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Through the Wardrobe of character education: unveiling complexities in implementing the Narnian virtues curriculum

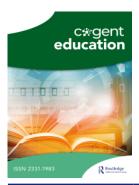HART, Peter and LIDDLE, Anna <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7491-9771>

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Published online: 22 Oct 2024.

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Through the Wardrobe of character education: unveiling complexities in implementing the Narnian virtues curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on findings from a qualitative evaluation of the Narnian Virtues Character Education English Curriculum (NV) in the context of critical engagement with the field of character education. We recognise many people argue for or against character education based on ideological positions. This article will reflect on how those positions relate to our data, recognising in practice dominant neoliberal and deficit narratives influence the operationalising of the curriculum. It is then argued that character education has the potential to promote the wellbeing of young people where there exists robust conceptualisions of character and young people, whilst also making an overt effort to resist and challenge dominant ideologies.

Introduction

The year 2019 saw the culmination of a three-year English literature-based character-education project based on C.S. Lewis' 'Chronicles of Narnia', titled 'Narnian Virtues'. We conducted a qualitative evaluation involving 70 participants, before engaging in an extended period of reflection both on the state of character education in the UK, and how this project contributed to dominant discourses within character education (that is, the intentional attempt to develop 'positive' or 'pro-social' characteristics within students). Here, we report the results of the evaluation and a reflective account of the project, arguing that while character education *can* promote the wellbeing of young people and their communities, robust conceptualisations of character and young people that can be properly operationalised are required to challenge dominant neoliberal and deficit discourses.

During the project students were taught the meaning of six 'Narnian' virtues (love, fortitude, self-control, justice, wisdom and integrity). They were considered 'universal' (that is, the NV curriculum material provided specific definitions and examples of practices and defined them as being 'good for everyone'), although the extent to which virtues can be universal is contested (Carr, 2005; Plummer, 2011, p. 95; Suissa, 2015). Many of the activities eliciting personal engagement were rooted in Rossenblatt's reader response theory (Pike, 2004), focussing on finding examples in the text for the existence of these virtues (or their opposing vices) and students applying the examples of 'virtuous' behaviour to their own lives. Narnian Virtues was rooted in an Aristotelian understanding of 'virtue', shared by Lewis' approach to ethics (Lewis, 1943), and used Lickona's (1997, p. 2) definition of character as 'a constellation of virtues possessed by a person', and character education as 'the deliberate attempt to cultivate virtue'. Virtues were described as 'good moral habits', although 'good' was not defined.[1]

At the time Narnian Virtues was being trialled in schools there were two dominant voices influencing character education in the UK. Firstly, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (University of Birmingham), who utilise an Aristotelian framework (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017) with a focus on the development of intellectual, moral, civic, and performance virtues through teaching. In this context, virtues are dispositions to think and act in a way that leads to the flourishing of the individual and society. Secondly, the Office for Standatds in Education, Childrens services and Skills, who inspect schools in England and Wales (OFSTED, 2019), were promoting performance-based characteristics compatible with a neoliberal education system (Bull & Allen, 2018; Jerome & Kisby, 2019, 2022).

Kristjánsson (2021, p. 1) argues character education is a 'highly controversial educational topic' in the UK. Aware of the critics, this article broadly takes the position that character education *could* be a resource for developing important skills and dispositions that enable young people to flourish and appropriately challenge unjust structures around them. There is some evidence character education improves wellbeing (Park et al., 2004; Pike et al., 2021) ; and moral progress in young people (Schinkel & de Ruyter, 2017), it can develop dispositions to challenge structural inequality and oppression (Sayer, 2020) and teaching is an ethical endeavour suited to facilitating character development (Higgins, 2011; Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016). The extent to which flourishing is an aim of education is contested, particularly in a neoliberal landscape that prioritises the market, however as with Kristjánsson (2017) we argue that flourishing is a paradigm that takes a strengths-based approach to student wellbeing, and that it is part of the moral purpose of education that is concerned with 'human growth' in a broader context than academic skills (Higgins, 2011).

Character education is also taking place within the context of a morally complex world (Bleazby, 2020, p. 84), with young people facing contemporary challenges including: climate change (Verlie & Flynn, 2022), increased awareness and visibility of young victims of sexual harassment (Horn & Poteat, 2023), and navigating 'fake news' (Skipper et al., 2023). As such, it seems reasonable that schools should facilitate the development of skills necessary to navigate these debates, and character education may be one way to structure this.

Criticisms of character education

Despite the potential for character education, critics have presented three overarching complaints around how character education has been researched and operationalised in the UK: a disposition towards neoliberal aims and processes; a focus on predefined virtues that imply deficiencies both in character and the resources to develop character; and conflation with religiosity and/or moralising.

Neoliberalism. Kristjánsson (2021) has refuted the neoliberal assumption, and has challenged critics to better define this somewhat nebulous enemy; it is beyond the scope of this article to do that, however we are using Ball's (2016) understanding of neoliberalism affecting education through the prioritisation of standardised testing and preparation for the employment marketplace. Similarly, character education can be justified by evidence of correlation with higher exam grades (Duckworth et al., 2007; Tough, 2012); although by implication people with lower grades may be assumed to lack character, with Handsman (2021) arguing this propagates racist and classist stereotypes. Therefore, Character Education can reflect a neoliberal prioritisation of standardised testing and future employability above challenging current injustices; this would appear to fulfil Ball's understanding of the neoliberal prioritisation of the market in education. The promulgation of easily digestible and simplistically operationalised virtues would also fit into Ball's understanding of the homogenising managerial force of neoliberalism.

However, character education can challenge the notion that the school is only interested in academic achievement and may be constructed as the de-neoliberalising of education (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 1). This relationship is complex; the neoliberal agenda is pervasive, and sites of resistance can be co-opted to the neoliberal agenda (Thompson et al., 2021). Here, it may be possible that a genuine attempt by some to engage in character-work to focus on the 'whole student' has served a homogenising neoliberal agenda that makes character work more palatable to a neoliberal system.

Predefined virtues and deficit narratives. Critics have also asserted that this operationalising of virtue and character education typically focusses on individualised character 'deficiencies' (Sayer, 2020; Suissa, 2015) and underplays the effect of social inequalities (Bates, 2019, p. 113; Sanderse, 2019). Consequently, the

neoliberalising of character makes individuals culpable for wider systemic problems (Jerome & Kisby, 2022), and curriculum designers who provide a predefined set of virtues without consultation with participants have been accused of 'epistemological arrogance' (Suissa, 2015, p. 107). This lack of participation in what, and how, virtue is understood and developed diminishes young people's agency in how ethical issues are framed, understood, and responses manifest (Hart, 2022), which presupposes a deficit approach to character.

Moralising. Finally, critics also highlight that, to some extent, there exists a succession of moral panics and 'respectable fears' (Pearson, 1984) around young people's character, that Arthur (2008) has previously described as a 'litany of alarm' and includes a list of socially constructed 'deviant' behaviours (e.g. teenage pregnancy and sexual activity). In the UK – and particularly the work of the Jubilee Centre – this fear mongering is muted, however some character education curricula can portray 'Victorian Pulpit style' moralising (Jerome & Kisby, 2019, p. 64) with roots in 'muscular Christianity' (Taylor, 2018).

Background to the project

This project began in 2016 as a three-year long project, based on a previous pilot study in 2014 (Francis et al., 2017; Pike et al., 2015). Narnian Virtues (NV) encouraged young people to see themselves as individuals who care about character, and emphasise their agency over their character development. The NV Teachers' Guide described the aim of creating a 'community of virtue' where students are challenged to set 'target virtues' and put them into practice.

In the autumn term of each year, students (years 7 to 9, ages 11 to 14, the beginning of UK secondary school) would study one of the *Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis. The books referred to here are *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* (LWW), and *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (VDT). These books tell the adventures of children from the Pevensie family in the fantasy land of Narnia. The books include allegorical aspects, in particular the creator of Narnia, Aslan the lion, is a Christ-figure, drawn from Lewis' Christian faith.

The Narnia novels were chosen because they: are perennial favourites amongst children; had characters of a similar age to the students participating in the study; and because Lewis had subscribed to a largely Aristotelian view of character development (Lewis, 1943; Pike, 2013). It was also a pre-existing interest of the Principal Investigator (Pike, 2013). Hart worked on the project from 2016 after the pilot had completed with a focus on data collection and analysis, Liddle joined the team for the final six months of the project, to support the final qualitative evaluation in 2019

Each year NV lasted for 12 weeks (the autumn term), two hours of class time per week, and included a homework activity book titled the 'Character Passport' through which students were asked to engage with parents in social action or self-reflection activities (Paul et al., 2022).

The virtues for this study were chosen by the curriculum designers based on their relevance for contemporary students, as informed by the virtues recognised by organisations such as Character.Org, and their prevalence in the novels. We recognise that the novels reflect the some of the values of 1950s Britain (Echterling, 2016; Subramanian, 2020), ; and benefit from some critical interrogation in a diverse society, although the curriculum did not engage with these more problematic themes.

Literature in general (Arthur et al., 2014; Vezzali et al., 2015) and the work of Lewis in particular (Pike, 2013) has been associated with moral development. Typically, these studies evidence a quantitative increase in knowledge of ethics (or 'virtue literacy'), and qualitative evidence of changes in behaviour (Carr & Harrison, 2015, p. 5; Francis et al., 2018). Other data collected earlier in this project found significant increases in students' knowledge and understanding of virtue (Hart et al., 2020), a broadly positive impact on family life through increasing opportunities for meaningful conversation (Paul et al., 2022), and an effect on self-reflection and empathy (Hart et al., 2020). For a final round of qualitative data collection, reported here, we set about a more holistic account of the impacts of the curriculum as constructed by students and teachers.

Methodology

Our intention was to conduct a Fourth Generation Evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 8) to understand how the project had been 'constructed' by the stakeholders. Epistemologically, this was rooted in hermeneutics as it attempted to understand the way participants interpreted their involvement in Narnian Virtues (Smythe et al., 2008). As a constructivist evaluation, the lived experience of stakeholders was

prioritised over any pre-existing expectations of impact from the curriculum designers. Although time limited our ability to complete the full methodology, our data collection still followed the process of broad and open questions about the impact of the curriculum in the widest sense and narrowed towards testing past constructions of NV from other participants.

Narnian Virtues initially had twelve schools delivering the curriculum across two cohorts. Schools self-selected after a series of invitations were made through email and physical letter across Yorkshire and North-East England. As such, most schools had leadership with a pre-existing interest in Character Education. The first cohort ran as a form of pilot, the second cohort was a matched controlled trial. One school withdrew at the end of year 1, and a further six withdrew at the end of year two. Reasons given for withdrawal focussed on the difficulty of including a character education curricula within core English curriculum time, and a concern around using novels from the same series in successive years. We consider some of the practical issues in delivering the curriculum in our findings, and these may also have contributed to attrition rates. In total we collected data from four of the five schools who participated to the end of the project (in one school this was not possible due to staff absence, who did not return until after the end of the project). We held 13 student focus groups with 54 students, three focus groups with a total of 16 teachers, plus survey responses from six teachers who could not attend a focus group. The focus groups all occurred from January to March 2019. The breakdown by school was:

- 'Simon Academy': four groups totalling 16 students, and one with six teachers, part of a multi-academy trust with a broadly Christian ethos serving a local catchment with no 'faith-test' for admissions.
- 'Cedar Hill Academy' four groups totalling 17 students, and one with four teachers, a community school.
- 'St Catherine High School' three groups totalling 11 students, and a survey with six teachers, a state-funded Catholic school.
- 'Plumwood School' two groups totalling ten students, and one with six teachers, a community school.

The names of the schools are pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. Likewise, no student names are used, with respondents given a number (e.g. 'Student 1'). As there were multiple groups of students within each school, group numbers are also allocated for clarity.

All focus groups were made up of year 8 pupils, except for two groups of year 9 students from Simon Academy. All teachers were invited to take part. Teachers were asked to pick 5-6 students at random from each class, however we are aware that in at least one school, teachers chose from a pool of students they believed would be 'talkative'.

Focus groups were chosen to allow the co-construction of the impacts and understandings of the curriculum, and had the benefit of increasing the comfort level of participants and redressed some of the power differential with researchers. The semi-structured questioning allowed the groups to articulate the impact the curriculum had on them with limited leading by the researchers. The groups with students took on average around thirty minutes, the groups with teachers took on average around 45 minutes. Focus group questions were divided into two sections. Firstly, semi-structured questions uncovered participants' understandings of NV. The second set of questions developed as the data collection progressed. At first, these were based on themes from past data collection and then progressed so later groups could comment on the constructions of earlier groups.

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted by the two authors, one of whom was only involved in the evaluation to provide more objective distance on the interpretation of the data (Liddle). The authors considered two focus groups independently and then shared the themes to ensure consistency, before independently analysing the rest of the data. As we attempted to present the constructions of the curriculum provided by participants as closely as possible, we initially identified over 100 codes. Over several iterations, many of these codes coalesced into the broad themes presented below (some codes were lost in the analysis as part of this process). For ease and clarity, we then placed those themes that had some relationship to each other under the headings presented in the next section. NVivo software was used to manage the data set.

The research was given approval by the University of Leeds ethics committee (AREA 15–170). Students and teachers opted into the focus groups. We recognised the imbalance of power between teachers and students could lead to children being coerced into participating, the researchers made every effort to ensure children knew they could return to class at any time, however only one student left a focus group early.

Results

The overarching headings we have used to organise the data are: formal and operant aims of the curriculum; deficit approaches to character; the suitability of the curriculum in an English secondary school classroom; and the development of character. Two of these are, in themselves, themes from the data ('deficit approaches to character' and 'development of character'), while two are headings that house inter-related themes. Each of these headings, and the themes they contain, are presenting a summary of the dominant constructions of Narnian Virtues from perspective of the participants.

Formal and Operant aims of the Curriculum	Cultivating virtue
	Neoliberalism
	Proselytizing & Religious aims
Deficit approaches to character	
Suitability of the curriculum in English secondary school classrooms	Academically (un)suitable
	Vulnerability
	Encroaching on home life
Development of Character	

Formal and operant aims of the curriculum

Cultivating virtue
As a project situated in English lessons, NV focussed on developing vocabulary, skills of inference and prediction, and comprehension alongside character development and 'cultivating virtue'. Virtue was defined in the teachers' handbook as:

> good moral habits; good character consists of these good habits. If a person is 'of good character', then he or she will have developed a range of virtues. (good habits)

Although not explicitly defined, being overtly rooted in an Aristotelian framework can imply an aim of the curriculum was the development of virtues that would lead to the flourishing of the student, predominantly through dialogue and habituation (Chen, 2015; Kristjánsson, 2015). These formal aims appeared different to the way in which the curriculum was operationalised.

Neoliberalism
This theme drew together codes around the future-focussed nature of character education, employability, adult social life, and exam success. The idea of students' character development as a means to facilitate justice, to develop their agency, or promote their wellbeing in the present was not reported by participants. Typically, the responses from participants around the aim of the curriculum alluded to a neoliberal approach to childhood and education as preparation for entry into the market. Across three of the four participating schools our focus groups described NV as preparation for the future.

> …it's going to help you when you get older. Like your punctuality, you come early to school now, because if you come late to school now it can affect your career when you get older, because you're going to be used to waking up late. [Cedar Hill G2]

This primary motivation that character will engender some material regard in the future is inconsistent with an Aristotelian understanding of flourishing through internal 'goods' rather than external rewards. The belief that 'good character' correlates with a better-paid career is challenged when many pro-social careers (e.g. nursing, teaching, caring) are lower paid and many higher paid careers (e.g. politicians, bankers) can prioritise anti-social characteristics around competition and personal gain.

However, there is a counter-narrative in the data too, that suggests the inclusion of NV is a softening of the neoliberal approach to education as it includes more than academic skills and begins to see students as a whole person. Students reflect on this:

Student 1: I think that the actual booklet that you do in class is useful, because it's not just, even though there's tasks to do, you can help improve your English as well, and it just improves your way of thinking about things.

Student 2: I think it was useful, the whole thing, and then you had the booklet, it was something different than just a normal English lesson, and it also just helped with virtues and stuff. [Plumwood G1]

Proselytizing & religious aims

This theme contains codes from participants showing an awareness of Narnia's theological context and assumption that character education has a religious moralistic element. Although the curriculum went some way to show Narnia as suitable for non-faith schools, and there was no particular intent to proselytise, it was perhaps predictable that using a story rooted in Christian theology to stimulate reflection on morality could be framed as religiously motivated. Therefore, the inculcating of religious values was identified by some participants as an aim of the curriculum.

Students reflected on this with relative neutrality or in response to their own faith. In a school with an ethnically diverse student body, a focus group at Cedar Hill Academy made a link to Islam, with one girl reporting:

Our religion is like Narnian almost, you know how we learn the virtues, it teaches us to become good human beings and stuff, and how to worship.

When asked why their school took part, this group said:

Student 1: Because with, in one of the home works it was decipher what the Narnian Virtues are and it was, it was from a Christian belief, Aslan is Jesus and stuff like that and the White Witch was the Devil leading people in to temptation or showing with Edmund.

Interviewer: Yeah, so you think … so, tell us a little bit more about that; why do you think this school is particularly interested in the Christian allegories, the … ?

Student 2: Because it's a Christian school, so it was a nice way to put a twist on a book that everyone likes and also dropping all the Christian belief, showing that the school is Christian but not making it a [Religious Education] lesson. Simon Academy G1

However, in the same school a teacher reported a parent saying 'we don't do this religious claptrap in our household' with regard to Narnian Virtues. The context around this specific school meant the surreptitious inclusion of religious teaching in non-religious subjects heightened sensitives amongst some families that were not reflected in other schools. This suggests the importance of context and the participation of stakeholders when making decisions on curriculum design, and the use of a religiously inspired text may have been an unnecessary barrier to participation in some schools.

Deficit approaches to character

This theme came from an acknowledgement that many participants' opinions on the curriculum (even if presented as a positive) assumed that there was some element of behaviour management or modification, or that the participants themselves (or their peers) required 'correction' from an external curriculum. All participants recognised NV as a form of character development, and the purpose and form of that character development was diverse, but the dominant construction was that NV was required because of 'bad' behaviours or people. Students saw the project as a form of self-improvement, for themselves and their fellow students and several students assumed they (or their classmates) lack some positive characteristics. Several teachers echoed this assumption.

A deficit approach to character is often manifest as the responsibilising of individuals for 'problem' behaviours or attitudes that are influenced by the wider environment, or when difference is constructed as deviant. Usually there is an attempt to 'fix' these 'deficiencies' of character with an external intervention. In our data, as in the curriculum, there was no attention paid to the notion that a lack of appropriate or stimulating education, poor relationships with teachers, factors to do with material disadvantage and social inequality, or compulsory schooling could create an environment for 'poor' behaviour.

For example, when asked why the school took part in NV, this group commented:

Student 1: Change people's personalities and stuff like that, to change how humans do stuff.

Student 2: Make people who have a bad character, a stronger character in life and better in life.

Student 3: To make people not do bad stuff, like some of the people that are in the book, like Eustace did.

Student 4: It makes us see that we should change our character and not become a bad person, but also change the way we see other people and stuff. [Cedar Hill, G3]

This idea of 'making people' behave in a certain way implied the need for an external force to correct students' behaviours that was demonstrated in other groups.

This deficit approach to perceptions of character was not explored or challenged in the NV material, and could even be read as supporting it – the idea of a character intervention implies students are currently lacking in character and require an external intervention for improvement, with the presentation of predefined virtues and a particular reading of the text presented as 'correct' implied that students were expected to see themselves as deficient not only in character, but the skill required for self-transformation. This is despite the rhetoric around young people's agency in the material.

The suitability of the curriculum in a secondary school English lesson

The suitability of the curriculum was called into question, predominantly by teachers, on grounds of: the level of engagement and challenge in the texts and curriculum; the appropriateness of such a character education project in English as a core curriculum subject; the way the virtues were framed, and the suitability of the family engagement.

Academic suitability

Although many students enjoyed LWW, teachers did not believe the book was appropriate for secondary English classes. The difficulty of the texts were problematised by some participants. Some students found LWW easy to read, and others struggled with the more complex VDT. Many of the students had read LWW at primary school, which affected their experience of the project. Variety was another issue; some staff said students were asking for more 'contemporary young adult fiction' (Plumwood), and students recommended the curriculum uses books 'not just from one series' to reduce repetition (Plumwood G2). Teachers explained that it was beneficial when other texts, such as *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, were brought into the study, saying:

it was nice to be able to talk about virtues, but I think sometimes it was just a case of feature spotting rather than actually getting the real-life application which I know your project was aiming towards. [Simon staff]

Teachers questioned Narnian Virtue's suitability as an English curriculum, partly because the books themselves did not have the features of language required to develop students and partly because of the lack of variety in tasks. Teachers and students both generally acknowledged that the curriculum developed: speaking and listening, understanding of narrative, vocabulary training, and creative writing. However, teachers were univocal that this curriculum was a distraction from teaching English, even with those teachers who were still supportive of the aims of the curriculum.

Therefore, most teachers felt NV needed 'decoupling' from English. Some of these seemed to view NV as intruding on the time that they had for teaching the necessary skills to complement the curriculum. One teacher told us that they thought the curriculum could be improved by considering the needs of the English classroom more:

I personally think that if it was taught as maybe a PSHE [Personal, Social and Health Education] and taken English out of it, I think it would have been more beneficial to them, because then that way we're just bombarding them this idea of being this kind of a person and not the English skills, and I think sometimes that kind of took away from what we were trying to do. They were thinking with their heads, they were thinking about it, but then when that pressure of the English skills came on, they kind of, it wasn't as effective [Cedar Hill staff]

Vulnerability

Although the initial pilot project had teachers, PGCE tutors and academics with expertise in English selecting the activities (see Francis et al., 2017), the changes made to the three year curriculum reported

here was completed over the summer holidays without input from outside the Narnian Virtues team. Many of the issues around the suitability of the curriculum highlight the importance of stakeholder participation in designing educational interventions. Here, for example, greater participation by classroom teachers may have improved the choice of novel and variety of English skills targeted by the activities, which would have improved the curriculum and furthered its character development aims.

When stakeholder participation happened later in the project, it improved the curriculum. After a relatively high level of attrition in year 1, we ran focus groups before year 2 and 3, with a small number of teachers attending. This feedback developed the curriculum, and this was acknowledged by teachers:

> … this time you've obviously taken the feedback and a lot of it you tried to link it in with the skills that they needed, whereas in Year 7 it was just the virtues that, there wasn't really any of the teaching of the English, so we had to embed that into the tasks that were created in that booklet. [Cedar Hill staff]

Several teachers reported that the opening up of conversations NV provided helped the class get to know each other and opened up learning opportunities, however, some students reflected this left them feeling vulnerable:

> Student 1: Because people don't like to show their vulnerability, they'd rather keep it for themselves instead. It's their life, they don't want to put it out there until they're ready for something.

> Student 2: It puts you on the spot as well, so when you get that question you don't know what to say. [Simon Academy G3]

In another group, members also shared that they felt comfortable as they believed members of the class would respect each other's experiences and 'keep it in class' (Plumwood G1) or set their own boundaries though sharing 'the most blandest thing ever' (St Catherine G1), reminiscent of the strategies shared by Hart (2018). Teachers generally overlooked this, but when asked they framed vulnerability positively because it can precede 'learning' (Plumwood Staff).

Encroaching on home life

While the curriculum aimed to facilitate conversations around character at home, there were implicit assumptions that this would be both possible and welcome. However, at various times, students reported this caused tensions at home:

> my mum got involved in it, she would be like, 'Well you need to improve on this', and I'm like 'Okay, you need to improve on this', and she'd be like, 'No', and it would go vice versa, and then that would cause an argument. 'No, I don't think that', and it's like, 'But you need to improve on this', and I'm like, 'I already do that', and it was just like arguing. [St Catherine's G1]

Another student reflects on the importance of separating their 'home' and 'school' identity, and how this forced the two together:

> Everyone wears a mask for every different occasion. You don't really get to see the … because everyone puts a mask on for different things like school, being at home and being somewhere else with your friends. [Simon G3]

A teacher also related a problem that arose during the delivery of the NV curriculum:

> A discussion on parents' evening, where they'd been looking at the passport, and she said that it brought up a lot of very personal issues with her family and they'd been going to counselling, and she just wanted to pass that on as something that, for their family it became a bit of an issue, so they stopped doing the passport because they were having [trouble]. [Plumwood Staff]

The curriculum also did not make allowances for children who may not want to have these conversations with parents – neglectful or abusive households; busy parents with little time for school work; parents and children with poor relations that would not be able to engage meaningfully in these conversations; parents that may use these as a means to gain greater control or attribute unnecessary guilt and shame.

Development of character

This theme pulled together codes that related to self reflection, development of knowledge, self-reported changes in behaviour, and 'improvements' in character.

There was significant evidence that taking part in NV provided opportunities for self-reflection and developing knowledge and understanding of relatively complex concepts around virtue and character. We take these findings in tension with the above notion that much of the discourse around character development was deficit in nature, however it fundamentally did appear to encourage greater reflection on and conversations about issues of character.

For example:

> Before I read about the Narnia, I wasn't really a truthful girl, I always used to lie, and not be honest to my parents and my teachers, but then I used to, when I heard about it I changed [Cedar Hill G3]

While it appears problematic that this student defined herself as 'not truthful', and with a deficit sub-text here, the student reports to have developed her character in a way she is proud to share.

We problematised the future-focussed nature of character education above, however several students saw NV as a catalyst for a quicker transition into adult-like self-reflection and development of independent moral understanding, thus pulling what was assumed to be an 'adult' skill into the possession of contemporary students.

For instance, when asked an initial question about what the curriculum was like, one group of students replied:

> Student 1: Helpful.

> Student 2: For me, at first, I didn't think of it as anything but then when I used it in my day-to-day life it actually changed the way I do things and how I act around other people. [Cedar Hill G3]

Again, though, this language of 'it changed me' echoes those deficit narratives above. When asked to elaborate on how it was helpful, members of the group explained

> Student 1: It's really helpful because about the virtues and what we learn in lesson and they're fun, the lessons were fun, about Eustace turning into a dragon.

> Student 2: It's helpful for me because I had anger problems and I used to get angry quick, because of self-control, I control myself to not be angry now and I don't get that angry that quick, it takes quite a lot to get me angry now. [Cedar Hill G3]

In multiple other examples, we see strong evidence that students believe that their engagement with the curriculum has had an effect on their character for the better. Furthermore, this spread beyond the English classroom and was transferable to other situations. When asked if it was used outside the English lessons, a student told us that they had applied the virtues in food technology:

> Don't leave no one out, when we were working as a team, don't leave no one out, if someone doesn't have a partner, you work with them as well. [Cedar Hill G3]

A participant in a different school also described NV as a transformational and acting as a catalyst:

> Everyone has the ability to do it, and everyone probably knows that they should be kind, they just don't have the motivation, and by giving an example like, 'You can do it, because everyone else in this story has been on a journey from bad to better, and you're not nearly as bad as they are', it's possible, even if it doesn't take three months voyage to do it. [Plumwood G2]

This quote is one of the closest responses to challenging the deficit narrative we recorded, with the student recognising everyone has the potential to be kinder but there is a lack of motivation due to the environment – though there is still a focus on 'bad behaviour'. While there was significant qualitative evidence that behaviours appeared to 'improve' (i.e. there was greater compliance with teacher requests within the classroom), some students argued not everyone who participated in the curriculum was affected:

> I think they affected some students, but not all of them, some of them. Like in some ways, I think for others they've gone a bit quieter and they focus on lessons, and some them still haven't, probably because they're not trying to change it as well. [Cedar Hill G2]

Several teachers also commented it seemed to benefit those students who were already most engaged in their education.

One of the teachers who filled in the online survey comment that

Students that are already badly behaved have no interest in learning better behaviours through doing work. [St Catherine staff]

Again, here we see 'bad behaviour' conflated with virtue.

Discussion

While our data shows potential for the ongoing development of English-based character education curricula that facilitates the flourishing of students, it also displays weaknesses with how ethics, education, family, and young people were constructed, leading to disparities between the intentions of the curriculum and how it is operationalised in the classroom. We have evidence of deficit and neoliberal assumptions from students and teachers which are contrary to the Aristotelian notion of character development and the espoused purpose of the curriculum. On reflection, the NV curriculum lacked a clear philosophy of education (beyond Aristotelian conceptions of 'character') and construction of childhood or youth, which left it open to dominant ideologies reinterpreted the curriculum. This would echo the concerns of some critics of character education, though we should recognise the critics cited above have not engaged the voice of young people, few of whom reported an issue with character education as a concept in our research.

The findings showed that motives for engaging in the curriculum were influenced by the neoliberal agenda for schools, through: promoting individual moral responsibility, 'improving' future life opportunities by developing virtue, managing behaviour and increasing personal motivations to 'improve' (Ball, 2003, 2016). Students did seem to develop in the areas of self-reflection and interpersonal skills, but students typically constructed the development of character as a 'stepping-stone' to external rewards of exam success and employability skills rather than an 'end' in itself (despite curriculum designer's emphasis on flourishing). This confirms Kristjjanson's (2015) concern that many character education interventions often focus on external goods at the expense of the flourishing of young people, and echoes the transitional model of youth that devalues their current voice (Hill, 1999).

Most published scholars of character education appear to ignore the effect of neoliberalism. Kristjánsson (2021) is a notable exception, who identifies that market-driven individualism is not compatible with Aristotelian virtue ethics (p. 101). Similarly, Sanderse (2019) recognises that virtue ethics can *in theory* challenge neoliberal narratives, but 'in practice character education programmes seem to be used by governments to advance other agendas, such as enabling young people to develop resilience to be successful in the current job market' (p. 2).

There are possibilities for resisting the neoliberal narrative here though: firstly, character education programmes could actively teach that a 'virtuous life' leads to flourishing, rather than a means to employment. Secondly, considering the work of Featherstone (2011) on the grass-roots resistance to neoliberalism, character education could develop solidarity across national borders and facilitating political activism so the wellbeing of the student is prioritised over the needs of the market; though character education, as fundamentally interested in the individual or the school, may not be the field for promoting systemic change. Third, perhaps most likely, is to consider the work of Moore and Grandy (2017) in developing 'virtuous institutions' where schools (and school leadership) protecting the school's primary purpose of promoting the education and wellbeing of students, and protecting its teachers from chasing external goals of Ofsted, performance related pay, and exam grades. Some character educators may argue their work developing the ethos of the school is in line with Moore and Grady's work (e.g. Arthur et al., 2022), but the extent to which they are challenging neoliberalism rather than seeking to work within it is unclear. We may also find resistance in replacing the language of managerialism in schools, with discourses of care, compassion, collective responsibility, and macro-ethical concerns that connect specific individual and school level issues with wider social policy (Noddings, 2002; Weinberg & Banks, 2019, pp. 13–14).

The data suggests that students construct virtue in a somewhat superficial fashion, illustrated by a lack of engagement with students discussing, defining, and contextualising the virtues for themselves. Although we have reported in the past that quantitative measures of virtue literacy increase (Pike et al., 2021), and while dialogue was a key part of the curriculum, the focus on applying pre-defined virtues into the text and then into the lives of students did not allow for higher-level discussions on 'what is virtue'. Currently,

we cannot find any programs that offer this (though, we imagine there are some, perhaps framed as 'philosophy for students' rather than character education), rather character education predominantly uses discussion to *apply* virtue, not to consider what constitutes it (e.g. Arthur et al., 2022, pp. 20–21).

Our data also demonstrated a deficit narrative, which may introduce tension between the student and teacher (Hill, 1999), disempowers the student and creates a transactional relationship (Hill, 1999, p. 136) and feeds into the neoliberal narrative of measuring worth according to predefined outcomes relating to efficiency and productivity (Weinberg & Banks, 2019, p. 84). While the character education field in the UK generally avoids the rhetoric of moral panics and 'respectable fears' (Pearson, 1984), there is still evidence when there is a conflation between social risk factors and morality (Arthur, 2008; Carr, 2019) and then, by implication, that character education exists to 'fix' the 'problematic' young people. In other areas, particularly the US, 'behaviour narratives' are one of the dominant justifications for character education, often relying on debates around moral decay (Handsman, 2021).

Fundamentally, this fails to recognise issues young people identify as important (Hill, 1999) and rather than setting young people up as co-creators of a just society in which wellbeing is prioritised, they become analogous to a threat of the existing social order that require acting upon by those in positions of power. A participatory approach to character education (Hart, 2022) may prove to be of greater effectiveness and benefit when young people are seen as participants in, rather than subjects of, character education. This is consistent with Kristjánsson (2017, p. 88) who recognises 'the [Aristotelian] flourishing paradigm takes a strength-based approach to student well-being; it is all about furthering assets that students already possess in nascent forms and helping them continue to develop the character qualities that are intrinsically related to … [wellbeing]' – although discourses of 'nascent forms' may leave space for deficit narratives to arise, therefore we must be clear that deficiencies in the environment cause qualities to remain nascent, rather than the responsibility of the individual. This would lead the character educator to consider the social context of the student that has allowed qualities to be under-developed.

We also note that *if* we consider character education to be a worthy pursuit through English lessons, we discovered barriers to its effectiveness. Firstly, greater overlap between the skills required for English and those required for character education, and keeping character education within the remit of English would have gained greater 'buy in' from teachers. This also highlights the important of co-created curricula, with significant input from participants. Secondly, while there were many good reasons for choosing the Chronicles of Narnia, if the goal is character education then choosing novels without religious associations may reduce barriers to engagement for some. We also recognise that the comments around the suitability of the novels would be less likely to occur if the curriculum was co-created with teachers. Finally, ensuring any work with parents or families is accessible and inclusive, taking into account families that cannot (or perhaps inappropriate to) take part. Fundamentally, this kind of work dealing with character requires greater participation with stakeholders from the designing stage, onwards, to be effective. Here we also get a sense of the limits of character education in curriculum subjects. Character education could be more clearly focussed on the specific skills and character concerns of a specific discipline or field of study, as described by Hart (2022). English, for example, has some very clear links to engaging in debate around meaning, motivation, vocabulary, and outcome of events – it lends itself to moral discourses, particularly around ambiguity in the text (Pike, 2015). NV removed some of that ambiguity in the interpretation of texts that were provided.

Limitations

This research was predominantly limited by access to stakeholders and time. Greater parental voice would have been an important contribution, especially as participants explained some parents found NV controversial, however parental voices were better captured in previous studies on Narnian Virtues (Paul et al., 2022), and questions for this research were influenced by parental contributions from previous years.

Conclusion

This study provided unique perspectives on a character education curriculum we then problematised, recognising that many of the descriptions of how the curriculum was operationalised had privileged neoliberal or deficit approaches to education and young people. Creating a language to discuss ethical

issues was seen by participants as important in developing greater awareness of virtues, however the understanding of these virtues appeared relatively simplistic, and perhaps reflects the presentation of the virtues in the curriculum.

The rhetoric around Character education is often claiming it is asset-based, particularly when rooted in a neo-Aristotelian model. However, much Character education claiming an Aristotelian foundation is missing key aspects around the development of: dialogical pedagogy, human flourishing over neoliberal values, and a situational manifestation of virtue.

Future projects could enable teachers to avoid adopting deficit approaches by emphasising how to foster metacognitive skills, such as self-reflection and independent reasoning about ethical issues. Alongside this, teachers should be supported to critique dominant neoliberal values that run counter to the aims of character education and the hope of eudaimonia. By identifying the dominant value base that influences schools, teachers are better able to challenge it (Freire, 1996; Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 66). The project encountered high attrition rates and robust feedback from teachers, we believe this was partly because teachers were not fully consulted in the design stage of the curriculum. At the end of year one and two teachers did have space for input and that improved feedback on the curriculum and reduced attrition. Teacher involvement in the creation of curricula attempting to introduce character education would be essential to ensure it is fit for purpose in the classroom.

However, we also recommend building on the positive outcomes of the project. Using English lessons to exercise greater self-reflection was a constructive impact from the curriculum, as was engaging in greater dialogue around ethical issues using a shared language, and providing opportunities for peers to explore issues of character together. This would have been improved with greater levels of co-creation of the project with teachers. This basis, alongside avoiding any uncritical adoption of predefined virtues/ values by schools, may allay some of the fears of the critics of character education we recognised at the beginning of this article.

Note

1. The material is available at https://doi.org/10.5518/1049.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

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