



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VALUES

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Of Good Character
James Arthur
(Resume by David Carr)

**School of Education
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham**

(i) The research on which ‘Of Good Character’ is based represents probably the largest study of character education in the UK to date, involving – both formally and informally – responses from over 70, 000 participants. ‘Learning for Life’ is a major research project largely funded by the Templeton Foundation and Porticus UK, However, initial funding was provided by the Esmee Fairburn Foundation and further ten UK charities also provided support. The research was mounted in the context of relatively recent explosion of interest in the general area of values education – or more specifically ‘moral education’ – across the world. While it is likely that much of the post-war interest in the study of moral education was stimulated by the influential American cognitive psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg and his many followers, it seems that the emphasis on moral reasoning of so-called cognitive developmentalism has now been largely overtaken in the USA, Britain and more widely by a broader interest in the development of moral character – and it is upon this that the present study has chosen to focus.

(ii) While the study of moral character has been of enduring interest to ethical theorists, the major proponent of character as a core moral concept was the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. By contrast with most modern moral theories and theorists, Aristotle conceived moral development as the development of more than just reason: for him, moral growth as the development of character or ‘virtue’ involves cultivation of appropriate volition, emotion and conduct as well as reason. As one recent writer has put it: ‘the Aristotelian view is basically that moral virtues are more or less equivalent to states of emotion, feeling or appetite ordered in accordance with some deliberative ideal of practical wisdom’ (Carr 2009). So, for Aristotle, moral education essentially involves the right training of emotions, feelings and appetites in the light of that wise reflection he termed *phronesis* or ‘practical wisdom’. The rationale for this research follows Aristotle and more modern virtue and/or character ethicists in conceiving character education as a particular (broader) form of moral education. For the purposes of this study it construes character as: (i) an interlocked set of personal values that normally guide conduct; (ii) not a fixed set of personal values easily measured or incapable of modification; (iii) a matter of choices about (good or bad) conduct that agents can shape in themselves and others.

(iii) The major part of the present research involved an extensive empirical investigation – by means of semi-structured group discussions/interviews and semi-structured individual and questionnaire surveys – of the thoughts on values and character education of young people in different parts of the United Kingdom, across the entire spectrum of formal education and beyond. It therefore covers

children of nursery age, the earlier and later stages of primary education, secondary education, further education, tertiary education and into employment. A subset of the tertiary education sample included trainee teachers, whose importance as educators of future generations of children and young people should be evident. Accordingly, five major research reports have so far been produced as follows: (i) Foundations of Character – Developing Character and Values in the Early Years (3-6); (ii) Character in Transition – Consistency in Values: the Transition from Primary to Secondary School (10-12); (iii) Citizens of Character: the Values and Character Dispositions of 14-16 Year Olds in the Hodge Hill Constituency (14-16); (iv) Character Education: the Formation for Virtues and Dispositions in 16-19 Year Olds, with Particular Reference to the Religious and Spiritual (16-19); Graduates of Character – Values and Character: Higher Education and Graduate Employment (18-25). In addition there have been research reports on trainee teachers, Church of England pupils (14-16) as well as an in-depth survey of volunteering in a major British University.

(iv) Intended as a short account of this extensive and detailed research programme, and following an inspirational introduction by Lord Watson of Richmond, 'Of Good Character' sets out to present and analyse the essential findings of the research under the following chapter headings: (i) Being of Good Character; (ii) The Research: Context and Methods; (iii) The Individual; (iii) Family and Friends; (iv) Community, Civic Engagement and Volunteering; (v) Schools and Teachers; (vi) University and Employment; (vii) Language and Media; and (viii) Religion – followed by a brief conclusion. The book includes appendices giving handy summaries, details of contexts and key findings of the five main research reports and also contains words of appreciation for the research work from such illustrious contemporary national and international public figures as Prime Minister David Cameron, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Rowan Williams, Sir Menzies Campbell, the popular writer Professor Alexander McCall Smith and former UNESCO Secretary General Dr Federico Mayor.

(v) As already briefly indicated, the first chapter sketches the contemporary context of theory, research and policy regarding education in moral and other values (noting the important contributions of UNESCO, the Australian values education project and the English National Curriculum) in a general social climate in Britain and elsewhere of rapid change. However, the chapter is sensitive to the serious philosophical questions in which any public policy regarding moral and values education is inevitably implicated. Precisely, it asks whether it is the business of either government or schools – not least in a culturally plural liberal democracy in which individual autonomy is often promoted as a core value – to determine the values and character of its individual

citizens. Nevertheless, while recognising that families and communities also have a right and a role to play in such determination, the chapter concludes that government, schools and educational policy cannot avoid a normative role in the formation of the attitudes and values of citizens and pupils and that value-neutrality is not a serious option. Moreover, in the light of previously mentioned developments in thinking about the aims and purposes of moral and values education, the chapter affirms a general commitment to a conception of moral education as character development in a broad tradition of Aristotelian virtue theory and notes that this conception is broadly in line with the policies of recent British political administration – notably the communitarianism of New Labour and the ‘Big Society’ of David Cameron and the Conservative-Liberal Coalition.

(vi) Following some account of the more technical aspects of the research – pertaining to research contexts, data collection methods, ample sizes, the roles of questionnaires, interviews, written reflections and so on – chapter three addresses questions of character in relation to individuals and individualism in contemporary society. In the light of the already noted tendency towards the promotion of individual autonomy and individualism as a core value in modern western liberal democracies, it expresses concern that young people – especially as they move away the family at later stages of formal education and training – may become disconnected from the socially constituted ties and networks that are the sine qua non of genuine moral association. At the same time, it is appreciated that development of moral virtue is in a large part a matter of the individual or personal development of good character and laments (a re-occurring complaint in the evaluation of this research) that school pupils and young people no longer seem to possess the moral language or vocabulary (of former times) in which such character might be properly understood and appreciated. However, chapter four of the work goes some way to allaying the deepest fears of chapter three in reporting that most young research interviewees regarded family and friends – particularly mothers – as perhaps the most important and stabilising influences of their lives. (Although this was obviously especially true in early years such influences were evidently of enduring, and – in the case of friends – of increasing importance with passage of time). Chapter four concludes by noting the emphasis on the moral and emotional importance of family of much latter day social scientific research.

(vii) Noting the moral educational importance attached by Emile Durkheim to proper social bonding, chapter five turns to the crucially significant issue for the present research of the place of society and community in the life of youth and of what various social institutions might do to encourage or foster greater engagement with community on the part of young people. Once again, it is noted that the decline of traditional close-knit social contexts – Durkheim’s ‘moral communities’ – seems to have

led to more individualised or socially detached attitudes and perspectives on the part of young people. There seemed to be general uncertainty on the part of research interviewees over the question of whether there might be shared community values or what values these might be. The research also revealed that young people were unlikely – especially as they grew older – to know their neighbours. Here, the encroaching secularism of much latter day western liberal society seems also to have had a considerable impact, since former moral communities were often also communities of common religious faith. In this respect, it was striking that the young of ethnic communities of strong faith (such as Moslems) were more likely to be engaged with their communities than their native British counterparts. It also seemed that young people (perhaps in consequence) tended to feel less safe and secure in public spaces. Much of the research on this general theme focused on the potential value for society and individual character formation of service to the community through volunteering. In this regard, the research seems to suggest that young people are not generally antipathetic to such community service, and that their reputation for being ‘apathetic’ follows more from lack of encouragement of them – outside school – to volunteer. The chapter therefore concludes by generally commending recent political attempts (of both recent administrations) to develop schemes of youth community service.

(viii) Chapters six and seven turn to the roles of education and schools in the development of good character and positive values. On the one hand, much social and educational theory seems to have agreed that education and schooling cannot be not value-free and must therefore have an influence for either ill or (hopefully) good on students and pupils – perhaps at least through the individual discipline and responsibility they strive to promote. It was also clear that interviewed teachers largely agreed with this and took their roles as moral exemplars very seriously. On the other hand, pupils did not themselves see either teachers or schools (apart from the opportunities for socialising with peers) in such positive light. They did not generally (despite differences at different stages) regard teachers as good moral role models or as influences on character formation and often seemed to find them unsupportive. Taking the view that education and schools are inevitably the most important moral influences on the young after the family, chapter six concludes that teacher education and the school curriculum need to be developed in ways that may enable more effective development of character and values. Chapter seven reports that most employers do seem to value positive qualities of personality, character and attitude as much if not more than other vocational skills and qualifications, and notes Cardinal Newman’s emphasis on character development as one of the key tasks of the traditional university. However, it also laments that latter day higher education seems – under pressures of economic competition – seems to have been much overtaken by narrower

instrumental goals. It therefore recommends collaboration between universities and employers in developing opportunities for reflection on and development of character in higher education and beyond.

(ix) The research with which chapter eight is concerned addresses two significant issues regarding the roles in character education of media and language. The first is the question of whether the media to which young people might be expected to be exposed – principally television and the internet – has much influence on their character, attitudes and values. This was not easy to determine and the evidence seemed to be conflicting. First, while the general view of young interviewees (across all interviewed constituencies) seemed to be that the media did not significantly influence their attitudes or values, other evidence – such as the very content of their responses – seemed to belie this. On the other hand the use of examples drawn from the media to illustrate or discuss issues of moral value, suggested that exposure to media might have some positive effect in precisely drawing the attention of young people to, or helping them to frame or formulate, moral issues. That said, in so far as one concern of the research underpinning chapter eight was with the very question of the language or vocabulary on which the young might draw to appreciate or evaluate moral values and issues, it was a cause for concern that young people appeared to lack the rich discursive resources – particularly the language of virtues and vices – of former traditional moral communities. Chapter eight therefore concludes that there is a pressing need for contemporary schools and other educational institutions to reclaim and promote such time-honoured modes of moral discourse and proposes that space might also be found in the school curriculum for the teaching of ethics or moral philosophy.

(x) The final chapter (ix) briefly explores the role of religion in the lives of young interviewees and the relationship of religious faith or allegiance to moral character and values. First, it is fairly clear that the major world faiths – at least Christianity – usually entail (often strict) codes of ethics or moral conduct (though it should be noted that this has not prevented past Christian and other religious groups from behaving badly) and recent American research seems to show that members of faith groups generally observe high standards of moral behaviour. On the other hand, it is clear that the young interviewees of this research have been substantially affected by the recent general secularization of British society: many research participants denied any religious allegiance or influence and it seemed widely held that religion and religious faith had little if any affect on their character and behaviour – although older students did often admit to a sense of the religious or spiritual that was not tied to any organised religion. The major exception to this trend, unsurprisingly, was to be found among students from immigrant groups for whom their native

religion was an important maker of cultural and moral identity. In this connection, the research interestingly found that those indigenous British students who most readily identified themselves as Christian usually hailed from social constituencies of predominantly non-Christian (Moslem or other) make-up, and that they identified themselves as Christians as a way of marking their separate cultural identity. However, given clear enough connections between religion and morality and some evidence of religious influence on character and behaviour the chapter concludes by urging further exploration of these issues by educationalists and religious organizations.