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On the Role of Personal Reflection in Character Education

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This paper discusses the place of personal reflection in character education. It starts by providing a background to the literature and moves on to seeing how this played out in practice through the My Character project¹. Interviews were conducted with three teachers and 49 students in Y7, Y8 and Y9. The students were mostly interviewed in small groups but some data were also gathered from a class of 27 Y9 students. The purpose of the paper is to give an overview of the theme in the light of evidence drawn from teachers and young people about how it is viewed and operationalised in teaching and learning about character and virtues.

The opinions expressed in this piece are those of the author and are not necessarily shared by the My Character development team.

Introduction

Personal reflection is an integral part of the ethical life. Its importance was recognised by Socrates who said that the 'unexamined life is not worth living' (quoted by Plato in The Apology). Character education aims to strengthen young people's moral identity and encourages them to become responsible for their own actions as they grow into young adulthood. Without the ability to reflect on their own actions, the capacity for individual responsibility is undermined. Personal reflection can include both forward and retrospective thinking. Responsible action requires what Socrates called *phronesis* - wisdom in action, namely, the ability to apply ethical reasoning to current situations in order to make wise and informed judgements and do the right thing. Reasoned reflection prior to action can encourage moderation and restrain more passionate or emotional responses (which is consistent with the Aristotelian view of the importance of temperance as a virtue). Retrospective reflection, on the other hand, enables individuals to critically analyse past actions in order to learn from them and in this way to gain wisdom and understanding of both personal and human affairs (Kolb, 1984, Moon, 1999).

However, much moral thinking is implicit and intuitive, even for adults, (Narvaez, 2008). By developing and mastering an ethical vocabulary and the skills to resolve moral dilemmas, young people's ability to become critically reflective is increased and they are thus enabled to become more aware of who they are, what their true or deepest aspirations are, and what their ethical strengths and weaknesses might be. Such thinking may be internal and/or expressed orally but there is also value in committing such reflections to writing. As Wolf (1989) puts it, 'In writing we capture a thought. We take something from inside ourselves and we set it out; it is a means of discovering who we are, that we exist, that we change and grow.' Writing

¹ The materials can be inspected at http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/projects/development-projects/My_Character_spreads.pdf and are described more fully in other papers relating to the My Character Project.

is a linear process and the discipline of having to complete a line of reasoning enables the often more skittish mind to better follow its own thinking to a logical conclusion.

Hallberg (1987) suggests that reflective writing in the form of a personal journal is 'person making'. 'Journals are far more powerful and far-reaching in their effects than is generally recognised. They change students' enduring attitudes, and sense of personal identity' (Hallberg, 1987, p289). The ethical life should be one in which actions are increasingly authentic i.e. synchronous with one's personal identity and deeply held values. One of the key insights of positive psychology as identified by the Values in Action Institute (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) is that when individuals have a strong sense of what the authors call 'transcendence' (i.e. having a framework of values and beliefs which connects them to the 'larger universe') this provides an enduring sense of meaning and purpose. This is a positive ingredient of happiness and fulfilment and provides a psychological grounding out of which springs resilience and moral courage.

Daniel Siegel (2010) argues that, as the capacity for inner reflection and self-understanding is developed, so the brain physically develops the neural connections to enable empathy and awareness of others' thoughts and feelings. Further, Siegel believes there is evidence that self-awareness nurtures the integration of the personality, which is a strong signifier of mental health.

Personal reflection is a key ingredient in the process of internalising virtues and taking ownership of them. Lockwood (2009) argues that certain character education programmes emphasise role modelling, habituation and/or obedience to authority at the expense of individuals understanding *why* certain virtues or behaviours are to be regarded as 'better' than others. Lockwood advocates a developmental perspective which recognises that reasoning and reflection about the good becomes increasingly informed and complex with age. For example, an evaluation of the outcomes of the 'Facing History as Ourselves' programme, (Schultz et al, 2001) which foregrounds personal reflection as a key methodology, found that the eighth graders in the study were 'much more focused on and engaged with issues regarding peer relationships, rather than intergroup relations in the broader society' confirming that moral thinking, like social and political thinking, develops through an interpersonal phase before societal thinking develops (see, e.g. , Weinreich-Haste, 1983; Adelson and O'Neil, 1966, Connell, 1971). This is not simply an academic point - it underlines the importance of teachers focusing young people's reflections on matters which they find age-appropriately intellectually and emotionally engaging.

Hawkes (2013) is a leading exponent of what he calls 'values-based' education. He argues that schools should adopt a set of core values (or virtues) each of which, by rotation, becomes the focus of whole-school thinking and personal reflection for a month at a time. He strongly advocates the transformative power of personal reflection in the development of authentic moral agency both for teachers who model the virtues and for the students. Seldon (2013), master of Wellington College, similarly advocates the value of reflective practices punctuating the school day as part of the whole school's permeating character development approach.

Evidence from the schools

Teachers working on the My Character project recognised the central role of personal reflection in its methodology and acknowledged this as something with which young people often need help. One teacher

referenced the thinking of Bruner (Wood et al, 1976) in describing how the project *scaffolded* reflective thinking:

"We currently use it [the project] to do scaffolding to get at personal qualities of mind and character, so the students begin to think about who they are more readily. "

It is widely recognised that conscious personal reflection is not possible without mastery of the appropriate language of virtues, values, character and of moral reasoning. So, engaging in moral discourse with students and deliberately introducing them to different forms of moral reasoning (e.g. the procedure undertaken in 'lesser of evils' thinking) will assist them in become more internally reflective. Establishing a common vocabulary with shared understandings enables staff to engage in what the teacher quoted above called 'teachable moments'. These happen when, in the flux of social interaction, there occur instances of a virtue previously discussed in class. The shared understanding makes it possible for the teacher to, perhaps, commend students or remind them of its importance at the precise moment of the incident, providing reinforcement and demonstrating the practical significance of the virtue. Another form of scaffolding was commented on by one student after discussing the difficulties of being patient. The teacher had suggested that she should:

"... go away and come back and say two things that you did that were examples of being patient over the week. I thought that was quite good." [Y7]

Many of the students I spoke with recognised that it was valuable to be able to think about themselves and reflect on who they are and what they want to be. As one student put it:

"If this helps you develop a more interesting and complex personality, then it probably helps you in later life." [Y8]

And the value of committing personal reflections to writing was also acknowledged:

"I think it puts it in your mind because you've actually written it down so it sticks in your mind easier than just thinking. Writing it down definitely helps. " [Y7]

In polling the students in one year 9 class, two-thirds of them thought it was important to think about oneself. However, the most important areas for reflection for this group appeared to be connected to subject option and career choices as they approached year 10. One of the most reportedly popular parts of the project were the personality quizzes, which students seemed able to relate to easily and many found thought-provoking.

There are, however, many students who are not in the habit of personal reflection - at least as a conscious exercise. For example, one student commented that he had failed to see anything in the project that was helping him/her. Many students thought that the value of thinking about themselves related instrumentally to their education and career prospects and that the purpose of having a good character was that 'people will trust and respect you'. Eight students out of the twenty-seven students in this Y9 class admitted that they thought only about the present or that they just 'don't think'. This is unlikely to be completely accurate but such responses do suggest that many young people are developmentally still relatively immature and,

for students whose home lives are stressful or emotionally chaotic, personal reflection is not likely to be their most natural mode of thinking. One year 9 student recognised that for many young people, the busyness of their lives and the constant distractions make it easy not to think deeply in the way encouraged by the project. So, having this experience provided as part of a compulsory school programme is arguably giving young people at least some time to think and reflect, as well as developing the intellectual and emotional tools with which to do it. One student reported that she had found the project 'revealing' and different to the kind of work they normally do because it involved thinking about things they would not normally focus on. Another student remarked:

"It could really help people if they listened. Most people do, but sometimes people who don't have good character don't pay attention as much." [Y7]

Projects asking students to reflect on aspects of character do not necessarily succeed in this by being too abstract. For many students, reflection on disembodied qualities is challenging and, for them, there needs to be a demonstrable link to behaviour and action to make it real and relevant. When it is, then personal reflection can often follow as a natural human response. Many students found the use of inspirational characters had this effect:

"You're not going to be like Martin Luther King, you're not going to do what he did but his character traits, like things he did, and his intentions are what you bring from that - that he was strong and determined and, if you want to focus on that, then you could take that from him." [Y7]

The My Character journal focused on eight virtues - having a dream, thrift, patience, helping others, determination, courage, cooperation and creativity. Each section focused on a single virtue. Some students found these to be rather long and that some sections seemed to be similar to ones previously completed and so it became more difficult to maintain interest. The knock-on effect is that if engagement wanes, then it is much less likely that personal and genuinely reflective thinking will occur. Variety in the pace of lessons and in the activities can help. One way to do this is to hold regular discussions of issues raised by the project. Students reported that discussions around the virtues, when conducted by teachers using the paper-based version and by some mediating the online version, were helpful because of the way they helped them know what other people thought. Sometimes the groups using the material online had an initial discussion before getting on with the material on their own:

Student: At the beginning of each theme, we did talk a bit about it as a class and then we just got with what we were doing. We were also asked to talk to the person next to you about stuff - ask them what they would do.

Interviewer: And the value of that is what?

Student It's getting other people's opinions, so you get more than one answer.

Teachers involved in delivering the project were also aware that it is important to identify ways in which personal reflection achieved through the project can be reinforced in other ways. For example, assemblies which echo the themes and qualities of the project were found to be worthwhile if done well and students could recall assemblies which had made them think or inspired them.

The act of personal reflection is central to a project like 'My Character'. However, its value is not limited to the personal or even social realm, according to one of the teachers in the project:

"... the books all these economic leaders are reading are emotional intelligence books. So if you want to become a father, brother, child ... reflect. If you want to become a really good sportsman, a really good athlete ... reflect. If you want to become the next Bill Gates, if you want to become the next Richard Branson, if you want to become a real business manager ... reflect. And so, if in all of these we have that as a core, then surely in the school, as educators, we should be working on this. The reflection aspect is very much at the core of everything we do."

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has briefly considered the place of personal reflection in a project designed to help young people become more aware of their own character and more willing to work at aspects in which they might feel deficient. Typically, the project offers examples of inspirational people whose lives exemplify certain virtues and then a range of quotations about the character trait from which students are asked to select a favourite and say why. These are followed by a range of activities which encourage students to better understand their own strengths and weaknesses and to reflect on how each virtue is reflected in their own attitudes and behaviour.

These activities are designed to increase young people's ability to reflect on their own lives with reference to certain pre-selected virtues in the hope that these students will, to a greater or lesser degree, be able to internalise them. If engagement with their meaning in the context of self-examination is an aim, then the methodologies adopted become critical. In the case of the present project, it was evident that the virtues themselves were accepted by students as worthwhile and worthy of their attention. However, some students reported that they felt there was some overlap between virtues such as courage, determination and patience and that the work as a result became rather repetitive. In a project of this kind, the conditions of learning are unlike some subjects, in that they rely on the active and willing collaboration of every student to engage in a degree of self-examination. Of course, it is a truism that if a student is disengaged in any subject then learning is likely to be limited. But it is surely the case that a character education project is a subject that requires the maximum possible active collaboration of students to think in ways not usually asked for within the school setting. Therefore teachers need to be aware of the possibility that if the work becomes repetitive or is relatively inaccessible for some students, as some reported, then it is likely that levels of student engagement will be reduced.

It may be, also, that the *form* in which questions are asked could have a disengaging impact on student thinking. One student offered feedback that he had experienced some of the options offered in response to questions as too closed and not sufficiently flexible to allow him to offer his own genuine responses. One example of this is a question in the section on patience which asked students to complete the sentence 'Good things come to those who wait because ...'. The closed nature of this activity is typical of many that students encounter in school. Closed questions have their place in the classroom and are designed to reinforce a point or refresh the memory. But in a character education lesson care needs to be taken to allow students to reflect in more open-ended and authentic ways. For example, in thinking about patience, students would no doubt be able to offer some positive examples of when patience *would* pay off. But

students in the early secondary years are rapidly learning that the world is not black and white, that virtue is not *always* rewarded in obvious, extrinsic ways but that that, in itself, need not reduce the rightness of an action. Asking students to answer a closed question in a way which forecloses some of their ideas, could result in shallow or inauthentic responses trotted out to please the teacher. Thus the learning conditions required for character or character education projects of this kind are, arguably, *amongst the most challenging of any school-based curricula*.

Nonetheless, many students undertaking this work clearly recognised the value of what it was trying to do. They were able to offer a range of reasons why the My Character project was worthwhile and, in response to my question, few students disagreed that there is value in having a good character. However, there was evidence that many of the students were still thinking instrumentally and with a restricted focus with regard to the beneficiaries of one's good character. For example, in the Y9 class, fifteen of the students thought that having good character was beneficial because people would trust and respect them and only seven mentioned that it was about making *other people* happy, making the world a better place, or reducing conflict in the wider world. These findings are consistent with those from the 'Facing History and Ourselves' project mentioned above. They reinforce the need to help young people develop greater awareness of others such that their moral decision making becomes less narrow in its focus and more inclusive of others - in other words, a key ingredient of character education is the growth of empathy, in its affective and cognitive forms, the latter being often referred to as 'perspective taking'.

It is this ability to go beyond self-centred or instrumental reasoning that Gibbs (1992) suggests is the mark of mature moral reasoning. In this, he includes moral choices which can embrace interpersonal, societal or principled considerations. As the ability to reflect on oneself develops, then the capacity for understanding others, both how they think and feel, is nurtured (Siegal, 2010).

The My Character project has developed a range of strategies to encourage personal reflection in ways which are innovative and not at all characteristic of how schools usually work. It offers a range of materials to help students gain insights into their own characters and the characters of others and I found much evidence that students benefitted from it and appreciated a course that was different and personal. Quite typically, such courses are located under the umbrella of Personal, Social and Health education or as part of a tutorial programme. This was the case with all the schools I visited. But this programme is not typical of PSHE content and its focus on helping young people to see themselves as 'work in progress' was regarded as usefully complementary to courses such as relationships education and education for equality and citizenship.

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