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Practical Wisdom and Virtue Internalisation:

Addressing the Paradox of Moral Education via Reflection

1. Research Context

This research investigates whether **phronesis-guided reflection** (i.e., reflection informed by a general conception of the good life) can help young people internalise moral virtues – a recurring proposition in character education (e.g., Arthur et al., 2014; Jubilee Centre, 2022; Harrison et al., 2016; Kristjánsson, 2017; Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024). At its core, the study addresses the "paradox of moral education": how to foster autonomy and ethical reasoning from a foundation of externally guided habits and rules. This paradox, famously captured by Peters' (1981) metaphor of entering "the Palace of Reason" through the "courtyard of Habit and Tradition," challenges Aristotelian and other moral development theories that depend on early-stage heteronomy or external control (e.g., Piaget, 1932; Kohlberg, 1981).

This issue carries significant **practical implications**. Many schools rely heavily on extrinsic reward systems to encourage good behaviour (Berkowitz & Bustamante, 2013). Yet sustainable character development requires a shift from external motivators to internal, self-driven commitments to moral values. This research explores whether this transition can be facilitated by reflective practices specifically informed by phronesis.

The potential of reflection in this context is supported by evidence linking it to positive character-related outcomes, such as empathy, ethical reasoning, and intellectual virtues (e.g., Bruya & Ardelt, 2018; Day, 2002; Orona, 2021). However, key **gaps** in the literature remain:

1. **Ambiguity in the concept of reflection**: Reflection is inconsistently defined, complicating its application in educational contexts (van Beveren et al., 2018).

2. **Limited integration of phronesis**: Empirical studies rarely incorporate practical wisdom, a cornerstone of Aristotelian character education (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024).

3. **Lack of measures for virtue internalisation**: Research has yet to develop robust tools to assess whether virtues have been internalised rather than merely performed for external reasons.

4. **Focus on intellectual virtues**: Studies often emphasise virtues like critical thinking and curiosity over moral virtues such as honesty, kindness, or gratitude, without which intellectual virtues risk being misdirected (Kristjánsson, 2017).

To address these gaps, this study integrates two complementary frameworks: **neo-Aristotelian character education**, which emphasises the cultivation of moral virtues as essential to flourishing (Jubilee Centre, 2022), and **Self-Determination Theory (SDT)**, a well-established model of motivation and human development that highlights the importance of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017). While these two frameworks have met before (Krettenauer & Curren, 2020), this research deepens their integration by employing SDT explicitly in the service of character education.

2. Objectives

This research aims to investigate whether phronesis-guided reflection can facilitate the internalisation of moral virtues. This overarching objective engenders four **sub-objectives**, each addressing a key gap in the literature:

1. **Clarify the concept of reflection**: Conduct a conceptual analysis to resolve the ambiguity in how reflection is defined and used within character education research.

2. **Develop a phronesis-guided reflection tool**: This practical tool will help students critically evaluate whether and how their actions align with a generally justifiable "blueprint" of a good life, grounded in the emerging science of flourishing (Fowers et al., 2024). The blueprint will be explicitly taught to students through structured activities and guided discussions.

3. **Measure virtue internalisation**: Use SDT's **Organismic Integration Theory (OIT)** to assess how students' motivations for virtuous behaviour shift from external (e.g., rewards) to internal (e.g., personal endorsement). Internalisation will be measured through **Self-Regulation Questionnaires (SRQs),** which are well-validated tools for tracking changes in motivation (Pelletier et al., 2001).

4. **Design activities for moral virtues**: Develop activities that target moral virtues rather than intellectual virtues alone. For example, gratitude journalling may be used to help students practise and reflect on the virtue of gratitude (Froh et al., 2008).

The reflection tool, activities, and measures will be pilot-tested with a small sample and refined before full implementation.

3. Methodology

The hypothesis – that phronesis-guided reflection can facilitate virtue internalisation – will be tested using a **quantitative, mixed factorial design** (Figure 1, below). Participants will be recruited from a population of 11- to 12-year-old students, as adolescence is often seen as the period when the shift from heteronomy (external control) to autonomy (self-governance) begins (Kristjánsson, 2017).

Externally motivated students will be recruited using a script designed to identify and exclude autonomous volunteers. Participants will engage in a six-week moral activity (e.g., gratitude journalling) and be randomly assigned to one of two groups:

- **Intervention group**: Students will use the designed **phronesis-guided reflection tool** immediately after each session.

- **Control group**: No reflection.

Virtue internalisation will be measured pre- and post-intervention using **SRQs** to assess motivation along an autonomy continuum. Results will be analysed using a **mixed ANOVA,** comparing changes in internalisation within and between the two groups. The hypothesis predicts that the intervention group will exhibit significantly greater gains in virtue internalisation than the control group.

4. Timetable

(See Figure 2, below.)

5. Outcomes

The study above is designed to address two further gaps in character education research:

1. **Employing a randomised controlled trial (RCT)**: Despite being widely regarded as the gold standard for evaluating education interventions (Harrison et al., 2016), there is a notable lack of RCTs in character education (Oldham & McLoughlin, 2024). By adopting a robust RCT framework, this study enhances methodological rigour and offers a model to inform school policies, teacher training, and other character education interventions.

2. **Inclusive recruitment of participants:** Most character education studies rely on voluntary participation, which often means participants are already autonomous. This approach raises two concerns:

   - **Methodological**: Evaluating character interventions with autonomous participants risks "ceiling effects," where their high baseline autonomy limits the measurable impact of the intervention.

   - **Ethical**: Autonomous participants have less need for character interventions, whereas those who do not initially volunteer may have greater developmental needs that are often overlooked.

   Recruiting externally motivated students ensures a more representative sample, with extrinsic rewards being used to encourage participation. This inclusive design addresses the risk of biased findings and contributes to a deeper understanding of effective character education and its practical applications in diverse student populations, including disadvantaged groups.
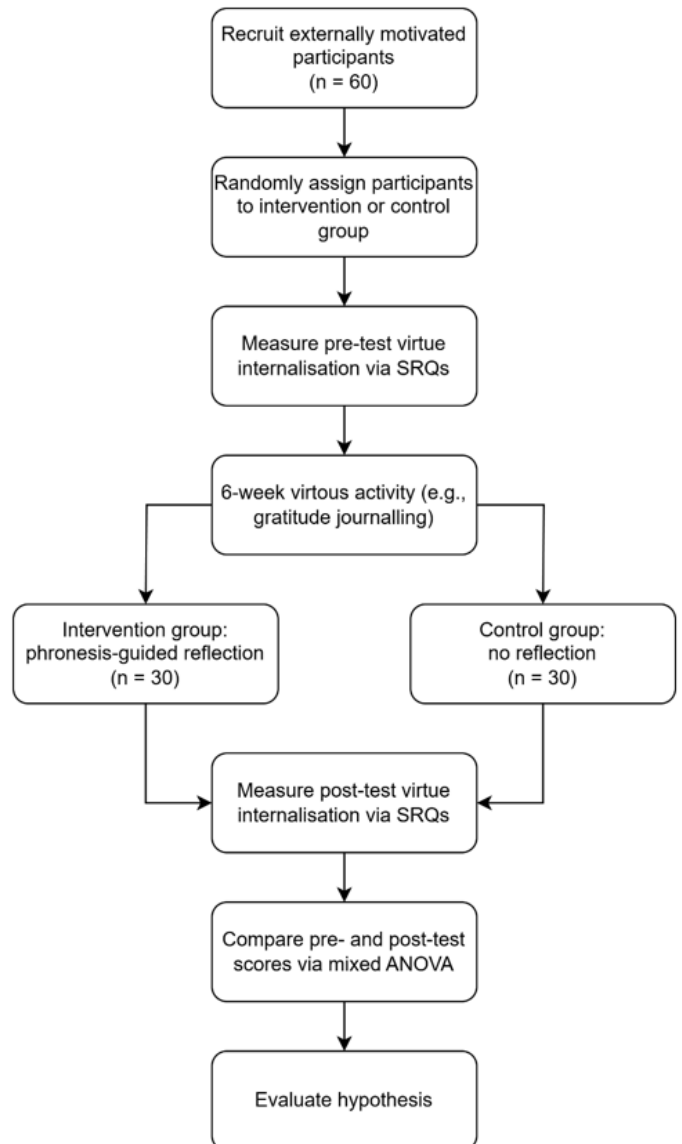
6. Researcher Background

(See Question 7: Personal Statement.)

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Figure 1

Flowchart for the proposed study.

Figure 2

PhD Project Gantt Chart