A Curriculum for Human Flourishing: Position Statement

Introduction

The Department for Education in the UK aims to develop a 'broader, richer, cutting-edge curriculum that drives high and rising school standards and equips all young people for life and work.' Becky Francis CBE is currently leading a review to guide changes to the curriculum in England. In this statement, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham, The Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, and the Association for Character Education advocate that the overarching aim of the new curriculum should be to promote individual and societal flourishing, with character education being an explicit and core component of all schooling, for the following reasons:

i) A curriculum focused on flourishing will ensure a broad and holistic approach, preparing young people to face the challenges of the modern world.

ii) In the UK and globally, there is a growing emphasis on flourishing as the central goal of education, and this trend is likely to become increasingly prominent in educational policymaking. A curriculum for flourishing will thus be future proof.

iii) Extensive evidence links character and values-based education to improved academic performance, better behaviour, and long-term success in both employment and personal life.

iv) Evidence shows that emphasising character education for human flourishing will be appealing to school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and the wider community.

In this jointly written position statement, we outline our commitment to the development of a new curriculum for schools in England that foregrounds human flourishing.

Background

The concepts of *student flourishing* and *character education* have been making headlines in recent educational literatures. But how are they related and why should they be central to the above vision for the curriculum review?

The concept of *human flourishing* – denoting predominantly objective, evaluable features of human wellbeing – has recently come into vogue within various areas of the humanities and social sciences (philosophy, psychology, economics, health sciences, education) after playing only a marginal role since its heyday within ancient theorising about the good life. This development is perhaps most noticeable within education where the concept has garnered significant attention and has become a major item on educational agendas[1], most conspicuously seen by the fact that the biggest international policymaker in the field, OECD, which runs the famous PISA-tests comparing countries in terms of their 15-year old students'

[1] See Kristjánsson, K. (2020). *Flourishing as the aim of education: A neo-Aristotelian view*. Routledge; de Ruyter, D. J., Oades, L. G., Waghid, Y., Ehrenfeld, J., Gilead, T., & Singh, N. C. (2022). Education for flourishing and flourishing in education. In O. Ergas, T. Gilead, & N. C. Singh (Eds.), *Reimagining education: International science and evidence based education assessment*. UNESCO MGIEP; Kristjánsson, K. & VanderWeele, T. J. (2024). The proper scope of education for flourishing. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, in press. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1093/jopedu/qhae056

educational achievements, is moving away from a decades-old human capital theory about the aims of education (as mainly utilitarian/economical) and is considering adopting human flourishing as the primary aim of education[2]. Organisations that support thousands of schools across the UK, including the Confederation of School Trusts, Catholic Education Service, and National Society for Education (Church of England), have also been championing education for human flourishing in recent times.

The motivation for this rediscovered interest in flourishing, in particular in education circles, lies in increased student dissatisfaction and disenfranchisement. The great strides that have been made since WW2 regarding some of the main objective predictors of human flourishing, such as a drastic reduction in abject poverty, illiteracy, preventable poverty-linked disease, population growth, and the frequency of serious crime and warfare, seem to stand in stark contrast to an epidemic of mental ill health that is affecting young people around the world, either as classified pathologies or less specific feelings of ennui and hopelessness. Cultural critic David Brooks goes as far as claiming that we are enmeshed in an 'emotional, relational, and spiritual crisis', undergirding our social, political, and educational dysfunction[3].

Various conceptions of the concept of flourishing are competing for allegiance in academic and policy circles: neo-Aristotelian, liberal, positive psychological, to name just three. However, the definitions of student flourishing that are being aimed for in those circles usually try to incorporate and synthesise different elements from all three conceptions. The definitions on offer all tend to focus on the fulfilment of human potential, the development of a value-driven identity and virtuous agency, and the salience of strong social relationships.

Such general definitions need to be operationalised for practical educational purposes, however. The operationalisation advocated by The Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University is particularly relevant practically because of the extensive use of the flourishing measure they have created. Observing first that flourishing can be understood as a state in which all 'aspects of a person's life are good', the operationalisation moves towards identifying the life domains that would command general acceptance as the relevant 'aspects' within which flourishing can be explored: namely, '(i) happiness and life satisfaction; (ii) health, both mental and physical; (iii) meaning and purpose; (iv) character and virtue; and (v) close social relationships. All are arguably at least a part of what we mean by flourishing. Each of these domains also satisfies the following two criteria: (i) Each domain is generally viewed as an end in itself, and (ii) each domain is nearly universally desired'[4]. In addition to operationalising the generic concept of human flourishing, attention must be given to its application in educational contexts, which will need to take account of various contextual factors, relevant to education in particular[5]. Besides its measure of adult flourishing, the Harvard Program has created a measure for ages 12-18, and is in the process of developing and validating measures for ages 9-11 and 5-8.

To turn now to *character education*, 'character' refers to the reason-responsive, morally evaluable, and educable part of human personhood. Positive traits of character have

[2] Stevenson, M. (2022). *Education for human flourishing*. Retrieved from:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LKxCvKbk6wFh2xQffxv5hIVCjy8STVKt/view
[3] Brooks, D. (2023). How America got mean. *The Atlantic*, September issue. Retrieved from
https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/09/us-culture-moral-education-formation/674765/
[4] VanderWeele, T. J. (2017). On the promotion of human flourishing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(31), 8148–8156.
[5] Kristjánsson & VanderWeele, op.cit.; VanderWeele, T. J. & Hinton, C. (2024). Metrics for education for flourishing: A framework. *Journal of Wellbeing*, 14(1), 1-35.

traditionally been called 'virtues'; and those are standardly divided into moral, civic, intellectual, and performance virtues. 'Character education' then covers all systematic educational efforts to cultivate the virtues, through 'caught', 'taught', or 'sought' methods[6].

So how is character related to human flourishing? The first thing to note is that 'flourishing' has historically been seen as the key concept in character education, rather than the concepts of 'character' or 'virtues' because of its foundational role as the 'ungrounded grounder' of all human strivings. Ask a person about any of their life goals and why those are important to them, including the development of their character. Continue asking the 'why' question until you hit rock bottom and the question becomes senseless. Where does that rock bottom lie? It is when the person answers you by saying that their deepest life goal is leading a good, flourishing life. A further questioning on why they would want to live a good, flourishing life sounds inane. Hence, we seem to have hit upon a justification that is psychologically foundational.

Referring back to the six domains that the Human Flourishing Program considers to make up human flourishing, 'character and virtues' is one of them (iv above). So the second link between character and flourishing is that the former forms one of the necessary ingredients in the latter. However, the relationship goes much deeper than that, for if we look at the other five domains of human flourishing, character traits are also conducive to, or even constitutive of, all of them in different ways: (i) Exhibiting good character, for instance through deeds of compassion, generosity, and gratitude, is a known predictor of happiness. (ii) Many wellbeing problems are arguably created by or mask underlying character issues, such as not having found a moral/existential purpose in life. (iii) Character development, especially the development of the overarching intellectual virtue of practical wisdom, cannot take place unless learners have found meaning in their studies and endeavours: a 'blueprint' of their own good life (v) Good relationships cannot be formed without moral and civic virtues, such as trustworthiness, friendship, giving to others, and civility. Finally (vi), grade attainment and job success, which lead to financial and material stability, are greatly influenced by character virtues. For example, employers typically seek out job applicants who are reliable and truthful.

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[6] Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. (2022). *A framework for character education in schools*. Retrieved from: https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/The-Jubilee-Centre-Framework-for-Character-Education-in-Schools-April-2024.pdf

Conclusion

Since character is integral to human flourishing at all levels and across all domains, it is essential that schools offer an explicit, authentic, and well-planned character education program. Andreas Schleicher, Director of Education and Skills at the OECD and the effective leader of the PISA tests, put it succinctly when he said that 'character is perhaps the most central outcome of education. And character will only materialize and develop where it is valued, where it is made visible, and where it is seen. You cannot be what you cannot see. You cannot improve if you do not know what improvement looks like'[7].

It is our contention, based on a significant body of research, that a curriculum for flourishing will ensure that character is:

Caught through a positive school community, formative relationships, and a clear, values-driven ethos.

Taught through the curriculum by employing effective teaching strategies, activities, and resources.

Sought through a broad and enriching learning experience that emphasises both formal and informal educational opportunities.

An explicit focus on flourishing and character education is the key to fulfilling the ambition of providing all pupils with a broad, rich, and cutting-edge curriculum that fully equips them for the challenges and opportunities of life and work.

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[7] Schleicher, A. (2024). Lessons from the pandemic: An international perspective on character education. *The Hedgehog Review*, 26(1), 34-40.