Equity and Character Education

Character education aims to help young people develop virtues (Jubilee Centre, 2022). But not all young people start off at the same level: some are more alienated from virtue than others. Thus, the aim of this essay is to consider how character education might be implemented *equitably* – a question which has received little direct attention. This lacuna may be partly because "equity" is so poorly defined (Levinson et al., 2022). In the first section, I will attempt to formulate a coherent principle of equity.

This principle, applied within the framework of virtue ethics, raises three important questions for character education: How do we identify children who are disadvantaged in terms of character development? Is there a minimum standard of character education? And what do disadvantaged students need in order to attain this standard? The bulk of this essay comprises my attempt to answer these questions.

Equity

What is educational equity? Levinson et al. (2022) consider this question at length, with a view to clarifying educational discourse. Equity, they explain, might have something to do with *equality*, but each such conception is problematic in its own right, and they also contradict one another. Or (they continue) equity might have nothing to do with equality, but rather concern *benefitting the less advantaged* or *ensuring educational adequacy*. Far from elucidating, I think this analysis only deepens confusion. In Levinson et al.'s (2022) defence, they do not seem so concerned with defining "equity" as with describing the multifarious – and, indeed, often contradictory – ways in which the word is used. But, for our purposes, not to mention educational discourse more generally, it would help to have a single, coherent definition. In this section, via a closer critique of Levison et al. (2022), I will attempt to tease out such a definition.

Levinson et al. (2022) begin their analysis by examining equity as different forms of *equality*. First, they consider *equal distributions of outcomes across populations*: while it would be unrealistic to expect *every* child to be a maths whizz, for example, the *distribution* of maths whizzes should be roughly equal across all populations of children (e.g., SES, gender, etc.). But, they argue, there are some outcomes that we would want for *all* children – basic literacy, for example. Levinson et al. (2022) thus proceed to consider the next form of equality, and we will follow them momentarily. First, it is worth considering what has happened so far. Levison et al. (2022) took one possible conception of equity – equal distributions of outcomes across populations – and showed it to be flawed. We should conclude, therefore, that equity is *not* equal distributions of outcomes across populations. But the analysis was not in vain; rather, it has started to bring the conceptual boundaries of equity into focus. Specifically, we now know that an adequate conception of equity must acknowledge the fact that there are some outcomes that *all* children must achieve. I will call this equity criterion number one (EC1).

Second, Levinson et al. (2022) consider *equality of resources*, where all children receive the same curricula, student-teacher ratios, etc. But, they argue, resource equality would not be enough to guarantee *equality of opportunity*, as different children have different needs, and thus different resource-to-opportunity conversion rates. I conclude, therefore (as before), that equity is *not* equality of resources. But, again, the conceptual boundaries of equity have been brought into sharper focus. We have learned that equity is in service to equality of opportunity (see also Jencks, 1988), and that an adequate conception must acknowledge that children have different needs. Thus, we have gained two more criteria (EC2 and EC3, respectively).

Third, Levinson et al. (2022) consider *equality of growth*, where each child should experience the same amount of development as they move through school. But, they argue,

children start off at different levels, so equal growth would only preserve inequalities. I conclude, therefore, that equity is *not* equality of growth. But the analysis here reaffirms the importance of acknowledging that children have different needs (EC2).

Finally, Levison et al. (2022) consider *equality of individual outcomes*, where every learner achieves the same outcomes. But, they argue, there are some outcomes that we would not expect *every* child to achieve – mastering calculus, for example. This outcome is "not necessary for most people to live productive and fulfilling lives" (p. 4). I conclude, therefore, that equity is *not* equality of individual outcomes. But here we have learnt a great deal. First, while we have already acknowledged that equity is in the service of equality of opportunity (EC2), we did not stop to ask: Opportunity for *what*? Now we have an answer: for a *good life* (see also Schouten, 2012). I will call this EC2+. We have also learned that while not all outcomes are necessary for a good life, certain other outcomes presumably *are* – basic literacy, for example (see also Brighouse et al., 2018). This reaffirms EC1.

Levinson et al. (2022) close the first section of their article by reiterating that these conceptions of equity as different forms of equality are incompatible: equal growth from unequal starting points will result in unequal outcomes, while equal outcomes will require unequal resource allocation. But it was these contradictions, recall, that have allowed us to delimit the conceptual boundaries of equity, and thus derive our three equity criteria (EC1, EC2+ and EC3).

In the second section or their article, Levinson et al. (2022) describe how equity is often subsumed to values that have nothing to do with equality. First, *benefitting the less advantaged*, where the interests of children who are disadvantaged are prioritised in terms of resource allocation. Second, *ensuring educational adequacy*, where all children are enabled to thrive above some baseline. These values, they explain, can be seen as different ways of conceptualising equity *or* as alternatives to equity. Again, I find this analysis confusing. So, I

offer the following alternative: these two values are best understood as arising to resolve the aforementioned contradictions. Indeed, together they satisfy our three equity criteria! The first value (prioritarianism) acknowledges that children have different needs (EC3), while the second (educational adequacy) acknowledges that there are some outcomes that all children must achieve (EC1) if they are to have an equal opportunity to thrive (EC2+). Far from being alternatives to equity, these values *are* equity. In short:

> *More resources should be allocated to disadvantaged children in order to ensure that all children achieve the minimum requirements for a good life.*

I present this as the principle of equity.[1]

Returning to Levinson et al. (2022), they proceed to raise some concerns about the values of prioritarianism and educational adequacy. It can be difficult, they explain, to figure out *how* to prioritise disadvantaged children at the level of school or classroom practice; and to decide what an adequate education would have to be adequate *for*, and whether standards of adequacy have been met. They also raise some more general concerns regarding "trade-offs": Does a certain conception of equity benefit some students more than others? Does it benefit other stakeholders more than students? Does it prioritise some beliefs over others? Does it assume that others share the same values?

These are legitimate concerns. But observe that none challenge the principle of equity stated above. Indeed, the principle is entirely *formal*: it makes no claims whatsoever about the nature of the good life, its minimum requirements, or how to achieve these requirements. Two people could be in complete disagreement regarding these substantive issues, but nonetheless agree on the principle of equity. The concerns raised by Levinson et al. (2022) are substantive concerns; they do not challenge, but rather implicitly endorse the principle of equity.

[1] This principle is a more general formulation of Schouten's (2012) prioritarian principle of educational justice.

Now, the question to which all considerations of equity are ultimately subsumed is this: What constitutes a good life? For it is only once we have answered this question that we might proceed to consider the minimum requirements for such a life, or indeed how to ensure that all children achieve these requirements.

Character Education

The question of what constitutes a good life is one of the perennial questions of philosophy. There are three main theories. First, according to *deontology* (e.g., Kant, 1785/2019), a good life is one that is lived in accordance with a rational principle. Second, according to *utilitarianism* (e.g., Mill, 1863/1998), a good life is one that maximises happiness. Third, according to *virtue ethics* (e.g., Aristotle, 2009), a good life is a *flourishing* one. This essay will proceed on the assumption of virtue ethics.

Flourishing is constituted by positive character traits known as *virtues*, most specifically *moral* virtues (e.g., courage, justice, honesty, citizenship), but also *intellectual* virtues (e.g., curiosity, critical thinking, *phronesis*) and *performance* virtues (e.g., co-operative skills, resilience) (Kristjánsson, 2017, pp. 13–17).[2] *Character education* refers to any educational activities that help young people develop virtues (Jubilee Centre, 2022). Thus, the ultimate aim of Aristotelian character education is the flourishing of the student (Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 14).

But, as always, not all children will start off at the same level: some will be more alienated from virtue than others. Thus arises the question of how character education might be implemented *equitably*. This question has received little direct attention. That is not to say that the two ideas – "equity" and character education, or moral education more broadly – have not occasionally coincided. Gorard et al. (2008), for example, argue that equity is a

[2] I include *civic* virtues within the moral virtues, though I acknowledge this relationship is a matter of debate (see e.g. Peterson, 2020).

precondition of citizenship education. Several works have argued that issues of inequity might be addressed by various approaches to moral education: Nucci (2016), by focussing on reasoning; Jagers et al. (2018), by promoting the development of social and emotional learning; and Seider and Graves (2020), by developing critical consciousness. Others have stressed the importance of taking contextual factors into consideration: Nucci and Ilten-Gee (2021), for moral education in general (see also Thompson, 2021); and Soutter et al. (2022), for the measurement of character. But none has sought to address the question of how character education in particular might be implemented equitably. This will be my focus.

Recall that according to the principle of equity (above), more resources should be allocated to disadvantaged children to ensure that all children achieve the minimum requirements for a good life. Assuming that a good life is a flourishing one, this raises three questions for character education: How do we identify children who are disadvantaged in terms of character development? What are the minimum requirements for flourishing? And what do disadvantaged students need (qua resources) to achieve these minimum requirements? I will consider each question in turn.

Character Disadvantage

First, how do we identify children who are disadvantaged in terms of character development? One might think that the task of identifying such students presupposes a reliable way of measuring character, which has been called character education's "profoundest problem" (Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 60). This is not true. We do not need to measure wealth down to the last penny in order to know who is the poorest. Nor do we need a reliable way of measuring character in order to identify those who are most disadvantaged.

The Jubilee Centre's (2022) neo-Aristotelian model of moral development is a good place to start. The model is split into an upper and lower trajectory – "Plan A" and "Plan B". Plan A children are raised with positive moral habits; Plan B children are raised with negative

moral habits. Thus, relative to Plan A children, Plan B children are disadvantaged in terms of moral development. One might object that this is not immediately helpful. Indeed, it is often far from obvious what sorts of moral habits a child has been raised with. As a classroom teacher, however, I would argue that many of the children who have been raised with the *worst* moral habits (i.e., the *most* disadvantaged in terms of character development) will not need discovering, but rather will make themselves known, and usually quite quickly.

Good character consists in virtues: kindness, honesty, respect, etc. Opposed to virtues are the *vices*: unkindness, dishonesty, disrespect, etc. Both virtues and vices have components: perception, emotion, desire, motivation, behaviour and style (Kristjánsson, 2017, pp. 14–15); and among these components, the most outwardly observable (e.g., by a teacher) is behaviour. Thus, children who have been raised with positive moral habits are more likely to be seen behaving virtuously. Conversely, children who have been raised with negative moral habits are more likely to be seen behaving viciously (i.e., in a way that manifests vice).

But here we must be careful. As Kristjánsson (2017, p. 14) explains, none of these components, not even behaviour, can be evaluated in isolation from the others. If I lied to you, for example, this does not necessarily mean that I am a habitually dishonest person, let alone that I have bad character. I might have lied in order to protect your feelings. Thus, behaviour cannot be evaluated in isolation from motivation.[3] But if a child is seen to behave viciously *for its own reward* – if they seem to enjoy being unkind to others, for example – then it is highly likely that they have been raised with negative moral habits, and are therefore disadvantaged in terms of character development. That is not to say that children who behave viciously for an external reward (e.g., money) are not also disadvantaged in terms of

[3] Note that the motivation component of virtue may also subsume the emotion component, as emotions can be conceptualised as motivations (see Scarantino & de Sousa, 2021).

character development, just less disadvantaged than children who behave viciously for its own reward. (I will develop a more systematic hierarchy of (dis)advantage in the following section.) And it is worth stressing that while disadvantage may be outwardly observable as vicious behaviour, it must still *be* observed by practitioners. This requires professional judgment and real knowledge of the children.

So, in answer to the question of identifying children who are disadvantaged in terms of character development, I submit that it is those who have been raised with negative moral habits; and that those who have been raised with the worst moral habits (i.e., the most disadvantaged) will often make themselves known (e.g., to a teacher) by behaving viciously for its own reward.

Minimum Standard of Character Education

Equity involves ensuring that all children achieve the minimum requirements for a good life. Assuming that a good life is a flourishing one, we might now ask: What are the minimum requirements for flourishing? Or, equivalently, is there a minimum standard of character education?

Returning to the neo-Aristotelian model of moral development (Jubilee Centre, 2022), a key difference between Plan A and Plan B children is *motivation*. Plan A is largely *intrinsically* motivated; that is, Plan A children pursue virtuous activity for its own reward. Plan B, on the other hand, is largely *extrinsically* motivated; that is, Plan B children pursue virtue for some separable consequence (e.g., an external reward). What the model fails to convey, however, is that extrinsic motivation is not a homogenous phenomenon, but rather can vary in its relative autonomy, from integrated regulation (most autonomous) to external

regulation (least autonomous) (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Thus, within Plan B, there is in fact a continuum of sub-paths, which children may move between.[4]

Using the neo-Aristotelian model of moral development (Jubilee Centre, 2022) as a jumping-off point, we might posit the following hierarchy of virtue:

A. Intrinsically motivated virtue: those who pursue virtue for its own reward.
B. Continuum of extrinsically motivated virtue: those who pursue virtue for some separable consequence, from most autonomous to least autonomous.
C. Amotivation: those who do not pursue virtue, but nor do they pursue vice.
D. Continuum of extrinsically motivated vice: those who pursue vice for some separable consequence, from least autonomous to most autonomous (note the inversion relative to B).
E. Intrinsically motivated vice: those who pursue vice for its own reward.[5]

The most advantaged in terms of character development are at the top (level A); the most disadvantaged are at the bottom (level E). Character education might be defined as the attempt to move people *up* this hierarchy; any vertical movement whatsoever could be considered progress. But the question persists: Is there a *minimum* standard – a level in the hierarchy which all students, even the most disadvantaged (level E), should attain?

The Jubilee Centre's (2022) *Framework for Character Education in Schools* suggests an answer: "… [moral learners] may need to take a detour through a pathway of good intentions, undermined by a weakness of will, through practical habituation, which provides them with the self-regulation needed to *at least be extrinsically motivated to act virtuously*" (p. 20; emphasis added). This suggests that all students should attain at least level B in the

[4] What is less clear is whether Plan B children could ever make the jump from extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation (Plan A). Despite being many times suggested – most recently by Watts et al. (2021, p. 79; 2022) – there remains no body of evidence to support this speculative proposition.
[5] Aristotle would refer to level B as "continent" (*enkratês*), C as "incontinent" (*akratês*), and D/E as "evil" (*kakos*, *phaulos*) (Kraut, 2022).

hierarchy. I agree with this in general, but we should be more specific. The quotation implies that self-regulation is important for character development. As noted above, however, there are different types of extrinsic motivation, which vary in their relative autonomy. Not all of these types require self-regulation: the least autonomous type of extrinsic motivation (viz. external regulation) is regulated wholly from outside the self; if the external contingencies are removed, this type of motivation would evaporate. This is why self-regulation matters: if a student is to do the right thing when no one is looking – that is, in the absence of external regulation – then they must carry their motivation with them. Self-regulation thus requires at least some degree of *internalisation*. So, the question becomes: At which point within level B does extrinsic motivation start to become internalised? One step up in terms of autonomy from external regulation is *introjected* regulation. As Ryan and Deci (2017) explain: "*Introjection* is a type of internalization that involves taking in or adopting a regulation or value, yet doing so in a way that is only a partial and incomplete transformation or assimilation" (p. 185; emphasis in original). So, if introjected regulation is the lowest point in the hierarchy which involves at least some internalisation, then perhaps we have found the minimum standard of character education.

There is a complication. Character is not a unitary construct, but rather consists in different virtues. A single person could therefore occupy different levels in the hierarchy with respect to different virtues; they might be intrinsically motivated to be honest, for example, but require external regulation in order to be kind. So, we must ask: Which virtues matter most when it comes to character development? The aim of character education is the development of *good* character, and good character consists in *moral* virtues (Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 17). Intellectual and performance virtues, by contrast, have no bearing on whether someone's character is good; even the intellectual meta-virtue of *phronesis* degenerates to mere cleverness without the moral virtues (Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 30). So, my suggestion for

a minimum standard of character education is this: introjected regulation with respect to the *prototypical* moral virtues, namely, courage, justice, honesty, compassion, gratitude, and humility (Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 17).

Before proceeding, it is worth considering a possible objection. If all children achieved the proposed minimum standard of character education, this would effectively eliminate vice, at least its overt manifestations, which would be good for society; and flourishing is a communal activity, after all (Kristjánsson, 2021). But what about the individual? As Ryan and Deci (2017) point out, "an introject is experienced as a demanding or controlling force, albeit an internal one, acting on the self – a sense that one "should" or "must" do something or face anxiety and self-disparagement" (p. 185). That does not sound much like flourishing. Perhaps, then, character education should set its sights higher: not merely introjected regulation, but identified regulation or even fully integrated regulation.

While some students may readily attain this higher standard, it would be too much to expect of *all* students. Character is something that develops over the course of a lifetime. Formal education, however, is largely confined to the first eighteen years. Thus, the question facing character education is not one of final outcome, but rather one of *preparation*: How can we best prepare students for a lifetime of character development? If a child achieves the level of introjected regulation, this would ensure that they at least *act* virtuously, if only begrudgingly. But by acting virtuously, they might come to feel the inherent satisfactions of such behaviour, which would facilitate deeper internalisation of virtue.

Character Educational Resources

We have identified our most disadvantaged students: those who pursue vice for its own reward (level E in the hierarchy of virtue). And the minimum standard of character education is introjected regulation with respect to moral virtue. Now, finally, we must

consider the question of *resources*: What do disadvantaged students need in order to attain this minimum standard of character education?

First, a word of warning. Given that the minimum standard of character education involves a form of extrinsic motivation, one might be tempted simply to set up more external reward contingencies for disadvantaged students. This would be a mistake. Consider Michael, a student who seems to take pleasure in being rude to teachers (level E). One day, however, perhaps for the first time in his life, he says, "Thank you" – that is, he manifests the moral virtue of gratitude. In response, his teacher excitedly gives him a "merit" – a symbolic, but nonetheless *external* reward. What effect might this have on Michael's motivation? First, it could undermine whatever autonomous force had compelled him to say thank you in the first place: Michael might come to see gratitude as a means to receiving merits, and thereby experience merits as *controlling* (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Even if the reward contingency is withdrawn (i.e., no more merits), his motivation is unlikely to return to its baseline level (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Thus, far from moving Michael further up the hierarchy of virtue, it could in fact move him down. And the damage is not confined to just the rewarded behaviour, but could spill over into related behaviours (Gubler et al., 2016). While Michael had always struggled with gratitude, perhaps he had managed just fine with honesty. But if he is now being rewarded for saying thank you, then why not for telling the truth, too? Nor is the damage confined to just Michael (Gubler et al., 2016)! Consider Martha, a student who has always pursued virtue for its own reward (level A). But if Michael is getting merits simply for saying thank you, then why are her efforts not also being rewarded? Thus, the effect of misusing external rewards is potentially catastrophic to the aims of character education, especially within the classroom environment.[6] But if not external rewards, then what do

[6] For recent discussion, see the exchange between Berkowitz (2022) and Watts et al. (2022). Gorard et al. (2008) also express a similar concern in relation to citizenship education.

disadvantaged students need in order to attain introjected regulation? What does a student like Michael require in order to transition from being rude to teachers for the fun of it to internalising (at least in part) the moral virtue of gratitude?

Self-determination theory (SDT) proposes three *basic psychological needs*, which when satisfied facilitate growth, integrity, and wellbeing: the needs for *competence*, *relatedness*, and *autonomy* (Ryan & Deci, 2017). According to organismic integration theory, one of SDT's sub-theories, satisfying these needs will also facilitate greater internalisation (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 203). It is in this sense that disadvantaged students might be said to have "greater needs": they lack competence, relatedness and autonomy with respect to the moral virtues. Michael, for example, might not know how to express gratitude (competence), or feel part of community where gratitude is valued (relatedness), or feel that he has the choice to be grateful (autonomy). Resources should be so directed as to satisfy these needs in disadvantaged students, and thus facilitate the internalisation of virtue, at least up to the minimum level of introjected regulation.[7]

SDT's three basic needs correspond with the Jubilee Centre's (2022) "taught", "caught" and "sought". Indeed, the need for competence could be satisfied by teaching what virtue is (taught), the need for relatedness by fostering an inclusive environment where virtue is valued (caught), and the need for autonomy by providing opportunities to practice virtue (sought). The character teaching inventory (Jubilee Centre, 2022) presents 70 strategies that fall into these three categories. Suffice to say, the implementation of many of these strategies requires considerable resources: money, time, effort, expertise, etc. But it is these resources that disadvantaged students need more of if they are to attain the minimum standard of introjected regulation with respect to moral virtue.

[7] Anything that achieves this end might be considered a character educational resource.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to explore how character education might be implemented equitably, a question which has received little direct attention. First, via a critique of Levinson et al. (2022), I formulated a general principle of equity, namely, that more resources should be allocated to disadvantaged children in order to ensure that all children achieve the minimum requirements for a good life. Assuming that a good life is a flourishing one, this raises three important questions for character education: How do we identify children who are disadvantaged in terms of character development? Is there a minimum standard of character education? And what do disadvantaged students need in order to attain this standard? I answered these questions as follows.

I argued that disadvantaged students are those who have been raised with negative moral habits; and that those who have been raised with the worst moral habits (i.e., the most disadvantaged) will often make themselves known by pursuing vice for its own reward (e.g., by being unkind for the fun of it). The second question, regarding a minimum standard of character education, led me to posit a hierarchy of virtue, with intrinsically motivated vice at the bottom (level E). I argued that character education should aim to raise all students at least to the level of extrinsically motivated virtue (level B), specifically, introjected regulation with respect to the prototypical moral virtues. Finally, I argued that with respect to these virtues, disadvantaged students have greater needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy; and that these needs map onto the Jubilee Centre's (2022) "taught", "caught" and "sought". Thus, it is the resources required to implement these character educational strategies that disadvantaged students need more of if they are to attain the minimum standard of introjected regulation with respect to moral virtue.

I will end on a question for further consideration. Introjected regulation with respect to moral virtue would ensure that students do the right thing when no one is looking (i.e.,

without external regulation). If students are to attain this minimum standard, then they must be given the opportunity to do the thing *when no one is looking* – that is, at some point, practitioners must look away, and leave students to their own devices. But if no one is looking, how can we ever be certain that the standard has been attained?[8]

[8] This echoes Levinson et al.'s (2022) more general concern about ensuring that standards of educational adequacy have been met.

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