

CLARIFYING CHARACTER EDUCATION

Commentary on McGrath

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Robert McGrath (this issue) has proposed a useful way of bringing the field closer to a consensual definition of character education. We support much of his proposal. Like McGrath, we believe the goal of character education should be to increase the expression of qualities that benefit one's self and others. We also agree that character education entails more than just skill building. That said, we have a few reservations about McGrath's proposal. In this commentary, we describe what we consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of McGrath's article. We also offer alternatives to the positions on which we disagree.

Character education is a divisive topic.

When we speak of character education as polarizing, we do not just refer to the fact that some are for it and some are against it. We also refer to infighting among those who enthusiastically champion the idea of teaching character in schools. Whenever thoughtful and well-meaning people disagree, there's a good chance that their disagreement derives from differences in assumptions. For instance, what does the term "character" mean, essentially, and what is meant by its companion term "education"?

R. E. McGrath (this issue) proposes a way forward. He suggests that character education can be distinguished from other types of education aimed at encouraging "growth as a per-

son" (p. 23). Why is this clarification important? Why not, for example, proceed on the assumption that most of us mainly agree on the essential features of character education, even if we cannot easily articulate them?

In McGrath's view, the chief risk of the status quo is that "any program intended to increase prosocial behaviors or resistance to negative behaviors could be treated as an example of character education" (p. 23). McGrath argues that we should instead draw a tighter circle around the scope of character education. Responsible people may disagree with that point, but it's a plain fact that clarifying terms is a prerequisite for evaluating the efficacy of education programs or developing clear policies for funding and research. This

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seems especially true of *character* education, given the abundance of distinct definitions of “character” (Fleeson, Furr, Jayawickreme, Meindl, & Helzer, 2014).

McGrath usefully contrasts two ways to define character education or, indeed, any categorical concept. One way is to identify essential elements; an alternative is to base judgments on family resemblances (i.e., similarity to an ideal prototype).

Much of McGrath’s essay is devoted to seven proposed features of an ideal prototype for character education. For us, these are most easily understood when contrasted with their respective obverse: (1) school based (versus extracurricular or family based), (2) structured (versus unstructured), (3) addressing positive psychological attributes (versus neutral or detrimental attributes), (4) concerned with identity (versus skills), (5) addressing moral development (as opposed to attributes without moral valence), (6) holistic (versus focused on a single strength), and (7) including practical wisdom (versus remaining silent about when and in what measure to deploy strengths).

We support including several of these features in a definition of character education. For example, we also think the goal of character education is to improve the subset of psychological attributes in young people that are stable yet malleable and, importantly, which benefit the individual and their community without doing harm to either.

We also concur that an exclusive focus on skill building in character education is limited. In our view, there is a *skill* component to any character strength, but the *motivation* to act, feel, and think in particular ways is equally essential. For instance, gratitude is demonstrated by the student who writes their teacher a thank you note in order to express their appreciation, but the same gesture is empty if enacted to curry favor. In other words, character is not just about *how* you act, think, and feel, but also, crucially, about *why* you do so.

While we agree with much of McGrath’s reasoning, we differ on a few issues. First, though McGrath’s criterion of holistic (versus

targeted) development of character strengths feels right to us, we also consider it important to acknowledge this approach’s natural limitations. For instance, it seems impractical to work on improving many different character strengths all at once (e.g., 13 in the case of Benjamin Franklin [1791/1921], or 24 as argued by Peterson and Seligman [2004]).

We think it could be more tractable to target, sequentially, individual character strengths. Importantly, it seems that certain strengths are better targets than others, insofar as they have demonstrated influence on other strengths. For instance, a child who develops self-control is not just more self-disciplined, but is probably also in a better position to develop a suite of moral strengths (Baumeister & Exline, 1999). Focusing on “master virtues” like self-control should make character education more efficient (Meindl, Quirk, & Graham, 2017).

Higher order taxonomies of character offer another way of developing character holistically without getting overwhelmed. McGrath’s earlier (2015) work supports three core dimensions of character: caring, inquisitiveness, and self-control. These dimensions resonate with Berkowitz, Bier, and McCauley’s (2016) four aspects of character (moral, performance, intellectual, and civic; see also Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017). Our own view differs only slightly: we divide character into interpersonal, intellectual, and intrapersonal dimensions (as identified by Park, Tsukayama, Goodwin, Patrick, & Duckworth, 2017). The interpersonal dimension includes Berkowitz et al.’s (2016) moral and civic strengths, both of which share a focus on other people that is lacking for intellectual and intrapersonal strengths.

Second, we are not convinced that character education need be structured and school-based. Much of character education, it seems, can and does happen in what is often called the “hidden curriculum”—without a formal syllabus and often outside the classroom, as in the Boy and Girl Scouts, Outward Bound, and after school sports teams. In the

same breath, let us add that an intentional and deliberate focus on character education is surely better than a laissez-faire and unreflective approach. Likewise, schools, where many young people spend the majority of their waking hours, are an excellent locus for character development.

Third, we view character education as different from skill-formation programs not just in its emphasis on identity, but on values as well (see March & Olsen, 2008). Identity is about self-assigned membership to a categorical group. While much of human behavior is motivated by identity (e.g., “I’m the sort of person who considers other people’s feelings”), it also reflects values that are more loosely bound to such categorical beliefs (e.g., “Considering other people’s feelings is important”).

CONCLUSION

McGrath finishes his essay by suggesting how to use his criteria in order to advance both the theory and practice of character education. He proposes that the contribution of his perspective is threefold: clarification of muddled terminology, a tractable approach to defining character education, and a suggested path forward for evaluating character education programs. While we might quibble with some of the specific details of his argument, we are convinced that McGrath’s contribution is moving the field in the right direction.

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