about their approaches to the construction of such a model. This is mainly because they are alert to the considerable challenge associated with developing a 'simple' model of such an inherently complex construct such as character. For example, Carr (2002) has also questioned the legitimacy of many developmental models for their lack of evidential basis and argues that they are better considered as simply 'accounts of moral development'. Philosophers not directly attached to the Centre make similar arguments. For example, Howard Curzor (2016), who argues that it is illogical to talk about a moral development path as moral progress and therefore it cannot be understood as movement from one stage to the next.

Despite such warnings, work on what might form the basis of a 'popular' model has been started by individuals affiliated with the Jubilee Centre. These fledgling steps, briefly outlined below, are limited and further effort is required to either establish or dismiss them. It is argued that in order to be considered successful they should be judged by the following criteria:

i)   The philosophical test – is the model founded on, and does it resemble, widely accepted interpretations of (Aristotelian) virtue ethics theory;

ii)   The psychological test – does the model stand up to rigorous empirical testing, and is it considered to be broadly in line with the accepted wisdom about human behavior;

iii)   The educational test – does the model align with teachers understandings of character development, is it practically focused and fairly straightforward to understand and implement.

To date none of the attempts at a model (outlined below) have satisfied all three of these demands. Of course, it is unlikely that any model will, and there will invariably have to be some play-off between principles and practice if such a pursuit is to be successful.

A) Character Development Model

No stage theory for moral education has come close to Kohlbergs 'cognitive development model' (Kohlberg, 1981) in terms of popularity. The model, designed in the 1960s, is still used despite much criticism, in some schools and teacher training courses today. It is against this backdrop that Sanderse (2015) has created the 'character development ladder' which he claims follows broadly Aristotelian lines. The ladder describes four levels of moral maturity, from 'moral indifference', 'emerging self-control', to 'self-control' and, eventually, 'virtue'. It is not suggested that it is a strict stage theory *in that everyone has to pass through the stages in the same order.* Sanderse argues that the model will help teachers understand what it means for children to develop morally, making it easier to recognise the various developmental stages of their students. Furthermore,

that this integrated stage model of virtue development is 'not only faithful to the spirit of Aristotle's Ethics, but is also placed in the context of contemporary moral educational theory, thereby being potentially valuable for those studying the moral development of children and adolescents' (Sanderse, 2015: 394). The character development ladder, on the surface, appears to be an important contribution to the debate on moral development. However, as yet it has not been 'road-tested' in schools and there is sparse evidence to either collaborate or deny its claims and therefore the jury is still out as to its use and effectiveness.

B) Component model: Virtue literacy, virtue reasoning, virtue practice

A successful component model identifies the key features of character and virtue development and details the relationship between them. A popular example of this approach is the *four component model* which provides a conceptualization, drawing on Kolberg, of successful moral functioning and the capacities it requires (Rest (1983; Thoma, 1999). At the heart of the Model are four inter-related abilities that it is believed are required to be a moral individual; Moral sensitivity; Moral judgment; Moral motivation; Moral character. Although this four-component model, as it was originally designed, does not draw any inspiration from virtue ethics, Curzer (2014) has recently tried to bring it into line with Aristotelian philosophy.

The Jubilee Centre is currently working on a number of components that could eventually comprise a model. These are most clearly conceptualised in the Programme of Study and the Teaching Character Through the Curriculum programme. Each 'component' could be considered necessary to the education of individual virtues and in combination contribute to good character, and more widely, human flourishing.
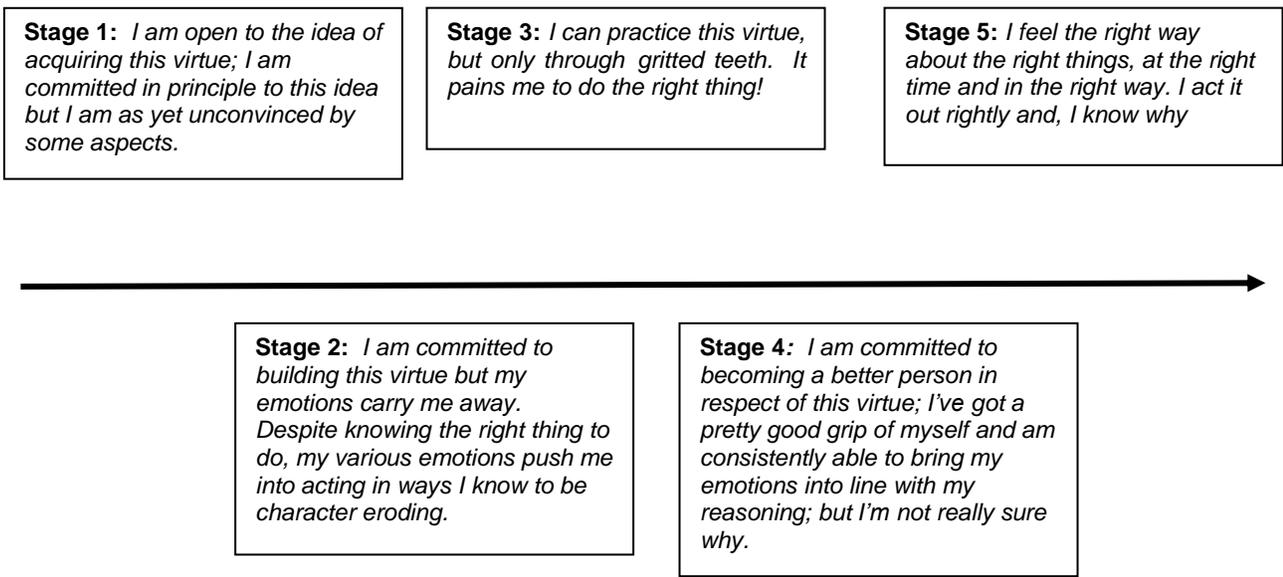
The components are:

i) Virtue literacy: Knowledge and understanding of virtue terms and concepts that provide the language, rational and tools required for character development (see Arthur *et al.*, 2014; Carr and Harrison, 2015);

ii) Virtue reasoning: the ability to undertake reasoned judgements and decide what is the right thing to do, at the right time (see Wright *et al.*, 2014; Harrison *et al.,* 2016 forthcoming);

iii) Virtue Practice: builds on knowing, understanding and making reasoned judgments about virtues, to the actual display of them.   Self-examination makes up an important component of 'virtue practice' (see Wright *et al.*, 2014);

More work is required if these components are to be developed into a comprehensive model. Most importantly the relationships between these components need to be established and empirically tested.

c) Continuum Model

A third approach, currently under consideration at the Jubilee Centre, is a continuum model for the development of practical wisdom. Along the continuum descriptions of different levels of practical wisdom are provided. Elements of this type of Model are in place, described for example in the secondary Programme of Study (Wright *et al.*, 2014). The authors argue that the five stages they describe help students self-examine their virtue development but also form a useful basis for one to one discussions about character growth with teachers. The five stages that can be applied to the examination of any virtue are mapped onto a continuum as follows:

| Stage 1: *I am open to the idea of acquiring this virtue; I am committed in principle to this idea but I am as yet unconvinced by some aspects.* | Stage 3: *I can practice this virtue, but only through gritted teeth. It pains me to do the right thing!* | Stage 5: *I feel the right way about the right things, at the right time and in the right way. I act it out rightly and, I know why* |

| Stage 2: *I am committed to building this virtue but my emotions carry me away. Despite knowing the right thing to do, my various emotions push me into acting in ways I know to be character eroding.* | Stage 4: *I am committed to becoming a better person in respect of this virtue; I've got a pretty good grip of myself and am consistently able to bring my emotions into line with my reasoning; but I'm not really sure why.* |

This continuum cannot be viewed as a stage theory, in that progress along it might not necessarily be linear. Further, to recognise the complexities of character, it is likely that individuals will be on different parts of the continuum for different virtues and probably in different contexts.

Next steps

The three approaches outlined above offer promise, and evidence is starting to be collected from teachers and students as to their usefulness and effectiveness. It is being reported that teachers and students understand the approaches and they are relatable to their own experiences and understandings of character. This evidence gives confidence that the pursuit of a model is a fruitful enterprise and should be continued. What is required now, is further discussion and debate between philosophers, psychologists and educationalists to determine the strengths and weaknesses of each of these approaches. They also need to be assessed against the empirical and practical tests.

ii) Can and should a practical measure of character and/or virtue(s) be developed?

Based on the assumption that a model can be developed, a further 'gap' is a tool that can be used by teachers to measure individual and/or cohorts of students' progress against it. This challenge opens up a whole new can of worms as the issue of 'measuring character' is perhaps the biggest lacuna in the field today. It is well known that many, if not the majority, of philosophers and psychologists currently working in the area, harbor (some serious) concerns about the limitations of measuring character (see e.g. Kristjansson, 2015; Duckworth and Yeager, 2015). It is also an area that some people noticeably steer away from, whilst others have made laudable efforts at providing sound advice on the topic (see e.g. Alexander, 2014). The question is, can a 'simple' tool be developed to measure such an inherently complex construct as character and/or virtue(s). The following passage from Kristjan Kristjansson (2015) lays out the problem.

> *'We can imagine the possibility of drawing up, step by step, a complex picture of students' broad moral hexeis/schemas by homing in separately on each of the components of Aristotelian virtue…for example gauging perception of moral salience by letting them analyse*

a novel or a film and identify the moral issues that it elicits, gauging moral emotion and desire through an implicit-measure test, gauging moral self-concept through a self-report questionnaire, gauging moral understanding/reasoning through a deep interview, gauging moral motivation through dilemma testing, gauging moral behaviour and general character-related school ethos through a longitudinal observational study, and then corroborating the findings of the study through detailed peer reports (parents, friends, teachers) over an extended period of time' (Kristjánsson 2015, chap. 3)

Despite the evidence, the clamour from policy makers and practitioners for 'popular' measures that can be implemented fairly straightforwardly in the classroom has not abated. It is for this reason that attempts to fill this gap have been popular with teachers – for example the *Virtues in Action* (VIA)(www.viacharacter.org) scale which can be completed online, and the new *Character Growth* app developed by Character Lab (characterlab.org/character-growth-card). Whilst many researchers remain concerned about the psychometric properties and validity of these measures, they continue to be popular with practitioners. Researchers at the Jubilee Centre have also been looking closely at this problem. Whilst we remain cautious about the possibilities of developing a tool (or tools) that successfully measures character and can be easily implemented by practitioners, the pursuit of such a goal is ongoing. For example, the Jubilee Centre's first attempt at a popular measure was the Schools Virtue Measure (SVM) developed and piloted in 2013. In order to meet the requirement of being popular, it had to be (reasonably) easy to implement and ideally it could analysed by teachers themselves. In order to satisfy the research team at the Centre, it had to have validity and sound psychometric properties. While the measure is still under consideration, the initial version of it satisfied neither the researchers' nor the teachers' demands. It was too complicated for schools to analyse on their own, but not methodically robust enough for the researchers to have confidence in its ability to measure what it claimed to measure. The SVM serves as an example of where researchers might be seen to be putting their academic integrity at risk in order to satisfy practical demands. Despite this, a great deal was learnt by those involved with the development of the SVM, and the pursuit of a suitable measure continues as it is believed in can serve a legitimate purpose. The question of legitimate *purpose,* is after all, key to this debate.

There are two purposes, this paper argues, that would legitimise the development of a 'popular' measure for character. The first is as a developmental tool for character building, and the second, to provide (limited) evidence about 'what works' in character education. The first purpose might best be described as taking the 'collective temperature' of a cohort of students in a school or other educational organisation. The purpose of taking the temperature would be for educational and developmental purposes. The picture built up by the measure (ideally linked to a model), although unlikely to be entirely accurate, would provide some evidence as to the student's collective strengths and weaknesses, and would therefore highlight where more effort, resources and time should be directed. Aggregated scores would allow teachers to view patterns across the school, or perhaps a year group or particular classes. Handled carefully, the same approach might be useful for individual students to help them consider their own strengths and weaknesses and the results, and if nothing else, would get these students thinking and talking about their character and virtues. It's worth stressing that using the measure to give individual students character/virtue grades would be entirely inappropriate and illegitimate.   The distinction between measures that are more formative in nature and summative in nature is an important one.

The second purpose would be to provide some evidence as to the effectiveness of a new or existing character education intervention – to help discover 'what works'. To measure the impact

of a character education intervention properly, a randomised and controlled trial would be required. However, such trials present researchers with significant challenges (see e.g., Arthur *et al.*, 2014; Arthur *et al.*, 2014a), and therefore are well beyond the scope of most teachers. A lighter touch approach to evaluation utilising a popular measure of character would, for a teacher, be better that no attempts at all to discover 'what works'. It would be important for those utilising the measure in such a way, to be wary of its limitations and avoid over-claiming based on the findings. It would also be important to triangulate (see Arthur *et al.*, 2015) the data found from such a measure, with that gained from other methods such as interviews and observation.

As yet no method or tool that would entirely satisfy one or both these purposes exists. It might be too farfetched to believe that a practical tool can be created that can be universally applied for the purposes described above. Furthermore, little consideration has been given above to how a combination of tools, used in harmony, providing the option of triangulating data, might be implemented. It is for this reason, that a significant amount of additional development, piloting and trialling works must be done if the purposes outlined above are considered to be legitimate.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the relationship between theory and practice in character education, making particular reference to the work currently being carried out by the Jubilee Centre. It has detailed areas of success as well as areas of challenge – and identified two pertinent gaps; i) the absence of a virtue ethics inspired model of character development; and, ii) the absence of a practical measure of character that can be implemented by teachers themselves. The paper has identified the risks and opportunities associated with the pursuit of filling these gaps, and concludes that there is a case (perhaps even an obligation) for researchers and practitioners to work together to address them. In order to do this, researchers and practitioners must work in tandem – each being prepared to give some territory in order to find a position acceptable to all. This process will inevitably involve some tradeoffs between the different parties and positions. Although this might be uncomfortable for some, it is important to do so as it will result in better outcomes for children and young people.

The paper concludes that philosophers, psychologists and educationalists who are interested in addressing these gaps must first agree a common purpose for the model and measure. A key recommendation is that the purpose is defined as well as constrained by their developmental and educational aims. There is a responsibility on those proposing the theoretical basis for the model/measure to firmly state the limits of them, as well as a responsibility on practitioners to use them wisely and only for their stated purpose. If these conditions are met than it is argued that the pursuit of a 'popular' model and measure is legitimate. Furthermore, given progress to date, it is contention of this paper that these gaps can be ameliorated and solutions both fit for the classroom and acceptable to researchers can be found.

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