

Character “taught”, “caught”, and “sought” as satisfying basic psychological needs

Introduction

There is growing interest in integrating moral education with established psychological theories of motivation. Several lines of convergence have already emerged between education, morality, and Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Krettenauer & Curren, 2020; Ryan et al., 2013). This paper seeks to deepen that integration by mapping the Jubilee Centre’s (2022) tripartite conceptualisation of character education – “taught”, “caught”, and “sought” – onto SDT’s three basic psychological needs: *competence*, *relatedness*, and *autonomy* (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Theoretical and practical implications will be explored.

The mapping

First, according to the Jubilee Centre, character virtues can be:

- “Caught” through a positive school community, formational relationships, and a clear ethos;
- “Taught” through the curriculum using teaching and learning strategies, activities, and resources; and
- “Sought” through chosen experiences that occur within and beyond the formal curriculum (2022, p. 11).

Second, defined as innate and essential for healthy development and flourishing, SDT posits three *basic psychological needs*:

- *Relatedness* – feeling connected to others;
- *Competence* – feeling effective and capable; and
- *Autonomy* – feeling in control of one’s behaviour (Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Naturally, then:

- Character “caught” satisfies the need for *relatedness*;
- Character “taught” satisfies the need for *competence*; and
- Character “sought” satisfies the need for *autonomy*.

Implications

Selection:

1. This mapping adds conceptual clarity and empirical grounding to the Jubilee Centre's (2022) tripartite model. SDT's needs are universally applicable, distinct yet interdependent, and grounded in an organismic meta-theory (Ryan, 2023). Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) is also one of the most empirically supported motivational theories in psychology.
2. While each need can be satisfied or thwarted independently, their fulfilment often reinforces one another. For example, competence and relatedness support the development of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This suggests that character "caught" (relatedness) and "taught" (competence) may foster character "sought" (autonomy) (see also Arthur & Kristjánsson, 2022).
3. Teachers can adopt strategies to meet each need (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Examples include: encouraging collaboration with shared goals (*relatedness*), providing scaffolded tasks with constructive feedback (*competence*), and offering meaningful choices in assignments (*autonomy*). These strategies can be productively incorporated into "caught", "taught", and "sought" practices.
4. The Jubilee Centre's *Character Teaching Inventory* (Arthur et al., 2022b) presents 70 strategies across "caught", "taught", and "sought". These strategies reflect what practitioners in character-focused schools perceive as effective (Arthur et al., 2022a). The proposed mapping enables these strategies to be evaluated using BPNT's methodological apparatus.
5. Teachers who feel supported in their own autonomy and competence are more likely to create autonomy-supportive classrooms (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Accordingly, teacher training and professional development should themselves embody "taught" and "sought" approaches.
6. Character education stands to gain from this deeper integration – but so does SDT. While SDT rests on the premise that humans tend towards flourishing, it is largely non-committal about the content of flourishing. Character education, grounded in virtue ethics, helps to fill this gap. There is already evidence that virtue-expressive behaviours satisfy basic psychological needs (Tian et al., 2016).

References

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