



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Insight Series

*Viewing Social Emotional Learning
through a Character Education Lens*

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Introduction

Distinguishing between character education and social emotional learning is a vital task given that the two fields are, at times, conflated conceptually and have often been merged in practice. When such conflation and merging occurs, important differences between the fields become obscured. On the other hand, it would also be misleading to present these two fields as wholly independent of one another, or as glaring opposites. The aim of this statement, therefore, is to clarify similarities and differences between social emotional learning and a neo-Aristotelian approach to character education and, more specifically, to advance ideas about how social emotional learning might be viewed and enhanced through the lens of character education.

Definitions and Connections

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues¹ *A Framework for Character Education in Schools* defines character education as ‘all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people develop positive personal strengths called *virtues*’ (2017; 2). Definitions of social emotional learning abound. Some have defined social emotional learning as ‘interventions that seek to improve pupils’ decision-making skills, interaction with others and their self-management of emotions, rather than focusing directly on the academic or cognitive elements of learning’², whereas as a leading SEL framework in America is more expansive, emphasising ‘the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions’³.

In practice, however, educational frameworks (and indeed educational settings) often blend aspects of character education and social emotional learning, or view them as separate but mutually beneficial endeavours (as the following examples from leading organisations in the field illustrate):

¹ <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/character-education/Framework%20for%20Character%20Education.pdf>

² <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/social-and-emotional-learning>

³ <https://casel.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/CASEL-SEL-Framework-11.2020.pdf>

Greater Good in Education – UC Berkeley

“While character strengths such as honesty, fairness, forgiveness, and compassion are something we all aspire to, it can be challenging to use them when faced with an ethical challenge. This is where social-emotional skills are key: they help us put our character strengths into action” (https://ggie.berkeley.edu/learn-more-about-sel/#tab_1).

Character.org National Guidelines for Character & Social Emotional Development

“Fused together, the SEL skills and the four areas of character [moral, intellectual, civic and performance] express the penultimate goal for all parents and educators: a thriving and striving person of character. Our goal as parents and educators ought to be more than raising or graduating smart teenagers. We also want our children and students to be kind and honest and individuals who other people trust. In sum...a good person. Developmentally, the ultimate “home run” is raising and graduating young people with a “striving mindset” -- a lifelong conviction and active commitment to becoming their best possible selves by consistently practicing, improving, and modeling the SEL skills and character strengths described in these National Guidelines” (<https://character.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CSED-Natl-Guidelines-2022.pdf>).

There are several pragmatic reasons for bringing character education and social emotional learning closer together. First, both character education and social emotional learning are interested in the self-regulation/self-management of emotions, in decision-making, and in positive social interactions. Second, both character education and social emotional learning are broadly concerned with, and contribute to, a holistic view of the child and of education that extends beyond an overly narrow focus on academic success and preparation for employment. Third, both character education and social emotional learning are more likely to feature as whole-school approaches rooted in culture, ethos and relationships than as discipline subjects with codified curricular and specific time-tabled lessons. Fourth, both character education and social emotional learning have been identified as impacting on a range of student outcomes, including:

- improved social and emotional skills;
- improved academic attainment;
- improved attitudes, behaviour and relationships with others; and,
- reduced emotional distress.

While the blending of character education and social emotional learning *might* be of educational value if thought through carefully and precisely, without intentionality and conceptual clarity about the differences and overlaps involved, the full potential of character education will not be realised. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that a number of attempts to set out the relation between social emotional learning and character education already exist. However, these attempts frequently suffer from certain important misconceptions which mean that the precise relationship between social emotional learning and character education is further confused. Three misconceptions are particularly conspicuous. The first is to view character education as a component of social emotional

learning rather than a substantive field in its own right. When character education is collapsed into social emotional learning in this way, its conceptual and educational breadth is diminished. The second misconception involves identifying differences between social emotional learning and character education based on what, in actuality, are misinterpretations or misrepresentations. A common mistake, for instance, is to view social emotional learning as being more concerned with critical values clarification, with character education requiring students to conform, approaching virtues in an uncritical manner. The idea that character education is necessarily indoctrinatory is a myth⁴. Indeed, neo-Aristotelian form of character education esteems critical components of virtue and emphasises the importance of character sought alongside character taught and caught (Arthur and Kristjánsson, 2022⁵). A third misconception occurs when overlaps between social emotional learning and character education overlook substantive differences between key concepts. A case in point is viewing ‘responsible decision making’ and ‘*phronesis*’ as synonymous. While *phronesis* certainly involves the making and taking of responsible decisions, it is a more complex and multifaceted concept⁶.

Conceptual Distinctions

Conceptually, there does appear to be some fertile ground for identifying areas of overlap between character education and social emotional learning. The influence that work on emotional intelligence has had on social emotional learning is a case in point. This influence, at least on the surface, seems to ‘reinforce the Aristotelian point that virtue is about emotion as well as action: that in order to be fully virtuous, a person must not only act, but also react, in the right way, toward the right people, at the right time’⁷. An example from a virtue perspective would be the virtue of compassion, which is dependent on an emotional response (in this case to the suffering of another) – without which the virtue would not get off the ground in the first place. Certainly, the virtuous agent is one able to manage their emotions, bring this into right relation with reason, and who is able to build positive relationships with others.

However, on closer inspection, substantive differences between character education and social and emotional learning can be pinpointed. First and foremost, it is not certain that social emotional learning is *necessarily nor profoundly* concerned with character and character formation. Even those forms of social and emotional learning that draw specifically on the concept of emotional intelligence (and in doing so do make some reference to the concept of character) seem committed to a more general sense of character than neo-Aristotelian approaches to character education. In his work on emotional intelligence, for example, Daniel Goleman⁸ defined character as a body of ‘skills that emotional intelligence represents’. In contrast, neo-Aristotelian approaches to character education are concerned with stable and more deeply held dispositions of character (*hexeis*) that are morally assessable, and which can be targeted more precisely in educational interventions⁹.

⁴ Kristjánsson, K. (2013) ‘Ten Myths About Character, Virtue and Virtue Education – Plus Three Well-Founded Misgivings’, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 61:3, 269-287.

⁵ https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/insight-series/JAKK_CharacterSought.pdf

⁶ https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/Phronesis_Report.pdf;

<https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/Phronesis%20Report.pdf>; Darnell, C., Gulliford, L., Kristjánsson, K. and Paris, P. (2019) ‘Phronesis and the Knowledge-Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis?’, *Human Development*, vol. 62, pp. 101–129.

⁷ Kristjánsson, K. (2006) ‘Emotional intelligence’ in the classroom? An Aristotelian critique, *Educational Theory*, 56(1): 39-56.

⁸ Goleman, D. (1995) *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.

⁹ Kristjánsson, K. (2006) ‘Emotional intelligence’ in the classroom? An Aristotelian critique, *Educational Theory*, 56(1): 39-56.

Other distinctions between character education and social emotional learning also point to important differences. The most significant of these are:

- character education has a constitutive dimension concerning 'the good', a dimension social emotional learning lacks.
- social emotional learning is focused on skills for living, the improvement of emotional self-management and positive relationships, whereas character education is concerned with meaning, the purpose of living a good life and human flourishing.
- character education has a humanistic view of the person, while social emotional learning has a functional view of the person.
- character education places special importance on the cultivation of *phronesis* or practical wisdom as a *meta*-virtue whereas social emotional learning relies only on responsible decision-making as one competence among others.
- social emotional learning typically draws on psychological and subjective measures of emotional and social wellbeing while character education appeals to moral and objective criteria.
- social emotional learning stresses the need for students to be socially aware and to understand the role of emotions in positive relationships with others, while character education understands virtues to be social in nature and cultivated within and through communal relationships.

Enhancing Social Emotional Learning through a Character Education Lens

Several leading organisations have understood and appreciated how social emotional learning can be enhanced and extended through a character education lens. Earlier in this statement the work of *Character.org* and the *Greater Good in Education* project were cited as significant examples. There remains, however, a scope for further advancement in recognising how social emotional learning can be extended through an intentional, explicit and authentic commitment to character. Constructive foci for enhancing social emotional learning through the lens of character education, each drawn from the JCCV's *Framework*, include:

- Recognising that social and emotional development will be more consistent and long-lasting if that development is rooted in deeply held, stable character traits or virtues.
- More clearly and explicitly connecting social and emotional development to moral and civic purpose, including what it means to live a good life.
- Being cognisant of different domains of life, including the particular dimensions of each, the relation between each and how each connects to human and societal flourishing.
- Identifying different components of virtue, including the components that comprise *Virtue Literacy*.
- Integrating the conceptual and practical affordances of the intellectual *meta*-virtue of *phronesis*;

- Incorporating a pedagogical model of education that articulates clearly not only the caught and taught aspects of social emotional learning, but which also embraces the sought (i.e. students seeking their own character development).
- Understanding that social emotional learning is not synonymous with character education, but also that character education can usefully draw on the skills of social emotional learning as an area of convergence.

By paying attention to each of these areas, the competences central to social emotional learning can be extended to find deeper personal, institutional and societal meaning, purpose and direction.

Areas for Further Discussion and Research

While this statement has identified important differences between character education and social emotional learning, some important questions remain. Pertinent questions include:

- 1) Given their different conceptual bases and traditions, how is the relationship between character education and social emotional learning best conceived?
- 2) How, and why, do the conceptual differences between character education and social emotional learning matter for instructional approaches in educational settings?
- 3) How do educators understand, merge and operationalise character education and social emotional learning in practice?
- 4) Can the emotional awareness and self-management central to social emotional learning operate effectively without the guide of an over-arching virtue such as *phronesis*?
- 5) Can character education be strengthened by integrating any foundations of social emotional learning? If so, which and how?



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- ◆ *Promoting a moral concept of character in order to explore the importance of virtue for public and professional life.*
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