



THE
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Structuring a Character Education Curriculum

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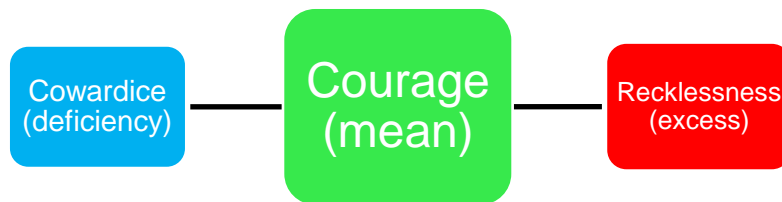
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Four domains of virtue.

The Jubilee Centre suggests that character is broadly made up of the acquisition of virtue across 4 domains: moral, intellectual, performance and civic. 4 different domains of virtue:

1. **Moral:** these are virtues such as courage, compassion, honesty and justice that relate to human flourishing and good human relationships. For Aristotle, it is not possible to be fully virtuous without the moral virtues. Each moral virtue is a 'mean' between two extremes of vice: the vice of deficiency and the vice of excess:



2. **Civic:** these are virtues such as service and citizenship that refer specifically to living life well in the community and society at large. Civic virtues are a subset of the moral virtues.
3. **Intellectual** virtues: these are virtues such as curiosity and critical thinking which relate to knowledge and to technical skill. These are not moral virtues and it is possible to have highly developed intellectual virtues, but poorly developed moral virtues (e.g. the recent actions of some in the financial service industry).
4. **Performance** virtues: these are virtues such as resilience, teamwork and persistence which enable us to get things done. Like the intellectual virtues, they are not moral and it is possible to possess highly developed performance virtues (even those of emotional intelligence) without being morally virtuous.

The doctrine of the mean¹ and the domains of virtue provide us with universal tools to break down, analyse and better understand our own and other people's experiences and they can be applied to the curriculum. A complete curriculum aiming to address character education directly will place a direct emphasis on each of these areas. In many respects, the academic curriculum comprising literacy, numeracy, science, languages, humanities and the arts will take care of the intellectual virtues, although some attention may need to be given to illuminating specific intellectual virtues (sometimes referred to as 'meta' skills of learning, or learning to learn) which enable us to access the curriculum such as memory, comparison, description and explanation.

The moral, performance and civic virtues can enhance and enrich the teaching of the academic curriculum because of the opportunities they provide for understanding academic learning in its relational (moral), social (civic) and performance contexts. Human learning takes place within relationships, either to the teacher, to other learners or to the thing learned about. In order to do this fully, we need to develop moral skill. We also need to place learning in its civic context as more sophisticated understanding of the world can enable us to transform societies at the global and local level. Academic learning also depends upon the meta-cognitive skills of observing and analysing our own thinking: the performance virtues such as the ability to persist with learning that is difficult or which requires attention over a long period of time.

¹ Experiencing emotion in the **right way**, about the **right things**, toward the **right people**, at the **right time**, for the **right reasons**.

A character-focused curriculum can also be used to encompass and develop existing requirements to teach PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic education) material as in many respects these contain themes which speak directly to the acquisition of virtue. Schools in the UK are largely free to develop their own approaches to the teaching of PSHE² and character and virtue could be a vehicle for transforming it into learning about how to make wise choices and live a good, full human life. For example, the UK Department for Education guidance on PSHE (2015) suggests the teaching of 'diet for a healthy lifestyle.' When looked at through the prism of virtue, this can become a rich study of food knowledge, regulating our desires for fatty or sugary foods, the moral implications of harming our bodies through poor diet, and perhaps even the civic, citizenship issues of campaigning for things like clearer labelling of food packaging or ethical treatment of animals.

A curriculum aimed at the development of character should give weight to each of the four domains of virtue and it should do so in a way that enables children to acquire an explicit and clear understanding of the processes involved in acquiring virtue: virtue **knowledge**, virtue **reasoning** and virtue **practice**.

Virtue knowledge, virtue reasoning, virtue practice.

Before the work of populating each lesson with content and each key stage with lessons begins, it's important to have some guiding, structural principles and concepts that give coherence to the overall curriculum that the children experience. This matters for two reasons. Firstly, it avoids contradictory messages within the learning and ensures that good work isn't undone later. Secondly, it enables teachers to build upwards on very solid foundations of learning, constantly reinforcing the concepts with ever more detailed and complex teaching as time goes on.

Perhaps chief amongst these concepts and principles is the precise nature of the way that virtue is learned. This is made up of 3 interrelated and mutually supporting aspects: virtue knowledge, virtue reasoning and virtue practice, which can be turned into a process, known as the caterpillar process (which is explained below).

Moral virtue involves the ability to educate our emotional responses to situations using reason. The virtue of courage for example, enables us to regulate the emotion of fear to enable us to avoid the vices of cowardice (where we succumb to fear) and foolhardiness (where we do not heed the message of fear to exercise caution). Virtue knowledge depends upon being able to do the following things:

1. Recognise and name particular virtues;
2. Recognise and name situations which call for those particular virtues by...
3. ...recognising the emotions we and others feel in particular situations;
4. Observing what it is that people who have developed the virtue can do particularly well.

When constructing a character education curriculum, this is one of the 3 principal strands that needs to be developed. Children need to be given an opportunity to recognise the virtues and the emotions which they regulate and they also need to be given an opportunity to learn from those who display the virtue. This does not necessarily have to be great heroes of virtue: some of the most powerful learning takes place when we see our peers doing something particularly well and we are then motivated to emulate their example.

² Apart from statutory requirements to teach about topics such as illegal drugs and sex and relationships, depending on whether the school is primary or secondary.

A good way of building virtue knowledge is through the use of story. For example, Dr Seuss's story *The Lorax* has 2 main characters who clearly display certain virtues and vices. By providing children with some virtue and vice words (courage, care, respect, greed, selfishness, ignorance) and then reading the story together, this helps children build their virtue vocabulary and also see what virtues and vices look like in action. Another writer who can be used in this way is Roald Dahl, whose characters tend to have their virtues and vices nicely exaggerated to make them easy to identify, but who also face some difficult moral decisions which draw upon virtue for their resolution; such as Danny's decision to illegally drive a car to help his father in *Danny Champion of the World*, or Mr Fox's decision to burgle to feed his family in *Fantastic Mr Fox*.

Learning about the virtues can help to kick start what Julia Annas (2011) calls the *need to learn* and the *drive to aspire*. Learning virtue depends upon a level of knowledge of virtue itself which can then, once we realise that we are deficient in the virtue, lead to the motivation to want to get better.

Virtue knowledge is not enough to be virtuous: the knowledge needs to be put into action, this is where virtue reasoning comes in. Virtue reasoning involves the following things:

1. Appreciating why a particular virtue is good by understanding how it benefits individuals and communities;
2. Understanding the '*middle-way*': doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, towards the right person and for the right reasons: that there are middle ways of feeling and acting in any situation and that these middle ways are the virtue;
3. Giving (our own) and taking (from others) good reasons for our actions;
4. Developing awareness of how we typically act in certain situations and making decisions about what habits we might need to change.

Virtue reasoning not only depends upon virtue knowledge, but also enriches it as it takes those building blocks of knowledge and applies them to awareness of our inner world and our own moral development and an awareness of our social world and our impact upon it. Coming to greater appreciation of how we reason in situations requiring virtue can also result in the realisation that we need to deepen our virtue knowledge by, for example, finding out how others have deployed a particular virtue that we now realise we lack.

Virtue practice takes the elements of knowledge and reasoning and helps a person to incorporate them into their sense of self through actually practising the virtues and reflecting on the impact that this practice has on us. It is made up of the following elements:

1. Putting the virtue(s) into action;
2. Observing and learning from others who put the virtues into action;
3. The ability to reflect upon events that have happened, to learn from them and to grow in understanding of how to act well;
4. Consciously and deliberately forming habits of virtuous action, with awareness of the person we are becoming.

It is with this third element of character education that we see learning about virtue take a stride beyond the classroom. There are obvious opportunities within a primary classroom for reinforcing what virtuous action would look like, but true virtue happens in the absence of a teacher or mentor where a person is intrinsically motivated and skilful enough to do the right thing at the right time. The ultimate and long-term aim of character education is for individuals to move beyond teachers, rules, rewards and sanctions: that they can decide well for themselves; that they are morally autonomous. Virtue practice is concerned with enabling children to recognise episodes

in their lives where virtue is required, to draw upon virtue knowledge and reasoning to act deliberately and then to reflect on what happened in order to learn for next time.

Reflection is not an innate human capacity, as it relies upon cognitive structures in the brain which take time to develop and may not be finished until early adulthood. However, research into neuroplasticity indicates that the brain is shaped by the experiences we feed it with (Doidge, 2008, Ratey 2003). The more that we provide children with a supportive environment where they can think back over recent events, examine what they were thinking and feeling and ask how they might act differently in the future, the greater the chance of them developing a sophisticated reflective capacity over time. It is this upon which virtue hinges.

Once all 3 of these elements are combined (knowledge, reasoning, practice) and developed over time, this will contribute to young people being competent and free in making sensible and wise (moral) choices in the situations they face. This is not a quick process and there will be stumbles, trips and falls along the way. But then, this can be just as true for us as adults as it is for the children we work with.

The caterpillar process: bringing knowledge, reasoning and practice to life.

Of central importance to the success of character education, is the opportunity for children to develop an internal language and process of developing in virtue: one that is simple, clear and effective. The Jubilee Centre materials for character education describe a 5 stage process called *the caterpillar process*, after Eric Carle's popular children's book *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. The process has 5 stages, which square with knowledge, reasoning and practice, but which has the added benefit of being an image that might be easier to remember. The 5 stages are as follows:

1. **Stop.** This involves the ability to either pause before making a decision, or to pause afterwards to reflect upon decisions that we have taken. It is based upon the skills of emotional regulation that enable us to pause before leaping in to a situation.
2. **Notice.** This involves gathering more information about the situations we find ourselves and instead of just going with our first thoughts, finding out more in an attempt to see situations as they are, rather than as we would like them to be.
3. **Look.** This involves observing our own emotions and the emotions of others. The emotions give us information about what we perceive and what others perceive and they are not always appropriate. The *middle way* encourages us to feel the right things, at the right time, in the right way, towards the right people, for the right reasons.
4. **Listen.** This involves the giving and taking of reasons for the things that we decide to do and the feelings that we have. Aristotle encourages us to educate the emotions with reason and educate reason with emotion to slowly refine our responses. This stage also encourages us to listen to our knowledge of the virtues and apply it practically to situations.
5. **Caterpillar.** In *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, the colours of the food the caterpillar eats end up on the wings of the butterfly he becomes. In the same way, what we think, feel, say and do end up 'colouring' the person that we are becoming. This final step involves reflecting upon how we have responded across the previous 4 stages, with a view to changing responses that are lacking in virtue.

This reflective process can be applied to any learning done across the 4 domains of virtue, as any form of learning involves pausing, gathering information, feeling, thinking and reflecting to improve future performance. In the early stages of understanding this process, time will need to be taken to deliberately develop each aspect, for example, 'pausing' can be developed using

mindfulness techniques and 'looking' will involve developing an understanding of how emotions manifest themselves in our body through feelings, facial expressions and posture and very young children may not yet have learned how to identify and read these signals.

Is it working? How do you know?

In the early stages of implementing a character education programme, feedback from the pupils is really important in gauging the success of the materials you put together. Children will tell you straightaway through their body language and engagement levels whether or not the learning activities you have designed are any good. They will also tell you if you ask them. If you are open with the pupils about trying out a new subject with some new approaches to learning from the start, they will generally rise to the challenge of giving thoughtful constructive feedback to you. This should in no way undermine the authority of the teacher: children can benefit a great deal from believing they are part of a collaborative effort to design good learning materials and if the process is carefully led, you can transform the teacher-pupil relationship into what Paolo Freire calls problem-posing education where the boundaries between teacher and pupil change to teacher-learner and learner-teacher, where anyone in the class can occupy either role.

This process of feedback gathering needs to be done thoughtfully and gently. Children quickly (and rightfully) develop survey fatigue and useful feedback can be gathered through an informal discussion at the end of the session focusing on 2 simple questions: what went well and what could be improved for next time? You could also ask a small group of children, representative of the class, to give you feedback on character education at regular intervals: again using very focused and structured questions which provide you with the information you need to make the sessions work better.

Another approach to discovering the impact of these lessons, is to ask the children to write their own reports in character education. There are obvious practical constraints to this, but they can be overcome and children can write very powerful reflections on how the lessons have affected them and their learning. As with survey fatigue, it is important to limit the regularity of this reporting: twice in an academic year is probably enough.

There are 2 cautionary points to make at this stage, about grading of progress in character and the interior life of children. This is not the place to enter into the wider debate about the place of grading in our schools, but suffice it to say, it is utterly inappropriate for children to be awarded a grade (numerical or otherwise) for their character development. There is well rehearsed research which shows that when giving children feedback, if the feedback comprises a comment and a grade, the children look at the grade and ignore the comment. If children receive a termly report on character where they are awarded a numerical grade for character development, how is the child to interpret that (assuming they won't read any summative/formative feedback)? What does that number mean to the child trying to widen their understanding of their moral agency in the world? It is also profoundly unhelpful to reduce the complexity of character development to a number (assuming it is even possible). In learning to acquire the habits of a good, virtuous life, I need specific feedback on how I handle my emotions, the reasons I give and take for my actions and the way my emotions and reasons translate into action *so that I can learn*. Numerical grades do not give specific feedback, either summative or formative.

Number grades also open the door for that most pernicious of phenomena: social comparison. Whether we like it or not, children compare each other's grades to establish some kind of hierarchy or pecking order. It would be counterproductive to the project of character education for children to get no further than placing themselves in a 'character hierarchy' based on

numerical grades which don't mean anything. In giving feedback on character development we are seeking to provide very specific guidance to children so that they can acquire and develop certain virtues: numbers will not achieve this. We should also be aspiring to create a community of learners who are aware of their own character development, but who can also contribute to the character development of their classmates. Character development aims at helping children to realise the common human good and it is therefore a social enterprise. If a child is aware that she is working on regulating her fear so that she can participate in group work, she can ask for help from her classmates. In helping her to overcome fear, the classmates are in turn developing virtues such as compassion and persistence. Number grades and social comparison make this very difficult to accomplish.

The second cautionary note mentioned above concerns the interior life of the child. In *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* (2009), Kathryn Eccleston and Dennis Hayes raise grave concerns about an anti-educational movement which assumes the emotional vulnerability of all children and which sees the role of education as being principally about 'kid-fixing'. In *therapeutic education*, Eccleston and Hayes suggest that there is a tendency for adults to go digging around in the interior lives of children, looking for problems which they can fix. This raises a boundary issue for character education which we need to be wary of as teachers. In teaching Maths, I am on reasonable territory when interrogating a child's approach to solving mathematical problems in order to help them solve those problems better. When it comes to character development, there is the potential for asking much more probing questions about the nature of the self which we should be very wary of asking. As teachers, we ought to be clear about the distinction between what is visible (i.e. behaviour) and what is interior (i.e. thoughts and feelings) and not assume that the latter is open to us for interrogation. If a child wishes to keep their interior life private, that is to be fully respected.

What should we assess?

The basic building blocks of a taught course in character education depend are virtue knowledge, virtue reasoning and virtue practice, which can in turn be used to create a process of virtue development called *the caterpillar process*. These building blocks can be used to create an assessment framework, the primary aim of which is to assist children in becoming aware of their character learning *not* to provide assessment evidence for its own sake. It is important to reiterate that an assessment framework should exist to help children create a mental landscape of learning within a discipline so that they can make progress, not so that they can be ticked off or scored. It is also important to stress that the acquisition of virtue is a life-long project and not everyone is ready to embark upon it. Some children experience levels of neglect in their early years which will make it difficult for them to embark upon moral learning until their emotional development and attachment styles are repaired. In school age children, particularly at primary age, we are unlikely to see a child going beyond doing what is right through gritted teeth and being swayed by pursuing pleasure rather than doing what is right or good. This is in no way to denigrate the moral ability of children, who often surprise and inspire us with their perspicacity and wisdom. However, virtues are stable states of character and few children (and surprisingly few adults) will be at the stage where managing emotions, being in command of our desires and acting for the good are habitual, rather than exceptional. Moral development takes a long time. It is also not necessarily linear: just as we can develop good habits over time, so we can also fall into bad habits and undermine virtue learning that has taken place.

Set out below is a table which describes what we might look for as we make progress with learning virtue. It is based upon the caterpillar process described above and sets out the first 3 of 6 'stages' of learning virtue.³

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Stop: pausing before moral choices are made.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I didn't pause to assess the situation. I was carried into action by my emotions or my desires. I was only interested in avoiding pain or pursuing pleasure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I found it difficult to pause to assess the situation. I was too easily influenced by avoiding pain or pursuing pleasure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I paused to assess the situation. I could resist the desire to avoid pain, but could not resist the desire to pursue pleasure.
Notice: awareness of the (moral) implications of a situation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I didn't notice what was going on, or that something was amiss. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I was aware of what was happening, or that something was amiss. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I was aware of what was happening or that something was amiss. I had an understanding of the moral elements of the situation.
Look: Understanding how emotions can help us to choose well.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I was unable to identify my emotions, or the emotions of others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I was aware of my emotions and the emotions of others. I wasn't able to use awareness of these emotions to act in the right way. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I was aware of my own emotions and those of others. I could use awareness of these emotions to try to act in the right way.
Listen: using reason to make deliberate (moral) choices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I could not identify the right thing to do in this situation. I didn't know the middle way: the non-extreme actions. I couldn't avoid making the same mistakes I usually make in situations like this. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I had an awareness of the right thing to do in this situation, but was unable to do it. I had an awareness of the middle way. I found it difficult to avoid making the same mistakes I usually make in situations like this. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I knew the right thing to do in the situation. I could identify the middle way. I was aware of the mistakes I often make in situations like this and tried to avoid them.

³ C.F. Sanderse, W., *Character Education* and Kristjansson K., *Aristotle, The Emotions and Education* for a fuller discussion of the issues surrounding stages of development in virtue.

Caterpillar: understanding of personal (moral) development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am unaware of the impact of my actions on the person I might become. • I would rather avoid pain or pursue pleasure than try to live life more skilfully. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was aware of the impact of my actions on the person I would like to become. • My desire to avoid pain or pursue pleasure makes it very hard for to me to live skilfully. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was aware of the impact of my actions on the person I am trying to become. • I can resist pain to live skilfully, but I find it harder to avoid pleasures.
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As development in virtue becomes more sophisticated, we might see people progressing to stages 4, 5 and 6:

	Stage 4	Stage 5	Stage 6: full virtue
Stop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I paused to assess the situation. • I could avoid pain to do the right thing, but might have been swayed by pleasures; ending up doing the wrong thing, even though I knew what the right course of action was. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I paused to carefully and deliberately assess the situation for its moral implications. • I may have desired to avoid pain or pursue pleasure instead of the good, but I could fully overcome these desires. 	Stage 6 is like stage 5, but for the fully virtuous, doing the right thing happens without any effort of will: they take delight in doing the right thing.
Notice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was well aware of what was happening. • I had a good understanding of the moral elements of the situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was fully aware of the situation. • I had a full understanding of the moral elements of the situation. 	
Look	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I understood my emotions and those of others. • I could use those emotions to act in the right way. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I fully understood my own emotional response and those of others. • These emotions helped me to make the right choice about how to act. 	
Listen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I had a clear idea of the right thing to do in this situation. • I had a clear idea of the middle way. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I knew the right thing to do in this situation. • I knew the middle way. 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I could avoid the mistakes I have made in situations like this in the past. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I did not make the same mistakes I have made before, because I have learned from them. 	
Caterpillar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am aware of the person I am trying to become and understood how my actions would affect that. • I still find it hard to resist pleasures that hinder me from living really skilfully. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know what kind of person I am trying to become and I choose how to act carefully because of this. • It is still sometimes an effort of will to do the right thing. 	

These descriptors can be used in a variety of ways to help children come to an understanding of what it looks like to employ a virtue. They might be used in discrete character education lessons, where children observe how these descriptors come in to play: this can be done especially powerfully by using the characters from stories to help children gain understanding of how others are on a journey of acquiring virtue. They can also be employed across the curriculum so that children can gain understanding of how the virtues can support them in the study of the different subject areas.

The main intention behind the assessment of virtue is for children to grow in self-understanding and to help them to build the habits of living a good life. By involving children in assessing and feeding back on character education lessons, they can grow in understanding of what contributes to good learning about character and virtue. By asking children to write their own reports on character, you can open up their reflective vocabulary and self-understanding. By sharing assessment descriptors across the stages of developing virtue, children can formulate a mental landscape of how virtue is developed and it can provide them with the drive to aspire to grow in virtue over a lifetime.