TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO CHARACTER EDUCATION
IN BRITAIN AND AMERICA

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The formation of character could be said to be the aim that all general education has historically set out to achieve. It is an aim that has often not been explicitly stated, instead it has simply been assumed. Most traditional approaches to character education emphasize the role of habit, imitation, modeling, instruction, rewards and punishments, and authority in the formation of character and regularly invoke Aristotelian ethics in justification. Some of these educational approaches have been interpreted as both coercive and teacher-centered and are seen in sharp contrast to the advocates of child-centered approaches based on moral developmental research which is characterized by a belief in the child’s ability to gradually bring their “behaviour under the explicit guidance of rational deliberation” (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005, p. 141). Therefore, to enter on a discussion about character and, even more, about character education is to enter a minefield of conflicting definition and ideology. It is an educational theme about which there is much fundamental disagreement and division. The disagreement is about whether traditional character education is a legitimate aim of schooling. Can there be said to exist such a thing as a regular and fixed set of habitual actions in a person that constitutes his or her character? In order to begin an answer to this question we must start with the early Greek and Christian ideas of character.

GREEK ORIGINS

Character education is ultimately about what kind of person a child will grow up to be and the early Greek idea of character suggests that moral goodness is essentially a prediction of persons and not acts. It also implies that this goodness of persons is not automatic, but must be acquired and cultivated. Character education is inherently a multi-disciplinary endeavor, which requires its adherents and critics to ask divergent questions and employ disparate methods in approaching the subject. Plato’s Republic was the first major work on the philosophy of education which argued that to have or to
form a good character is also to become fully human. Both the Republic and Aristotle’s Ethics concern themselves with the question of how a good person should live. They are also about how society should structure itself to make this type of life attainable.

In modern discussions about moral character most writers tend to cast the respective views of Plato and Aristotle as polar opposites. They argue that, in Plato’s case, a truly good character will be one that understands the good and therefore does what is good. Plato held that a person who knows what is good will therefore do it. He did not think that anyone willingly acted immorally, and explained that if they did so act then it could only be through ignorance of the good. In contrast, Plato’s pupil, Aristotle, took a different view. Where Plato had taught that a prior intellectual understanding of the good alone makes moral excellence attainable, Aristotle argued rather that a person becomes good by learning first what it is to do good. He also recognized, in contrast to Plato, that a person may have the ability to think about the good without having the disposition to implement it.

Aristotle says we become good by practising good actions. From Plato there is the idea that moral education is about improving thinking skills, whilst in Aristotle it is primarily about practising right behavior. In one there is an emphasis on moral reasoning without moral action, in the other, conformity without inner conviction. This is to overstate their differences. Both believed that character must be actively cultivated in the young. Both were concerned about whether ethical behavior could be taught. They debated mainly in terms of virtue and the virtuous, and morality for them was not about rules or principles, but the cultivation of character. Conformity to a set of moral rules was not their aim in the development of this character, but rather character development involved being a certain kind of person and not merely doing certain kinds of things.

In Aristotle’s writings, right moral conduct was not a matter for explicit teaching in terms of a subject on the school curriculum, although he did recommend mentors who guide the individual until he or she is able to cultivate his or her own virtues. Aristotle believed that there is rationality in every moral choice and this cannot be omitted from the process through which virtue is formed. The focus is not on the formation of prescribed habits, but rather on the intentions of the child. Habits are not simply passively learnt through repetition of behavior, but contain a cognitive element—they presuppose a capacity for decision-making and are done for the right reason in the right place. Whilst children must eventually decide voluntarily how to act in a certain way, this behavior is achieved gradually as they become more autonomous and make their own decisions. According to Aristotle, virtues are developed by an individual over time and signify a specific excellence in them of some kind. He recognized that a person may have the ability to think about the good without having the disposition to implement it. This Aristotelian notion of education is also about setting someone free, whilst demonstrating a consistent pattern of behavior.

Aristotle gave more specific attention to the process of education than did Plato. He suggested that there are clear developmental stages in education. The first stage is the training of the body; the second is the training of character; and lastly comes the training of the intellect. He observed that intellect appears later in the child. Only after they have built certain good habits within the second stage can children reasonably move to the stage of comprehension. There is a paradox here: students who already have virtuous characters through their actions are to be taught how to think about moral decisions. And yet Aristotle says that unless you already have skills to think correctly about moral decisions then you cannot be virtuous.
CHRISTIAN DEVELOPMENTS

Greek Patristic thought aimed at the formation of the *anima Christiana*, the Christian, and the child was to be formed after the likeness of Christ—Christ-loving or Christ-minded. This language articulated a unique kind of pedagogy and it is clear that these early Christians would have thought in terms of *paideia* which is a much broader meaning than the word *moral*. *Paideia* is a word that has been lost to modern educational discourse. *Paideia* is the total development of the human person: body, mind, heart, will, senses, passions, judgments, instincts, aimed at what the Greeks called *arête*, excellence in living. Early Greek Christians believed that morality cannot simply be taught as part of schooling: moral character was seen as a firm disposition for the good, for moral excellence, for all that is best in human existence and required the educative force of a Christian community for these things to flourish. This was understood from within the Christian faith which taught that moral character is rooted in intellectual insight and rational judgment and is the outcome of deliberate choice. The early Christians clearly built upon the classical understandings of character.

Much later Aquinas laid great emphasis upon the importance of using reason to make moral choices. Aristotle had taught that becoming virtuous involved using one’s powers of reasoning to shape virtues that are innate in each individual and that it was this inherent condition or potential that produced a natural impulse to desire the good (see Porter, 1990). Aquinas combined this natural impulse with the power of rational thought and claimed that together they allow human beings to reach an understanding of what is morally right. In other words, Aquinas develops a more sophisticated sense of the natural law which he says allows us to grasp God’s moral laws through our own reasoning powers. In regard to moral character Aquinas insisted upon the relation between reason and faith as the one sustained the other (*Summa Theologiae* 1a 2ae.94.2). Aquinas does not advocate the pursuance of mechanical actions without reflection as he emphasizes again and again that virtuous actions must be the product of liberty.

For the Christian, character formation is not independent of religious faith. Both reason and revelation are required for ethical decisions and actions. The task of Christian ethics is to discover what God is enabling and requiring Christians to be and do. Christianity places a high value on altruism and self-sacrifice, but does not see character education as being an end in itself. Christianity is embedded in all kinds of inclinations, feelings, attitudes, interests, habits, lifestyles, decision patterns, and actions. It is based on a teleological concept of the good life that is contained in the Christian revelation and tradition. Two approaches to character education can be discerned from Christian tradition. First, some Christians want to move deductively from scripture and/or doctrine to contemporary moral issues. Second, others wish to work inductively from contemporary empirical data back to scriptural and/or doctrinal affirmations. In practice, many Christians, especially evangelical Protestants, adopted wholly negative views of the child which assumed that a child was born corrupt and evil and that it was the task of education to rectify this through punishment and training in obedience. An obvious weakness of contemporary Christian approaches to character is that they are often abstract and say little to teachers about the pedagogical practices of character formation.
SECULAR INSIGHTS AND NINETEENTH CENTURY EXPERIMENTS

The period of the Enlightenment brought some secular insights into what character was understood to be. Whilst it is accepted that Enlightenment philosophy was not directly connected to traditional forms of character education, a number of philosophers addressed the issue. James Barclay, for instance, urged that teachers should only be selected for the role if they had strong characters as he considered that the example set by them was crucial. As he said: “Example is allowed to be stronger than precept, and children especially are much readier to copy what they see than what they hear” (Hutchison, 1976, pp. 233f.). Another Scot, David Fordyce, spoke of developing the child’s imagination in moral matters and wrote that “dull, formal lectures on several virtues and vices” were of no use in the formation of good character. Francis Hutcheson, professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow in 1747, advocated greater study of character. He sought to “search accurately into the constitution of our nature to see what sort of creatures we are” (Hutchison, 1976, pp. 233f.). What was needed, he argued, was an objective study of human nature, particularly motives and behavior. John Locke also believed that character formation was more important than intellectual attainment. There was also a sustained attack on the relation between religion and character during the Enlightenment. In the writings of David Hume and Jeremy Bentham we see how, in their view, the concept of the divine was superfluous to any thesis of morality. Education was about knowledge and was considered value-free whilst religion was about dogma and was value-laden.

English Victorian education had conscious moral purposes, particularly in the economic and religious domain. Indeed, there are clear similarities between the views contained in Plato’s *Republic* and Victorian character education. The production of characters suited to the needs of work was one of the principal goals of nineteenth century elementary schools for the poor. Children in these schools were taught the “habits of industry” (Barnard, 1966, p. 6) for they were destined for either the factories or domestic service. Character training formed the core of their schooling and included a form of moral development firmly based on the Ten Commandments and stories from the Bible. The teacher’s role in these schools was to inculcate specific social roles typified by a pattern of behavior in children. Children accepted without question the moral training provided and expected to be punished for bad habits. The emphasis was on obedience and duty to all forms of authority in society and absolute conformity to predetermined social roles for the child. The teachers themselves were often not well educated and were selected for their ability to exhibit virtues in and outside of school. They held a restricted outlook on educational matters, which resulted in crude and mechanistic methods of teaching (see Arthur, 2003).

Society in nineteenth century Britain was acutely class conscious and children were viewed as miniature adults to be inducted into the ways of social convention. Character was viewed as a class-based concept which contained within it a judgment regarding an individual’s status as much as their good conduct. The growing middle classes realized that money alone would not secure them the coveted status of the “character of a gentleman.” Increasingly they sent their sons to the rapidly expanding number of independent schools. There was a marked revival of interest in character formation for middle class children in the 1820s which began first in some reformed public schools (Rotblatt, 1976, pp. 133–134). Teachers overtook wider societal experience to become the main facilitators for this shaping.
of character. It was considered important that students developed strong characters from which they could take a principled stand, usually in favor of the established virtues of society. Stefan Collini (1985) identifies these Victorian virtues as including: bravery, loyalty, diligence, application, and manners. Thomas Arnold, the Headmaster of Rugby, gave voice to middle class aspirations by emphasizing that the educational ideal should be the production of the “noble character,” the “man of character,” or more precisely the Christian manly spirit, better known as “muscular Christianity.” His aim was no less than the formation of the Christian character in the young through “godliness and good learning.”

Supporters of Arnold were strong adherents of character formation. As well as instituting stern disciplinary regimes in their schools, they encouraged reading of selected great authors to discern the essential core of “common” values. There was a strong belief that games developed manliness and inspired, inter alia, the virtues of fairness, loyalty, moral and physical courage and co-operation. Games in the private schools were thus constituted as a course in ethics. The public schools also socialized young men into the habit of good manners. In this view character was a form of social and moral capital and the function of the school was to provide the right environment in which the “right” people could, at an early stage, get to know one another. For many, character was not an ideal, but a display of the required manners solely to those they considered their elders and betters. This was an education designed for the social elite and generally for men, it was not the character of a gentleman, but the reputation of gentlemen, and the social advantage that it would bring, that was the goal in educating their children.

The Victorian period was certainly a high point in character education, or perhaps more accurately the use of the language of character. The Victorians meant many things by the use of the word character. The notion of character formation they operated led to much ambiguity and contradiction in behavior. Much more general was the view that character equaled a socialization in good manners and in a particular form of social conduct. Whilst there was a recognition that human nature could be directly shaped by education, the notion of character was largely embodied in laws, institutions, and social expectations. The kinds of character that teachers and educational thinkers espoused and the training methods they used also varied enormously. Schools as a place to train character was not a totally new concept, but it came to distinguish the English private school, and influenced character education in America.

It is important to remember that British society was relatively homogeneous in religious outlook at this time. There was a common set of values derived from scripture and Protestantism. Morality was not a controversial issue for most schoolteachers since the generalized Protestantism which pervaded culture was implicitly accepted by teachers and by those who wrote the school textbooks of the period (Arthur, Deakin Crick, Samuel, Wilson, & McGettrick, 2001, pp. 61f.). Even when a Victorian abandoned religious belief this did not necessarily mean a lowering of ethical standards. Instead, agnostics pursued the moral life as a good in itself. Their enthusiasm for instilling moral character in the masses was often greater than that displayed by some Evangelicals. There is a long history of ill-conceived, ineffective, and failed efforts at character education in Britain.

As the religious basis for morality began to decline by the late nineteenth century, for some the latter became the surrogate of the former and there developed a heightened awareness of ensuring that moral standards in society and in individuals were upheld. This was the secular ethic, which profoundly influenced the progress of character education in schools. Secular character training became an alternative to the moral lessons derived
from Bible teaching and those who used the term “character training” were often the progressives in education. They used this language to avoid conflict with religious-based moral education, but it remained an ethic firmly based on puritan foundations. In 1886 the Ethical Union was established in Britain by a group of agnostics with the primary objective of seeking a secular basis for morality. They became interested in the education of character and formed the Moral Instruction League in 1897. The Moral Instruction League was opposed to Bible reading in schools and encouraged parents to withdraw their children from religious lessons. The government’s view of character training was expressed in the Introduction to the Education Code of 1904 and 1905, in which it was stated that “The purpose of the public elementary school is to form and strengthen the character and to develop intelligence, of the children entrusted to it.” The language and the notion of character here is more Greek than Christian in origin; a certain lip-service was paid to Christianity in order to legitimate or strengthen a secular ethic.

The Moral Instruction League comprised many of the leading educational thinkers and philosophers of the time. It aimed: “to substitute systematic non-theological moral instruction for the present religious teaching in all State schools, and to make character the chief aim of school life” (see Hilliard, 1961, p. 53). It further stated:

The aim of moral instruction is to form the character of the child. With this object in view, the scholar’s intellect should be regarded mainly as the channel through which to influence his feelings, purposes, and acts. The teacher must constantly bear this in mind, since knowledge about morality has missed its aim when no moral response is awakened in the child. A moral instruction lesson ought to appeal to the scholar’s feelings, and also to affect his habits and his will.

(1961, pp. 53f.)

This was a good definition of character education in its day and whilst the League did not recommend any specific teaching methods it did produce a syllabus for use in schools in 1901. Developments in the US, particularly the Character Education League, produced many curriculum materials with the explicit aim of teaching about and developing in children 31 virtues aimed at establishing an integral virtue called “character.” These virtues were almost identical to the Moral Education League’s syllabus so there must have been some cross-fertilization of ideas.

CHARACTER EDUCATION IN AMERICA

Character education has deep roots in the American public school system. Virtually every school in the US in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was responding in some implicit way to the educational goal of developing character. During the colonial period character education was based on theology, a reflexive Protestantism predominated in society, and the Founding Fathers saw moral education as a way of shaping the young into good citizens. However, in common with the experience in Britain, character education began to drift away from its Christian moorings by the late nineteenth century. Traditional character education approaches continued in the early twentieth century often without explicit reference to Christian ideals. Craig Cunningham provides a critical survey of the history of character education in the US which is an excellent start for those interested in a more detailed historical account (see Lapsley & Power, 2005).
One of the first major empirical research investigations into character development was entitled *The Character Education Enquiry* conducted in America by Hugh Hartshorne and Mark May (1928–1939). This enquiry seemed to deny that there was anything that could be called character, which it defined as the persistent dispositions to act according to moral principle in a variety of situations. The results of their tests of attitude did not consistently predict behavior and their most significant finding was that moral behavior appeared to be situation specific. This enquiry significantly influenced the work of Lawrence Kohlberg and many other moral developmental researchers. However, the research methodology employed was limited. Hartshorne and May took the profile of a morally mature person as their model and asked a series of questions of young people on stealing, cheating, and lying. The conclusions were, first; that there is no correlation between character training and actual behavior. Second, that moral behavior is not consistent in one person from one situation to another. Third, that there is no relationship between what people say about morality and the way that they act, and finally that cheating is distributed, in other words they claim that we all cheat a little. These results presented a challenge to those who sought to directly teach character to children.

By the 1950s cognitive psychology was becoming a discipline and gave great emphasis to Kohlberg’s theories helping to make them popular in education. The success of Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Erik Erikson was due to their themes of development which indicated progress. These themes satisfied the demands of culture at the time. Culture and society had become more pluralistic and therefore schooling became more sensitive to the increasing heterogeneity of children in many schools. These cognitive approaches to moral education—character education—were also more compatible with the liberal traditions of critical thinking rather than a virtues-based approach. Kohlberg (1984) was perhaps the most influential of the developmental theorists and he believed that knowledge of the good was constructed by the individual in a logical-cognitive progress through six stages of development. Each stage represented a qualitatively different mode of moral thinking and that development could stall at any stage. Kohlberg seemed to be dismissive of virtues as important in morality and to focus exclusively on the cognitive structural dimension of the human person’s character development. His early research specified no content and after some criticism (Peters, 1979) he sought to address the substantive content of his approach and to differentiate his position from the values clarification methods which gained widespread currency in schools. Kohlberg also differentiated his approach from value relativists, but many of his followers in schools interpreted and applied his ideas in a way that lacked substantive content for moral education. A number of writers have outlined the limits to the application of Kohlberg’s moral psychology by raising a number of empirical and conceptual problems (see Lapsley & Power, 2005).

The important work in the US of Peck and Havighurst (1960) on character education helped to revive explicit thinking in the area, even though they concluded that each generation tended to perpetuate its strengths and weaknesses of character and that character formation in the early years was relatively unmodifiable. The 1960s and 1970s were concerned with values clarification and procedural neutrality in the classroom and there was a widespread presumption in favour of moral relativism. It was the reaction against this relativistic thought that has seen the reemergence of more traditional character education approaches.
Cognitive psychologists, until recently, placed much emphasis on the development of structure of moral reasoning which, they claimed, underlies decision-making. Some even claimed universal application for this method, but David Carr (2002) casts doubts on the scientific basis of many of these developmental theories and questions their logical status. He observes that these theories were generally employed in support of progressive approaches to education with their emphasis on choice of lifestyle. This, he claims, ignores the more traditionalist perspectives that are generally concerned with initiating students into the knowledge, values, and virtues of civil society. Progressives, according to Carr, reject traditional perspectives because they do not wish to predetermine the ends and the goals of human development and because they question the worth of received knowledge and values. However, neo-Kohlbergian research finds cross-cultural validity for most of Kohlberg’s stages (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999) and newer approaches to moral cognition indicate that there is some evidence for universal elements of moral judgment outside of a universal stage sequence. Larry Nucci (2001, p. 122) for example, found in his research that basic moral concerns are shared across the range of human societies and religious groups and that there exists common ground in making moral judgments.

Given the multifarious positions taken in respect of character, it follows that the discussion about character education, and whether it is possible, is equally discordant. The variety of approaches results in a bewildering variety of educational schemes and curricula. This may be seen as a positive phenomenon potentially resulting in concrete classroom solutions, or perhaps as a wasteful over-lapping of character education resources. James Leming (1993, p. 35) believes that this diversity of academic opinion hampers effective development of character education as a school subject. He says that: “the current research in the field consists of disparate bits and pieces of sociology, philosophy, child development research, socio-political analysis, and a variety of different programmes of evaluation.” It is necessary to say something first of why traditional approaches to character education are increasingly being advocated.

THE LITANY OF ALARM

Those who have advocated character education in America and Britain often present it as a response to a list of ills facing society which originate in the behavior of juveniles (see British Social Trends). This list would normally include the following which have all shown a stubborn increase despite many attempts by government, schools, and welfare agencies to address their causes: suicides, especially of young males; teenage pregnancy and abortion; the crime rate, particularly theft by minors; alcohol and drug abuse; sexual activity and sexual abuse; teenage truancy and mental health problems. This teenage dysfunction has to be contextualized and set against a backdrop of family breakdown, domestic violence, poverty, and the provision of an endless diet of violence and sex in the media. Perhaps as a result of this, increasing numbers of children are arriving in early schooling showing symptoms of anxiety, emotional insecurity, and aggressive behavior. They seem devoid of many social skills and suffer low self-esteem. There are many reasons for the existence of these symptoms but they have a common effect in significantly reducing the ability of the school to develop positive character traits.

Thomas Lickona (1996) lists a further set of indicators of youth problems: dishonesty; peer cruelty; disrespect for adults and parents; self-centeredness; self-destructive
behavior; and ethical illiteracy. Altruism often appears as the exception whilst self-interest has become the rule. The general moral relativism of society is also routinely blamed by character educators for this litany of social and moral breakdown, which is often referred to as a “crisis in moral education” (see Kilpatrick, 1992, pp. 13f.). This moral relativism, it is claimed, has replaced the belief in personal responsibility with the notion of social causation.

A criticism leveled at promoters of character education by certain commentators is that they do not examine sufficiently the complex issues which underlie many of the social statistics they detail. David Purple (1997, p. 147) makes the point that “Even if there has been a significant increase in teen-age pregnancies there is still a question of why it is considered a moral transgression.” He asks which framework character educators use to criticize the degeneration they see around them. For Purple, teenage pregnancy and divorce are not problems at all. Timothy Rusnak (1998, 1) believes that fear is the justification for many character education programs in the US. Others would strongly argue that there has never been a “golden age,” that every generation for the past two hundred years have simply produced their own “litany of alarm.” Harry McKown (1935, pp. 18–34), writing in America in the 1930s provides his own litany. He bemoans the social break-up of the family (caused by economic pressures as opposed to marital difficulties); he decries the excessive individualism of the age; notes the decline in citizen participation in elections; abhors the “tremendous increase in crime”; is saddened by fewer young people attending Church; is concerned by the negative effect of advertising on the young; and sees the implications for morality in everything from public dancing and smoking to the wearing by young people of “types of close-to-nature clothing and bathing suits.”

**CRITICISMS OF CHARACTER EDUCATION**

Terry McLaughlin and Mark Halstead (1999, p. 136) take issue with contemporary approaches to character education in the US, as do two major critics of the movement in America—David Purple (1997) and Robert Nash (1997). They all claim, rightly, that American character educators generally begin with detailing the social ills of society and then offer character education as a remedy; that these character educators also believe that core values can be identified, justified, and taught. In addition, they claim that character educators seek explicit teaching in the public schools of moral virtues, dispositions, traits, and habits, to be inculcated through content and the example of teachers, together with the ethos of the school and direct teaching and that the success of character education programs should be measured by the changes in the behavior of students. Character educators also, they claim, leave explaining difficult moral concepts until later in the student’s development. They then criticize these views by outlining that character education is narrowly concerned with certain virtues, that it is restricted, limited, and focuses on traditional methods of teaching. Also, that there is a limited rationale given for the aims and purposes of character education by those who propose it in schools and that there is also a restricted emphasis on the use of critical faculties in students. McLaughlin and Halstead (1999, p. 139) observe that the character education movement: “lacks a common theoretical perspective and core of practice.”

Whilst McLaughlin and Halstead are reasonably sympathetic to character education, they paint a bleak picture of current narrow practices in the US. However, they fail to deal
with Nash whose language can often be extreme. Nash (1997) believes that most models of character education are deeply and seriously flawed, authoritarian in approach, too nostalgic, premodern in understanding of the virtues, aligned to reactionary politics, anti-intellectual, antidemocratic, and above all dangerous. He seeks to replace this tradition of character education with one that is not based on any moral authority and one which has an absence of a common moral standard by which to evaluate competing moral vocabularies. If this is what he seeks then McLaughlin and Halstead should have pointed out that he cannot condemn other competing moral vocabularies as he so obviously does from his own postmodern position. It appears that Nash refuses to acknowledge that all education rests on assumptions and beliefs and that a plurality of positions, including character education, can coexist. In the case of Purple (1997, p. 140) they do not answer his claim that character educators are “disingenuous” in their debates about character education and that they are effectively a conservative political movement with a hidden agenda. In any event, there is no necessary connection between a conservative political outlook and character education (see Howard, Berkowitz, & Shaeffer, 2004). A reasonable outline of the limits of the various approaches to traditional character education is provided by Larry Nucci (2001, pp. 129ff.).

David Brooks and Frank Goble (1997) in *The Case for Character Education* follow a standard structure of argument used by many who advocate school-based character education. As previously mentioned, Harry McKown (1935) was one of the first to develop a model of writing about character within the context of schooling, a framework which has since been adopted by many others. McKown’s book defines character education, presents a 1930s litany of alarm, explains why we should have character education in schools, describes the objectives of such a program, suggests how it should be in the curriculum, through the curriculum, as an extra-curricular activity, how it should be in the home and community, and how it might be assessed.

Brooks and Goble follow the same pattern. They first ask “what is wrong with Kids?” and answer: “they just don’t seem to know the difference between right and wrong” (1997, p. 1). They then focus on student crime rates, etc., detailing a litany of alarm. This leads to the conclusion that something needs to be done. They cite a lack of standards as the reason for the problem and they offer character education as the solution. They then attack all the other methods of moral education, ranging from values clarification to cognitive theories of development, and this is then followed by the outlining of a number of teaching methods for character education. A virtue-ethics approach to character education is suggested, but what this would entail for teaching in schools is never explained. These books, whether consciously or not, follow a model which has its origins in McKown’s 1935 seminal work and which was revived by Thomas Lickona’s publication of *Education for Character* in 1991.

**CONTEMPORARY DEFINITIONS OF CHARACTER EDUCATION**

It is important to stress that few in America or Britain would consider the school the most important location for character education, even if it remains the main public institution for the formal moral education of children. The mass media, religious communities, youth culture, peer groups, voluntary organizations, and above all parents and siblings, account for significant influences on character formation. It cannot be easily assumed that the school makes more of a difference than any of these. It would be reasonable to
assume that certain positive features of the school contribute to character development. Yet it is common in society to hold students responsible, not only for their behavior, but also for their own character, at a time when the burden of character education has inevitably been falling principally on the school. Obviously, some schools have the potential to be more effective than others at influencing character development. Some would argue that the ordinary public or State school has a more limited role in this for it would need to open longer and for many more days in the year to have a greater effect on character formation. However, in defining character education Ryan and Bohlin (1999, p. 190) say that it “is about developing virtues—good habits and dispositions which lead students to responsible and mature adulthood.” The difficulty in attempting to define character education is that the concept is more ethically reflected upon than empirically studied which means that it is often defined in terms of its educational practices. Narvaez (2006, pp. 703f.) provides a review of the various definitions employed in current practice.

In reviewing the diverse views of character educators in America Anne Lockwood (1997, p. 179) develops a “tentative” definition of character education. She defines character education as a school-based activity that seeks to systematically shape the behavior of students—as she says: “Character education is defined as any school-instituted program, designed in cooperation with other community institutions, to shape directly and systematically the behaviour of young people by influencing explicitly the non-relativistic values believed directly to bring about that behaviour.” She details three central propositions: first; that the goals of moral education can be pursued, not simply left to an uncontrolled hidden curriculum and that these goals should have a fair degree of public support and consensus. Second, that behavioral goals are part of character education. Third, that antisocial behavior on the part of children is a result of an absence of values. There is of course a presumed relation here with values and behavior.

I would add a fourth proposition: that many character educators not only seek to change behavior, but actually seek to produce certain kinds of character; to help form them in some way. The use of the terms “form” and “formation” here is not to be understood passively, but rather as the individual’s active and conscious participation in their own formation. Character education holds out the hope of what a person can be as opposed to what they are. Character education is not the same as behavior control, discipline, training, or indoctrination, it is much broader and has much more ambitious goals. Whilst good character and good behavior are similar the former is broader in scope. Character is an inclusive term for the individual as a whole. Consequently, for many character educators “character education” has much more to do with formation and the transformation of a person and includes education in schools, families, and through the individual’s participation in society’s social networks.

Much that passes for character education in schools is essentially a pluralistic vision of character education that evades explicit directives for practice and lacks for many the forcefulness to be compelling. How is it possible in a heterogeneous society, composed of people who sharply disagree about basic values, to achieve a consensus about what constitutes character education for citizens in a democracy? Can we agree on what constitutes character education, on what its content should be, and how it should be taught? We live in a pluralistic society in which our values appear to be constantly changing and in which children are presented with all kinds of models and exposed to all kinds of opinions about right and wrong. For some, this appears to necessitate a content-based moral education curriculum that many others have rejected as too problematic and even
Progressive educationalists have long advocated that individual development should not be hindered by “controversial” moral content and they have cast suspicion on the motives of others who propose such explicit content. Consequently, many teachers and academics have sought to construct an implicit character education rationale without subscribing to any particular set of values or content-based moral education. They have found subscribing to any set of values deeply problematic in a pluralistic society and so they often commit themselves to nothing in particular.

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO CHARACTER EDUCATION

The contemporary approach to character education in schools has been to accord the student a say in their own moral education, a degree of self-direction, which has been largely influenced by the cognitive development theorists. At the same time adult direction and authority has suffered from a great deal of criticism. Since the 1960s progressive teaching methods have emphasized child-centered learning, learning through experience, neutrality, and cooperative learning. These ideas in education tend to view the teacher as a professional educator who should not attempt to deliberately stamp character on students. Berkowitz and Bier (2005) have examined a range of empirical research, principally in refereed academic journals, in character education to examine whether character education works. They concluded that it does if “implemented effectively.” They also identify 12 recommended and 18 promising practices in character education that include: problem solving, empathy, social skills, conflict resolution, peace making, and life skills. This is clearly a very broad view of what counts as character education and most teachers would not readily associate the term “character education” with these practices as a way to describe their intentions or objectives. Therefore, Berkowitz and Bier (2005) do not say exactly what is distinctive about the content or teaching methods of character education.

Teachers commonly argue that there is little room in the school curriculum to educate for moral character. Many will say that moral character is the responsibility of parents together with faith communities and that in any case in a multicultural society there is no agreed way to determine what is good and bad character. There also appears to be a growing “moral correctness” mindset in education, as teachers do not say things are “immoral” for fear of being branded discriminatory. In fact, teachers are generally non-judgmental in official language about children. However, it may be that talk of indoctrination and brainwashing often excuses the teacher from the really difficult task of thinking what values they might consciously inculcate. Instead of deciding what should be taught suspicion is raised and concern is voiced about values and controversial issues. Carr and Steutel (1999) have argued that character education ought to be grounded in an explicit commitment to virtue ethics. Whilst the virtue-ethics approaches have made inroads in mainstream education, few teachers have been prepared to deal with their complexity. Teachers are, with few exceptions, ill equipped to discuss, far less consciously adopt a virtue ethics approach to character education as they lack the language in virtue-ethics discourse.

Narvaez (2005, pp. 154–155) has argued strongly that character education should be based on psychologically valid research. Her approach offers a promising line of research which has been to integrate the insights from developmental theory and psychological science into character education. To this end she has described a model
of character development and education which she calls Integrative Ethical Education (IEE) that sees character as a set of component skills that can be cultivated to a high level of expertise. She has identified the characteristic skills of persons with good character and believes that children move along a continuum from novice to expert in each ethical content domain that is studied. As she says “True ethical expertise requires concurrent competent interaction with the challenge of the environment using a plethora of processes, knowledge and skills” (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005, pp. 155). This expertise approach to moral character requires a well-structured school environment in which the child is able to understand and develop skills together with opportunities for focused practice. The child learns from a variety of experiences and builds a knowledge base that can be used in authentic practical learning experiences. Narvaez makes clear that this understanding in the child ought to be evident in their practice and action. She makes clear that her approach is not simply about intellectual ability or mere technical competence. It is an attempt to integrate character education with cognitive science.

Traditionalist advocates for character education include the writings of Bennett (1991), Kilpatrick (1992), Ryan (1996), and Wynne and Ryan (1993). These writers are agreed that moral maturity requires character education that exhibits direct teaching and close guidance of the young. Much of what has followed has built upon their work and a range of authors draw inspiration from their writings. For example, Philip Vincent (1999, p. 3) provides some helpful suggestions which he calls “rules and procedures for character education.” He suggests that schools should identify the virtues that need to be developed to help form character traits in students. These, he indicates, should be transformed into rules which are the expectations for appropriate behavior and that these should in turn become procedures which are practices needed to develop the habits of following rules and developing good character. So, the virtue of “respect” becomes a rule to treat all human beings with respect which becomes a set of procedures such as not interrupting others whilst they are speaking. Vincent and many others have looked at ways of translating the virtues into practical suggestions for teachers.

Bill Puka (2000, p. 131) in reviewing character education programs identifies six teaching methods. These are: 1) instruction in basic values and virtues; 2) behavioral codes established and enforced; 3) telling stories with moral lessons; 4) modeling desirable traits and values; 5) holding up moral exemplars in history, literature, religion, and extolling their traits; 6) providing in school and community outreach opportunities (service projects) through which students can exercise “good” traits and pursue “good” values. There are a wide variety of character development strategies which include those listed by Puka, but few have been evaluated. There are also certain assumptions of character educators implicitly or explicitly contained in these strategies. Whilst some subscribe to the psychological idea of moral development as developmental progression through stages, some prefer to substitute the word “development” for “formation.” Many character educators do not accept that moral values are relative—they generally insist that moral values can be objectively grounded in human nature and experience. Some would also claim that moral action is not simply rational, but involves the affective qualities of a human being, including feelings and emotions (see Nucci, 2001, p. 122). Ryan (1996) and Wynne and Ryan (1993) would reject many models of moral education as inadequate on the basis that they are not comprehensive enough to capture the full complexity of human character.
Kevin Ryan and Thomas Lickona (1987, pp. 20ff.) provide an interesting model of character development that involves three basic elements—knowledge, feeling, and action. Lickona (1991) further developed this model. First, students learn moral content from our heritage. This heritage is not static, but subject to change for it can be altered and added to. The student learns to know the good through informed rational decision-making. Moral reasoning, decision-making, and the ability to gain self-knowledge through reviewing and evaluating behavior are all essential in this dimension of character development. Second, the affective domain, which includes feelings of sympathy, care, and love for others and is considered by Lickona as an essential bridge to moral action. Lickona (1991, pp. 58ff.) refers to this second element as feelings and adds conscience, love, empathy, and humility as important aspects of it. Third, action depends on the will, competence, and habit of a person. Will is meant in the sense that a student must will their way to overcoming their self-interest and any pride or anxiety they have in order to do what they know to be the right action. Students must also develop the competence to do the “good” which involves certain skills and they must freely choose to repeat these good actions as a form of habit. Ryan and Lickona tell us that these three elements of action do not always work together. Their model also states that character development takes place in and through human community. This requires students to be participative in the affairs of the community.

Thomas Lickona (1996) also outlines 11 principles that have been largely adopted by the Character Education Partnership in the US as criteria for planning a character education program and for recognizing the achievements of schools through the conferment of a national award. Whilst he does not consider these principles to be exhaustive, they are:

1. Schools should be committed to core ethical values.
2. Character should be comprehensively defined to include thinking, feeling, and behavior.
3. Schools should be proactive and systematic in teaching character education and not simply wait for opportunities.
4. Schools must develop caring atmospheres and become a microcosm of the caring community.
5. Opportunities to practise moral actions should be varied and available to all.
6. Academic study should be central.
7. Schools need to develop ways of increasing the intrinsic motivation of students who should be committed to the core values.
8. Schools need to work together and share norms for character education.
9. Teachers and students should share in the moral leadership of the school.
10. Parents and community should be partners in character education in the school.
11. Evaluate the effectiveness of character education in both school, staff, and students.

Lapsley and Narvaez (2006, p. 269) offer a useful critique of these principles which they claim appear, at first sight, to be a kind of manifesto for progressive education.

Almost all character educators emphasize the importance of the school ethos in advancing arguments about character education (De Vries, 1998; Grant, 1982; Wynne...
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& Walberg, 1985). These authors have all claimed that there is a relation between school ethos and educational outcomes concerning moral character. There is of course no such thing as a “value-free” school ethos. The research and writings of Edward Wynne (1982, 1985/1986) also suggest that the school ethos is crucial to an effective character program. Ryan (1996, p. 75) contends that “classroom life is saturated with moral meaning that shapes students’ character and moral development.” Wynne focuses on the school rather than on the individual student. He believes that the school could teach morality without saying a single word about it. We can see this in the fact that character or moral education is rarely formally recorded in any lesson plans or schemes of work—rather it forms part of the hidden curriculum. No elementary teacher would doubt how the school often acts as a family for many students replicating some of the formative influences of the family environment—warmth, acceptance, caring relationships, love, and positive role models.

The emphasis on school ethos is a relatively new feature within character education. The term “ethos” is an elusive concept and is closely associated with notions of “atmosphere,” “climate,” “culture,” and “ethical environment.” Consequently, it is difficult to focus on the specific meaning of “ethos” for the purpose of analysis and discussion. However, there is a strong and widely-held assumption that the ethos of a school influences the formation of quality relationships and even promotes good moral character. There is some emerging evidence to support these assumptions (see Arthur et al., 2001). Nevertheless, greater critical attention is needed to the kinds of educative influence “ethos” might have in its relation to moral character. There is also a greater awareness of the role of the “hidden curriculum” on character development and some believe that the indirect methods of teaching character are perhaps more beneficial than traditional curricula-based approaches.

Schools in a democracy are not total institutions—the home is the primary shaper of character whilst the school is only a secondary shaper. Schools are limited institutions in democratic societies which are only able to support certain values and virtues of homes and society when asked to do so. Teachers are clearly already involved in the formation of character of their students simply by being part of the school community. In practice most teachers view certain kinds of action by students as wrong and it is not unusual to find teachers insisting, for example, that students ought always to tell the truth. In a study of 2,000 student teachers in England (Arthur, 2005) it was found that the overwhelming majority believed that the teacher influenced the character of their students and that this process of influencing moral values was integral to the role of the teacher. However, it was clear that the students experienced no common practice of moral or character education in schools and their training courses were inadequate at preparing them for this role. In another study of 551 students over a two-year period between the ages of 16 and 19 it was found that the quality of relationships between teachers and students is of central importance for character formation in schools, especially teachers modeling values (Arthur et al., 2001).

CONCLUSION

The development of moral character has been a traditional goal of moral education in schools. Traditional character education focuses on the inculcation of virtuous traits of character as the aim of education. Character education is a label or generic term for a
wide range of approaches to moral education, but specific programs often lack an explicit
definition of what counts as character, they lack solid supporting empirical evidence, and
they often lack a specific theory that underlines them. There are also few evaluations of
any traditional approaches to character education in schools. Nevertheless, since charac-
ter refers to that combination of rational and acquired factors which distinguish one indi-
vidual from another it is clear that certain aspects of character building are beyond the
realm of measurement. Another problem concerns the nature of the teaching role—an
exemplary teacher will naturally establish a good ethos in their class and will promote
good behavior with or without an explicit character education program. Character is not
considered to be formed automatically, but is developed through teaching, example, and
practice. There are also new approaches that have emerged to character education from
cognitive psychology.

We can conclude that different approaches to character education will be viewed
more or less favorably by people of different worldviews. However, because of the wide
variety of approaches to character education it is difficult to evaluate them en masse—it
is necessary to look at individual projects. The research to-date tells us that the danger
of traditional character education lies in adopting inappropriate teaching techniques
for the classroom which include an overtly coercive teacher-dominated approach. That
said, character education programs are popular in many schools and the development
of character can be effective moral education, especially when integrated into the whole
curriculum and school life.

NOTES
1. Lapsley and Narvaez (2006) and Narvaez (2006, p. 703) provide an excellent review of this developmental
research tradition over the last five decades.
2. Plato’s Republic is presented in the form of a dialogue between Socrates and three different interlocutors. It
is an enquiry into the notion of a perfect community and the ideal individual within it. Aristotle’s Ethics
converted ethics from a theoretical to a practical science and also introduced psychology into his study of
behavior. Aristotle both widens the field of moral philosophy and simultaneously makes it more accessible
to anyone who seeks an understanding of human nature. There are many editions of both books and the
editions cited in the references are published by Penguin Books in the UK.

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