# Some Reflections on Leadership for Character Education

## Background

Barr's Hill is an inner city comprehensive school operating in a highly challenging social context. The school has been on a journey in recent years, as shown by its two most recent Ofsted inspection ratings: from "Good" in 2018 (but, in truth, it required considerable improvement), to "Outstanding" in 2024. I joined the school as an early career maths teacher (ECT1) in 2022. I started my MA at the Jubilee Centre in the same year (funded by the school).

Barr's Hill had been operating with a virtues framework for some time, namely, PRIDE – Proactive, Responsible, Inquisitive, Determined and Engaged. However, the school continued to face some serious behaviour issues, particularly in the corridors between lessons. Given my recent commencement on the MA, I was invited to attend a series of SLT meetings to discuss how these behaviour issues might be addressed. I made the case that the PRIDE virtues were mostly performance and intellectual virtues; "Responsible" was possibly an exception, but it was unhelpfully ambiguous. What we needed, I argued, were some explicitly *moral* virtues. A year later (2023), the Responsible Behaviours (or virtues) were introduced – Honesty, Kindness, Considerateness, Bravery, Respect and Gratitude.

The Responsible virtues have had a mixed reception. Some teachers have begun to make good use of them during restorative conversations. Other teachers bemoan that they are yet more virtues within an increasingly bloated virtues framework, along with all the other strategies and policies that encumber the profession. Moreover, our primary means of promoting desirable behaviours continues to be a reward system – namely, PRIDE Points – a strategy which risks instrumentalising behaviours that should be considered intrinsically valuable. This was the real backdrop to my hypothetical presentation.

As stated at the outset, I wanted my presentation to reinvigorate character education at Barr's Hill. In terms of the Jubilee Centre's (2024) six practical aspects of character education leadership, my presentation aligned most closely with the first aspect, namely, defining – or, in

this case, *re*-defining – the school's mission, vision and values. There were also elements of the second and third aspects: adopting a model (viz., the PRIMED model; Berkowitz, 2021) and communicating my plan.[1]

There were two main aims. First, I wanted my presentation to hammer home the distinction between intrinsically valuable moral virtues (viz., the Responsible virtues) and instrumentally valuable performance/intellectual virtues (viz., the other PRIDE virtues). This distinction is central to the basic thesis of (Aristotelian) character education (Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 26) – a thesis which leaders of schools of character need to understand (Berkowitz, 2011). Alas, as Begley (2012) laments, one of the most common failures observable among educational leaders is a failure to distinguish between means and ends.[2] Thus, I wanted to be unequivocal: the ultimate end of education is student flourishing, which is constituted by the ongoing realisation of moral virtues (Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 14); everything else is but a means to flourishing.[3] That is not to say that character education does not also have instrumental value; it can lead to improved attainment (Jeynes, 2019) and social mobility (Jubilee Centre, 2016). But these so-called "positive" outcomes are valuable only if they facilitate flourishing.[4]

The second aim (a practical consequence of the first) was to motivate, before initiating, a shift away from strategies that rely on extrinsic motivators (viz., PRIDE Points). Berkowitz and Bustamante (2013, p. 13) describe this issue as "one of the most vexing and intractable issues" for character education reform in schools. And it is not just a problem for students. Stoten (2013) found that the style of leadership most associated with school leaders was that of *transactional* leadership, a style which has also been criticised for overreliance on extrinsic

[1] This description also aligns with Davies and Davies' (2012) description of *strategic* leadership as leadership that defines the organisation's vision and moral purpose and translates them into action.
[2] While school leaders may often fail to distinguish between means and ends, on a more optimistic note, a recent survey (Jubilee Centre, 2020) showed that parents and teachers prioritised moral virtues (e.g., honesty, compassion) over performance virtues (e.g., resilience).
[3] According to McKenna and Rooney (2019, p. 651), moving beyond instrumental thinking is a hallmark of wisdom.
[4] Indeed, it is easy to imagine someone who is high attaining and socially mobile, but who is nevertheless deeply alienated from virtue (see also Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 30).

motivators (Avolio & Bass, 1991). Extrinsic motivators are a specific problem for character education because they have been shown to undermine internalisation (Ryan & Deci, 2017), and internalised (if not intrinsic) motivation is essential for virtue (Aristotle, 2004; Curren, 2014). This idea is reflected in many prominent models of character education (e.g., Berkowitz, 2021; Character.org, 2018; Jubilee Centre, 2022). Hence, I was keen to shift towards strategies that facilitate (rather than undermine) the internalisation process.

These two aims – hammering home the intrinsic/instrumental distinction and shifting away from extrinsic motivators – determined the content of the presentation. As for the mode of presentation, it would be delivered on an INSET day to all teaching staff, and would be the first of a series of sessions; subsequent sessions would focus on each of the "new" internalisation strategies. Moreover, I attempted to deliver the presentation with a certain style, namely, that of a servant leader.

**Character Educator as Servant**

Which styles of leadership are well suited to the aims of character education? Character education – indeed, education in general – is an inherently ethical endeavour (Campbell, 2015), so we ought to look for styles of leadership that are overtly ethical. *Transformational*, *authentic* and *servant* leadership styles all have ethical aspects (Watts, 2024). I would argue, however, that servant leadership is particularly well suited to character education – not due to a difference in ethical substance, but rather to a serendipitous use of language. For both character education and servant leadership, the ultimate aim is for people – staff and students (within an educational context) – to "fulfil their potential" (Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 13; Van Dierendonck, 2011, p. 1231). But what does it mean for a person to "fulfil their potential"? On this question, servant leadership is silent – a potentially fatal omission.[5] Character education, on the other hand, does offer an answer. Drawing upon virtue ethics, Aristotelian character

[5] There are other criticisms of servant leadership (see e.g., Banks et al., 2018; Eva et al., 2019; Liu, 2019; Stone et al., 2004; Van Dierendonck, 2011).

education (Kristjánsson, 2017) proposes that fulfilling one's potential means *flourishing*, which is constituted in large part by the ongoing realisation of moral virtues – kindness, honesty, bravery, etc. Thus, character education offers servant leadership a grounding in ethical theory, namely, virtue ethics. The two theories together imply that the central focus of educational leadership should be to empower staff and students to be kind, honest, brave, etc. Lanctot and Irving (2010) similarly propose to situate servant leadership within a virtue ethical framework (albeit a Judeo-Christian rather than Aristotelian one).[6] So, I believe that servant leadership is indeed well suited to character education, providing that it is underpinned by a steadfast commitment to flourishing as the aim of education (see also Kristjánsson, 2019). Servant leadership is especially relevant to character education in the context of my school, Barr's Hill, given its emphasis on empowering "the least privileged in society" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 7).

Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) identify eight dimensions (or virtues) of servant leadership: empowerment, standing back, accountability, forgiveness, courage, authenticity, humility and stewardship. The Servant Leadership Survey (SLS; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011) breaks these virtues down into thirty concrete behaviours (or "items"). In what follows, I will explain how I demonstrated some of these behaviours – and thus the corresponding virtues – in my presentation. Moreover, within the framework of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), Chiniara and Bentein (2016) have shown that some of the main positive outcomes of servant leadership (viz., increased task performance and organisational citizenship behaviours) are mediated by the fulfilment of employee's basic psychological needs for *autonomy*, *competence* and *relatedness* (see also Eva et al., 2019). Thus, for each behaviour below, in addition to the SLS item number, I will also indicate (in brackets) whether the behaviour satisfies the need for autonomy (A), competence (C) or relatedness (R).[7]

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[6] Cameron (2011) does the same for *responsible* leadership, equating it with virtuousness.

[7] *Authentic* leaders are also said to support follower self-determination, by providing support for autonomy, providing non-controlling positive feedback, and acknowledging other perspectives (Avolio & Gardener, 2005; Ilies et al., 2005).

***Empowerment***. First, my presentation was designed to give colleagues the information needed in order to work well (Item 1; C), where "working well" is understood in terms of facilitating the internalisation of virtues. In particular, I wanted to hammer home the intrinsic/instrumental distinction and thus motivate a shift away from extrinsic motivators. Moreover, I did so with repeated reference to a concrete issue (viz., the "toilet problem"), which brought a potentially abstract discussion down to earth. I also did my best to avoid philosophical jargon, which can be counterproductive (Kristjánsson et al., 2022). Second, I encouraged colleagues to use their talents (Item 2; C, R), namely, Shanie, to use her graphic design skills to improve upon my design. Moreover, each of the subsequent sessions would be led by a different member of staff, with expertise specific to each internalisation strategy. Third, I enabled colleagues to solve problems independently (Item 20; A, C), inviting colleagues to discuss how *they* would respond to the research findings on rewards/internalisation.[8] Finally, I gave colleagues the opportunity to learn more (Item 27; A, C), making a set of key readings available on SharePoint.

***Standing back***. I gave credit to others (Item 5; C, R), namely: Dan, for engaging students in the conversations that gave rise to the "toilet problem"; Pete Curren, for his description of the PRIDE Points system; Wendy Stamper and John Orchard, for being paragons of teaching; and Beth, for her toilet twinning idea. At the end, I also committed to examples of best practice being shared at Showcase Best Practice meetings.

***Accountability***. I informed colleagues that we would hold one another accountable for performance (Item 14), where "performance" is understood (again) in terms of facilitating the internalisation of virtues. In particular, conversations regarding the use of internalisation strategies would be incorporated into Performance Management. However, it would be

[8] In my hypothetical presentation, a colleague named Andreas conveniently came to the same conclusion as me, namely, that PRIDE Points ought to be left behind; and I invited Andreas to share his (my) conclusion. If no one had come to the same conclusion, the presentation would have continued nonetheless. The opportunity to discuss and share ideas would still have been an autonomy-enhancing exercise.

important to do this in a way that did not undermine colleagues' sense of autonomy, competence or belonging.

***Forgiveness***. I did not criticize mistakes (Item 7; C, R). I made sure not to characterise the PRIDE Points system as a mistake. Indeed, some of members of the audience may have been responsible for introducing it! Rather, I portrayed it as a system that we have simply outgrown.

***Courage***. I took a risk and did what I felt needed to be done (Item 16). In my closing comments, I acknowledged that discontinuing PRIDE Points may result in an initial decline in behaviour. There may also be some resistance from colleagues who themselves rely on the use of extrinsic motivators. But I stressed that it was worth the risk for the sake of brighter, flourishing futures.

***Authenticity***. First, I was open about my limitations and weaknesses (Item 9; R), acknowledging my lack of skill when it comes to graphic design. Second, Van Dierendonck (2011) explains that authentic leaders are *visible* within organisations (R). This was the rationale behind my decision to include a video of myself in the presentation. Third, Ilies et al. (2005) explain that authentic leaders broaden their followers' thinking (C). One way in which a person's thinking might be broadened is by introducing them to important distinctions, for example, the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value. Finally, I would like to add that, for me, another aspect of authenticity is humour (R). An authentic leader could be defined in narrow terms as one who acts based on personal values and convictions (see e.g., Shamir & Eilam, 2005). The problem with this definition is that a person's true values and convictions are private. How, then, could we ever know whether someone was being authentic or not? Humour, however, offers an insight into a person's innermost thoughts and feelings. There were several natural opportunities for humour during my presentation, given that much of the discussion was framed within an issue concerning behaviour in toilets.

***Humility***. I was keen to learn from different views and opinions of others (Item 29; C, R). Not only did I circulate during the discussion period, but I also celebrated the fact that subsequent sessions on each of the internalisation strategies would be led by members of staff other than myself.

***Stewardship*.** First, I emphasised the importance of the good of the whole (Item 11; C). My focus throughout was on *flourishing*, which necessitates a holistic view of children and young people. Second, I outlined a long-term vision (Item 19; C, R), making sure to link the Responsible virtues to the school's overarching mission of building brighter futures. Finally, I emphasised the societal responsibility of our work (Item 26; R), stressing at the outset that character education, if done properly, would benefit not only our students, but also the wider community.

**Conclusion**

As previously mentioned, my presentation was only hypothetical. I do not hold a formal position of leadership within my school, let alone a position so lofty as to deliver a presentation to all staff on an INSET day! However, it is important to remember the original inspiration for Greenleaf's (1977) conception of servant leadership – namely, Leo, a character from Herman Hesse's novel, *Journey to the East* (1932). Leo occupies an ostensibly lowly position within his group. Yet, when he mysteriously disappears, the group begins to fall apart. My point is that my lowly position at Barr's Hill is not necessarily a hinderance to the aims of the flourishing-oriented servant leader. It may even be a boon! It may be easier to *stand back*, for instance, and give credit to others from a lowlier position. Credit seems naturally to migrate upwards, after all. With the whole organisational hierarchy above my head, there may also be greater opportunities for me to show *courage*. If nothing else, in light of planning my hypothetical presentation, I am now in a better informed position to help young people internalise virtues, and thus *empower* my colleagues to do the same.

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