



## **Narnian Virtues: Character Education and the Potential of the Parent-School Partnership**

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# Narnian Virtues: Character Education and the Potential of the Parent-School Partnership

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## Introduction

Is character education more effective when parents are involved?

In principle, character education has long recognized the importance of parents. Many authors (e.g., Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Lickona, 2004; Arthur, 2014) have argued that character education must be viewed as the 'joint responsibility' of home and school. Researchers, however, have not attempted to assess the extent to which parent involvement enhances student character outcomes. And so an important question for the field remains unanswered: Does involving parents in a school's character education efforts make a difference?

In this paper, we report our preliminary results from the parent component of our evolving *Narnian Virtues Character Education Curriculum*. In creating this curriculum, we drew inspiration from the *Knightly Virtues* character education program of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (Arthur et al., 2014; Carr & Harrison, 2015). We have expanded such literature-based character education by working with older students, 11- to 13-year-olds, and having them read and reflect on three novels from C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, whose protagonists are similar in age to that of our student readers. Eleven-year-olds read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; 12-year-olds, *Prince Caspian*; and 13-year-olds, *The Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'*. Our curriculum's principal goal is to increase the extent to which students understand, value, and act upon six universal virtues that are dramatically brought to life in Lewis' Narnia stories: wisdom, fortitude, self-control, justice, love, and integrity.

Initially supported by a 1-year grant from the John Templeton Foundation, we designed and field-tested our *Narnian Virtues* curriculum in 2015 in five diverse schools in the North of England. Our pilot results from that 6-week intervention found both

quantitative and qualitative evidence of students' growth in understanding the Narnian virtues and qualitative evidence of students' progress in applying the virtues to their own behaviour.

With continuing Templeton Foundation support, we began this past September an expanded, 3-year research project on this curriculum with 8 schools in the North of England. Over the autumn school term, working with approximately 1,200 11-year-olds and their families, we implemented what we think is now a stronger intervention, revised on the basis of lessons we learned from the pilot test.

Our revised curriculum and research design feature what we believe are five improvements: (1) a more focused intervention, aimed at helping students acquire a smaller, more manageable set of virtues—six rather than the previous 12; (2) a longer intervention—12 weeks (the whole autumn term) instead of the previous 6 weeks, thereby providing more time for students to form and practice virtuous habits; (3) new classroom strategies, such as “accountability buddies,” to help students make plans for improving in their practice of the target virtues and also to hold them accountable for recording and reporting their progress; (4) asking students and their parents or other carers to work together on a series of “home activities” intended to promote the Narnian virtues in family life; and (5) a refined set of quantitative and qualitative research tools designed to better capture students' growth in understanding, caring about, and putting into practice the 6 Narnian virtues—including two ‘personal target virtues’ that each student chooses as the ones in which he or she most wants to improve.

One pilot project finding in particular confirmed the wisdom of increasing our focus on families. In their journal entries on the everyday character challenges they face, students, to a surprising degree, gave examples drawn from home life—their relationships and conflicts with siblings and parents. In at least some of those cases, students' reflecting on those character challenges through the lens of the *Narnian Virtues* curriculum appeared to be a catalyst for their growth. One 12-year-old boy, for example, wrote:

Edmund [in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*] showed deceit by lying to his siblings. I've shown deceitfulness when lying about breaking something—I blamed it on someone else [such as his brother]. I wouldn't do that again.

## **The Role of Parents in Character Development**

Any consideration of whether and how to try to enhance character education by involving parents does well to begin by asking, “What does research reveal about the role of parents in their children’s character development?”

Berkowitz and Grych (1998), in their review of the research, identified five parenting practices that significantly impact children’s moral development and behaviour: nurturance, induction (reasoning), demandingness (high expectations), modelling, and democratic family processes. Lickona’s (1998) review of the empirical literature identified eight parenting practices—largely similar to those found by Berkowitz and Grych—that appear to promote children’s growth in character: (1) a loving and stable family environment; (2) fostering mutual respect; (3) teaching by example; (4) teaching directly; (5) using questioning to develop moral thinking; (6) giving children real responsibilities in family life; (7) being authoritative rather than authoritarian or permissive; and (8) fostering ‘spiritual development’. In their study of adolescents, Bowers and colleagues (2014) confirmed the importance of authority and love, reporting that teens show ‘higher positive youth development’ when their parents are either authoritative or ‘highly involved’ in their child’s life.

## **Character Education Programs with a Parent Component**

In the belief that parents do make a difference, published character education programmes—ones that typically supply curricular materials and guidelines for teaching lessons—have often included a parent component. In their monograph, *What Works in Character Education*, Berkowitz and Bier (2005) found some form of family or community participation to be one of five elements common to at least 50% of published character education programmes that had evidence of effectiveness. There are no hard data, however, on what percentage of schools implementing a character education initiative make use of published programmes; many schools report using a ‘home grown’ programme of their own devising that draws in an eclectic fashion on various character education strategies.

Parent involvement strategies in the published programmes evaluated by *What Works in Character Education* included video-based training on the same skills that children

were taught, face-to-face training in how to help children develop problem-solving, guidance in creating effective home learning environments, activities for children and parents to do together, and newsletters to keep parents informed. Because these parenting components were an integral part of the interventions, however, research evaluations were not able to evaluate the extent to which parent participation enhanced programme effectiveness beyond what would have been achieved without parent involvement.

Leming (2000) evaluated a U.S. literature-based character education programme with 963 students in grades 1-6 (aged 6-12 years). The programme, 'An Ethics Curriculum for Children' (Heartwood Institute, 1992), was a read-aloud, literature-based approach to teaching seven character attributes: courage, loyalty, justice, respect, hope, honesty, and love. Parents were invited to take part in discussions and activities related to the attributes being taught. Students who experienced the character education programme made significant pre- to post-test gains in ethical understanding and ethical conduct, but once again, the study's design did not make it possible to tease apart the effects of the parent involvement component from the effects of the overall curriculum.

Other research has looked at the role of socioeconomic factors. This research suggests that school-home collaboration becomes especially important in contexts where, by choice or circumstance, parents do not normally show strong involvement in their children's education. Paterson (2011), for example, reports that mothers from low-income families tend to be less engaged with their child's schoolwork. The importance of parents spending time with their children and being actively engaged in their interests and activities is emphasized in *Centre Forum's Parenting Matters* report (Paterson, 2011). Significantly, most of the children engaged in our pilot year of research lived in poorer areas and attended schools where parent involvement had been historically low (Pike, Lickona, & Nesfield, 2015). In the North of England, where these schools are, educational outcomes are in fact significantly worse than in London (Clarke-Billings, 2016), and this achievement gap has steadily worsened over the past 30 years (Weale, 2016).

### **The *Narnian Virtues* Partnership with Parents: Putting Students in a Leadership Role**

Arguably, the most difficult challenge regarding parent involvement is the one just referenced: How to involve parents who have historically been uninvolved? All too often,

when schools make resources and programs available to their parent community, they end up feeling they are ‘preaching to the choir’. Those parents who are already highly involved in their child’s education take advantage of the opportunities for further engagement, and those who are less involved typically do not.

With this in mind, our *Narnian Virtues* curriculum designed a parent involvement strategy with what we think has a better chance of reaching hard-to-reach parents: *Use the student as the bridge to the home*. Put students in a leadership role. Make students responsible for engaging their parents in curriculum-related family activities—in a kind of ‘character education homework’ (but more fun than normal homework) designed to promote the curriculum objectives through day-to-day family life. Finally, motivate students to carry out this leadership role by having them show their teacher every time they complete a prescribed home activity with their parent(s)—thereby earning a passport-style ‘stamp’ on that activity in their *Character Passport* family guide.

Our *Character Passport* guide for parents and students opens by speaking to students about how having a good character is like having a passport: You can go places you could not otherwise go.

Acquiring and practising these 6 virtues (wisdom, love, self-control, integrity, fortitude, and justice) will help you fulfil your potential in life. If you have these important virtues (good moral habits) in your life, you will go further than you could without them.

When you travel around the world and leave a country you have visited, you have your passport stamped at customs with a rubber stamp that proves you’ve visited that country. In the *Narnian Virtues* project, you will have your *Character Passport* stamped each time you ‘visit’ a virtue by doing one of the Home Activities with your parent(s) or carer(s).

To put students in a leadership role from the outset, we invited both students and their parents to their school’s Parent Seminar that introduces them to the project. This hour-long Seminar provided an overview of the curriculum, walked children and parents through the 10 weekly Home Activities they were being asked to do together, and invited their reactions and questions. To give you a picture of the sort of things these weekly Home Activities asked students and parents to do, here is a thumbnail sketch of the first five

activities; in each activity, note how it is structured to have students take the initiative to engage their parents:

- **Home Activity 1** asks students to complete a 'My Character' Self-Assessment, on which they indicate the virtues at which they want to get better. After their parent(s) independently list 3 suggested virtues for their child to consider as 'personal target virtues', the child selects 2 as his or her target virtues for the autumn term.
- **Home Activity 2** challenged students: 'Every week, do at least one good deed or job for someone, with no reward. Discuss with your parents what you can do in your family, school, or community that will be of service to others.' Thereafter, students completed a Weekly Service Update describing what act of service they had in fact done.
- **Home Activity 3**, 'What Is Your Turkish Delight?', asks students to invite family members to each identify a craving over which they would like to gain greater control. Everyone then makes a plan for achieving that goal, using their own ideas and considering suggestions from other family members. In the week that follows, family members meet again and share their progress.
- **Home Activity 4** has students work with family members to create a Family Mission Statement expressing the values and virtues they will all try to live by. Families are asked to try to make reference to the 6 Narnian virtues—wisdom, love, self-control, integrity, fortitude, and justice—in their Family Mission Statement.
- **Home Activity 5** asks students to work with their parents to begin regular family meetings that hold everyone accountable for putting the Family Mission Statement into practice and that give family members a voice and responsibility in solving and preventing common family problems, especially ones pertaining to the 6 Narnian virtues.

The *Character Passport* book, besides explaining to students how to take the lead in Home Activities like these, asks them to have a conversation with a parent at the end of each week to discuss how things are going with their two personal target virtues.

Have you made progress on each virtue, stayed about the same, or slipped back? This will require you, with the help of your parent(s), to honestly review your behaviour during the past week and rate your progress on a scale of 1 to 10.

Our hope is that this weekly parent-child conversation will serve two purposes: (1) strengthening students' commitment to working on their 2 'personal target virtues', and (2) increasing parents' engagement in helping their children follow through on their plans.

## Documenting and Evaluating the Impact of the Home Activities

Through our project's research, we hope to make progress in answering the question, 'Does parent involvement make a positive difference in student character outcomes?' Our hypothesis is, 'The greater the parent involvement in doing the Home Activities, the greater the student gains in understanding, valuing, and acting on the 6 Narnian virtues.'

To test that hypothesis, we clearly need a measure of degree of parent involvement, which we expect to vary from home to home. One way for us to try to measure the degree of parent involvement is to ascertain the amount of time spent by parents on the Home Activities. We're asking students and parents each to record how much time, in minutes, they spent working together on each task. These passports will be collected at the end of the term, and the average amount of time spent on tasks will be matched with students' pre- and post-intervention surveys that assess their understanding, valuing, and practise of the 6 Narnian virtues.

**Phone interviews with parents.** We are also conducting half-hour phone interviews with 25 parents in order to gain insight into parents' experience of the Home Activities and their perceptions of the impact on their child's character development. However, because the parents interviewed were self-selecting rather than randomly chosen, their responses to the phone interviews cannot be assumed to be representative of all parents in the project.

The phone interviews include questions such as:

1. Which home activities have you and your child been able to do so far?
2. About how much time each week, approximately, have you been able to spend working on the home activities with your child?
3. Which ones have you enjoyed the most? Why?
4. How much positive impact do you feel these activities have had in helping your child's character development?

1

2

3

Little or no impact

some positive impact

much impact

(If 2 or 3) In what ways do you feel these activities have helped your child's character development?

5. Which home activity did you find the least helpful for developing your child's character? Could you please explain why?



At the time of this writing, we had done just one week of these phone interviews— with 8 parents. We are able to report here illustrative responses for 4 of these parents. Regarding the approximate amount of time each week that parents were able to spend working on the Home Activities with their child, some sample responses were:

We usually do anything between 40 and 60 minutes. [parent 1]

About half an hour. [parent 2]

We usually do between 30 minutes and an hour. [parent 3]

Some weeks, just a couple of minutes; other weeks when he's found it more interesting, up to 60 minutes. [parent 4]

With regard to the activities that parents enjoyed the most, responses from the 4 parents included:

Turkish Delight Box. [parent 1]

The Family Mission Statement and the Turkish Delight Box. [parent 2]

Turkish Delight Box and Practising the Virtues. [parent 3]

Turkish Delight Box. [parent 4]

In terms of the amount of positive impact parents feel the activities had in helping their child's character development, responses from the 4 parents were:

Much impact. [parent 1]

Some impact. [parent 2]

Much impact. [parent 3]

Some positive impact. [parent 4]

With regard to the ways that these 4 parents feel these activities have helped their child's character development, responses included:

Because it was his Turkish Delight that he chose, it was a discussion. We realised that he understood that playing on his PlayStation was taking over his life. So he put that down as his Turkish Delight. Because of the Turkish Delight [activity] he's been able to manage himself. The positive output is that he manages his time exceptionally well on that. [parent 1]

It was quite good for having a chat about things that we need to look at and things that he needs to look at...and giving each other suggestions. That was quite good, and I really liked doing the [Family] Mission Statement, deciding what things were important for us as a family. [parent 2]

I work for a charity and a community group, so [child] is always doing things for other people, and he's a black belt at martial arts and he helps out with the little ones. But these things have become really quite normal for [child]. So it was really nice for us to actually be able to say that's a really good thing you are doing instead of him just presuming that that's what he does anyway. [parent 3]

If I'm totally honest, I don't think it's made him sit down and go into it that deep. [parent 4]

When parents were asked about the Home Activity that they found least helpful for developing their child's character, and the reasons for their choice, sample responses were:

I'm going to struggle with that because I think they've all been helpful. Honestly, I couldn't find anything. [parent 1]

There wasn't much to do on Home Activity 2, practising your target virtues every week. It was a bit wishy-washy compared to the first, more in-depth Home Activity on choosing your two [target] virtues. [parent 2]

I don't know if it's the one that was least helpful, but the one I found the hardest was to watch the film. We've not had time to sit and watch a film and then discuss. [parent 3]

The thing that went down least well was our Family Mission Statement because I don't think we all contributed equally to it. [parent 4]

### **Parent Feedback at the Seminars**

At the time of this writing, we can also report data for 4 Parent Seminars. Attendance ranged from 20 to 45 parents, carers, and students. The seminars included two forms of data capture: (1) We asked both parents and children to write on sticky notes the times/places/situations they found it relatively easy to talk about and have input into their child's character development, and those times/places/situations where it was more

difficult or awkward; and (2) we asked parents to fill out a 5-question survey, with 2 quantitative questions and three qualitative questions.

***Sticky note responses.*** In their sticky note responses, parents and students identified 4 situations where it was relatively easy to talk about character: (1) when it was in response to particular events (such as, a child displaying a virtue); (2) during or after a specific and usually recurring event (such as, in the car after Girl Guides), (3) in a particular place (especially the home and the car), and (4) when in a positive emotional state (i.e., avoiding times of tiredness or when one party was already in a temper). Sample responses included:

At the time of the event. [parent]

When something positive has happened, it's great to talk about wider issues. [parent]

When I have fallen out with friends. [student]

In trouble, falling out with friends. [student]

Possibly question if behaviour was less than perfect. [parent]

Enforce the behaviour with a statement 'that was good'. [parent]

When still fresh in the mind. [parent]

*Barriers* to talking about character included the opposite of the above, but also when other distracting activities were occurring (particularly activities involving a screen).

It is also worth noting that in the first year of the project the Home Activities are all planned events prescribed by the *Character Passport* book; students and parents must take steps to ensure they happen. They will watch a DVD (the movie, 'The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe') they may not have planned, they will engage in a family meeting because the homework asks them to, and so on. Parents' responses to the sticky note questions, however, make it clear that many opportunities for parents and children to speak about character happen during unplanned situations where parents need to be responsive. Therefore, in the future we will aim to provide the parenting tools required to take advantage of those unplanned opportunities, as well as to continue to provide home

activities where certain kinds of character-centred conversations can happen for the first time.

***Parent responses to the questionnaire.*** In addition to the sticky-note questions, we asked parents attending the Parent Seminar to complete a short questionnaire. The responses of parents completing the questionnaire can be summarised as follows:

- When asked if the Narnian Virtues character education project had helped them as character educators of their children, most said it has helped to increase what was already happening in their family life. A dominant theme was that it legitimated conversations and provided space for them; it was described as a ‘reason’, ‘new avenue’, or ‘excuse’, to talk about and focus on the development of good character.
- When presented with a list of influences on youth character—such as media, religion, peers, and parents—and asked which of these had the greatest influence upon their 11-year-old children, 29 out of 30 parents said that they themselves had the greatest influence.
- Asked, ‘Has the *Narnian Virtues Character Education* project helped you to become involved in trying to foster your child's character development in new ways? If so, how?’, parents gave overwhelmingly positive responses, such as the following statements (from different parents):

Definitely given more impetus to talking things through as a family.

Lives are so busy, it's a good reason/excuse to press pause and focus on important things to our family.

Yes. It's opened new lines of communication and analysis of herself (my daughter), others close to her, and the way we work as a family unit

Whilst I do chat with my son, it gives me a new avenue of discussion.

More communication, different techniques, new approaches, more awareness of behaviour of all involved, and more inclination to act virtuously.

Yes, it's helped us engage with each other and relate the virtues and activities to everyday life.

It's given us a great opportunity to discuss the virtues, to spend time together looking at this.

Yes, it's really made us stop and think and evaluate how we tackle issues and talk as a family.

It's important to emphasize that the questionnaires, like the sticky notes, were filled out by those self-selecting parents who cared enough about character to come to school during an evening—hardly a representative sample. Whether parents who are less engaged with their child's character education project would rate themselves as being as influential in their child's character development as did the parents attending the Seminar, is a question worth investigating.

## **Conclusion**

What we have reported in this paper describes our goals and strategies in recruiting parents as partners and very early indicators of our results. Most of our intervention work and data analysis lie ahead.

In Year 2 of the project, we will begin a control trial and an international field trial. We will try to increase the percentage of parents participating in the Parents Seminars by holding two seminars (instead of just one) in each school.

Year 3 of the project will be the final year of study in our 8 UK schools, including our control trial. This year will include a final analysis of the quantitative data and will bring the formal stage of the field trial to an end—although we hope that schools and students will continue to find the curriculum useful for many years to come.

By the project's end, we hope to have a good deal more quantitative and qualitative data bearing on the question that drives this part of our research: Is character education more effective when parents are involved?

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