



THE  
JUBILEE CENTRE  
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Insight Series

## Teaching character – but what sort of character?

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## Teaching character – but what sort of character?

The issue of teaching character, which until now has mainly been debated within the ivory towers of academia, is suddenly all the rage in policy circles in the UK, in the wake of the report by the All-party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on social mobility, and Shadow Education Secretary Tristram Hunt's latest speech (<http://www.government-world.com/schooling-for-the-future-speech-by-tristram-hunt/>). The report suggests that teaching 'character and resilience' should be an essential part of every school's ambition, and Hunt argues, in a similar vein, that character and resilience are vital components of a rounded education, a good preparation for a career – and that instilling them in young people 'should not be left to chance'.

Tristram Hunt builds his argument on the premise that there is 'growing evidence that character can be taught.' This is, indeed, true. It has been known for long time that although differences in school achievement can be ascribed, to a significant extent, to genetic and socio-economic factors, there seems to be some magic bullet that can make individual students exceed all expectations in their individual attainment. Even more significantly, when students leave educational institutions for the rough and tumble of the workplace and 'the real world', school grades seem to have only modest value in predicting how well they will do in their work and how much general well-being they will experience in their lives, either objectively or subjectively measured.

So what is this magic bullet? It has long been known – in the corridors of Whitehall at least – under the fuzzy labels of 'soft skills' or 'non-cognitive competences', but neither label is particularly felicitous. The so-called 'soft skills' do not seem 'softer' in terms of being easier to administer and learn than their allegedly 'harder' counterparts. Furthermore, what we are talking about here are surely not raw feelings and desires but rather certain attitudes based on complex self-beliefs and beliefs about the world; hence, anything but non-cognitive. Perhaps 'non-cognitive' is simply meant to denote 'non-academic', but that is a very different piece of cake.

Anthony Seldon at Wellington College and some of his colleagues both in the independent and state school sector have long argued that there is nothing mysterious about this magic bullet, and that it simply comprises what ordinary folk call 'character'. Moreover they claim

that such character can both be *taught* directly in the classroom and conveyed more indirectly (namely, *caught*) through a positive school ethos. Recent empirical findings seem to confirm this anecdotal evidence. For instance, a study of 681 elementary schools in California showed that schools with higher total character-education implementation tended to have higher academic scores by a small but significant margin. Another U.S. study revealed that lessons in character indicate a potential 16% improvement in academic achievement. The third study found that character-development programmes improve an array of positive behaviours in addition to academic achievement. Put simply, promoting the development of good character traits in schools seems to lead directly to positive outcomes. Notably, however, most of those studies have been conducted across the pond and they stand in urgent need of replication in the U.K. context.

Both the APPG report and the Shadow Education Secretary made references to the work being undertaken presently in the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values at the University of Birmingham. We are an interdisciplinary, externally funded, research institute, led by Professor James Arthur, dedicated to a scientific study of the role of character virtues and values in U.K. society. In the long run, we also want to help politicians and the general public understand the benefit that good character and virtues bring to the individual and society. Having only started our research work in the autumn of 2012, we are still in the process of gathering and analysing data. However, early findings confirm the salience of character for the individual, organisational and societal good; character here being understood as set of personal traits or dispositions that evoke specific emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct. When such traits are truly conducive to flourishing, we call them ‘virtues’. We have also produced an initial Framework for Character Education in U.K. schools and engaged in developmental work with schools, organisations and communities.

We are happy to see that the work done within the Centre has already begun to influence the public discourse on character, and we cannot but celebrate the general consensus that seems now to be forming about character as the magic bullet of a flourishing life. People need to be careful, however, not to overlook a couple of important distinctions as they jump on the character bandwagon. The first distinction is between *instrumental* and *intrinsic* value. While it is clearly helpful and fortunate that good character seems to contribute substantially to a number of extrinsic parameters of well-being, such as educational attainment, we believe that its ultimate justification must lie in the constitutive role of virtues in the good life. In other words, the final end of the good life does not lie beyond the good life itself. The second

distinction is between *moral* virtues (such as compassion and honesty), on the one hand, and *performance* virtues (such as resilience and self-confidence), on the other. Unfortunately, the recent discourse on character has focused almost exclusively on the latter. While there is no denying the fact that resilience helps one bounce back quickly from negative experiences and self-confidence makes one more efficacious in achieving one's ends, those 'virtues' can be dangerous if they are untethered from any moral constraints. The missing element in the character make-up of the banksters in the run-up to the financial crisis, or the average heinous dictator, is clearly not a higher level of resilience and self-confidence. Happily, there is some indication in Hunt's speech that politicians are waking up to the necessity for a normative conceptualisation of character, as he mentions both performance and moral virtues.

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Values welcomes the recent dramatic resurgence of interest in character and its education in the U.K. We will be happy to continue to contribute to research and development in this area. We simply want to remind people to take a broad view of character and not to shirk some crucial questions about the nature of the good life as a holistic, morally informed endeavour.

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Insight Series

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

- ◆ *Pioneering interdisciplinary research of international standing focussing on character, virtues and values in the interest of human flourishing.*
- ◆ *Promoting a moral concept of character in order to explore the importance of virtue for public and professional life.*
- ◆ *A leading informant on policy and practice in this area through an extensive range of research and development projects contributing to a renewal of character and values in both individuals and societies.*

*The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues or The University of Birmingham.*

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