The rise of character education in Britain: heroes, dragons and the myths of character [Book review]

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THE RISE OF CHARACTER EDUCATION IN BRITAIN: HEROES, DRAGONS AND THE MYTHS OF CHARACTER (2019), LEE JEROME AND BEN KISBY.
Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 137pp.
ISBN: 978-3-030-27760-4 (hardcover) 51,99 €
ISBN 978-3-030-27761-1 (eBook), 42,79 €
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Over recent years, the concept of character education in English schools has become more and more prominent. In 2019, it was announced by Ofsted (the United Kingdom's school inspectorate) that schools would be judged on '…wider work support[ing] learners to develop their character — including their resilience, confidence and independence…' (2019, p. 11). This was then followed up in November of that year by a document providing guidance to schools on character education, which included a list of benchmarks relating to leadership, curriculum, behaviour, access, and service with claims that character education has the ability to help students develop positive moral attributes, acquire social confidence, and to improve social mobility (Department for Education 2019). It is with claims such as these that the book The Rise of Character Education in Britain: Heroes, Dragons and the Myths of Character takes issue.

Thus, the book has been published at a significant time in the development of character education in Britain and is suitable for educators both in academic and school settings. The authors, Lee Jerome and Ben Kisby, who are both widely published in the field of citizenship education, make a compelling case for the need to critically examine this rising trend and furthermore need to safeguard the subject of citizenship education, as character education is often viewed as its successor or as a challenge to its existence (Davies 2016, Beck 2018, Weinberg and Flinders 2018).

The book contains seven chapters spread across three sections. After the introductory chapter, the first section (chapters 2 and 3), provide a background to the issue of character education, both conceptually and within UK policy. Chapter two begins by introducing the reader to the term "virtue ethics" and the Aristotelian foundation on which UK character education is mainly based. The authors' provide a valuable critique of this approach by suggesting that as this type of ethics is more focussed on the person undertaking the act, this can lead young people to face problems when virtues conflict and fails to equip students with the skills to analyse social structures. Chapter three provides further background by charting the history of character education in Britain, from the "muscular Christianity" in the mid-18th century to its return during the 2010 Coalition government and its changing nature throughout the intervening years. In this chapter, Jerome and Kisby also introduce what they call the "character education policy community", which includes the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values which is a major influence on character education in England.

The resources produced by the Jubilee Centre are addressed in the first chapter of section two (chapters four and five). Here, Jerome and Kisby highlight some of the issues with the resources, such as their individualised and depoliticised nature, and the lack of potential for moral reasoning. The authors use as a framework Kristjánsson's (2013) defence of character

education and argue that the resources have '…failed to live up to Kristjánsson's idealised model, and has itself fallen into some of the problems and pitfalls he identifies'. (2019, p. 78). Chapter five looks at three more case studies of character education: the Military Ethos funding for alternative provision; the "Rugby Values" of 'teamwork, respect, enjoyment, discipline, sportsmanship'; and the "Narnian Virtues" project run by the University of Leeds. They describe this as being 'old wine, new bottles', likening the projects to Victorian Character Education. This provides more evidence for their argument that a lack of engagement with citizenship education approaches moves the focus of such projects away from developing an understanding of the country's democratic systems.

The final section of the book (chapter six), critiques character education through a direct comparison with citizenship education, bringing to the fore the argument which has developed through the book arguing that the latter has a better chance of encouraging young people to develop into active citizens. They suggest that character education turns individuals into neo-liberal citizens whereas citizenship education enables '…young people to engage in civic and political activities' (2019, p. 107). Jerome and Kisby indicate that character education approaches see young people as "moral vacuums" in contrast to citizenship educators who appreciate students as "political agents". They summarise that citizenship education '…develop[s] students' understandings of how democratic societies function, and the role that citizens can play in sustaining them' (2019, p. 121). Finally, following the final section, the authors successfully wrap up the book with chapter seven, the concluding chapter.

The crux of Jerome and Kisby's argument is that character education is fundamentally problematic for many reasons and does not provide students with the skills needed to live in a participatory democracy. They lament the lack of criticality that is provided by an education based on character with an adult authority figure often holding the "correct" answer and that the political discourse of character education as a path to social mobility ignores the unequal social structures within society and the impact of austerity on young people and their families by individualising success and not seeking to understand the wider system. Jerome and Kisby stress the need to critically examine the initiatives funded, and resources produced to understand how character education is being delivered. They furthermore highlight what they argue are the flawed methodologies in the evaluations of some of the character education projects that have been touted as successes and call for a more rigorous approach in their assessment. Citizenship education is provided as a valuable alternative to character education, which they argue can reduce disparities in social engagement (2019, p. 116).

Overall, this book provides an important contribution to the current debates surrounding the growing popularity of character education in England. Its only deficit is that there is a lack of the authors' own empirical research or richer examples of citizenship education, which would have further strengthened their argument when criticising character education projects. However, I am aware this would have been difficult in the length available. A particular strength of this book is its accessibility. It is surprisingly rare to find a book that is equally suitable for both academics and practitioners, however I suggest The Rise of Character Education in Britain is an example of this and provides those working in the area with much needed food for thought regarding the arguments.

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