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Character and Academic Attainment:
Does Character Education Matter?

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Introduction

The notion of character education has gained extensive attention in academic literature and teacher training programmes, resulting in the concept of character becoming embedded within recent education and government policies as an integral objective of the education system as a whole (e.g. Hinds, 2018; Morgan, 2017). The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, based at the University of Birmingham, has established itself as one of the world leading organisations for influencing literature, research and policy development around the notion, and teaching, of character. Based upon an neo-Aristotelian perspective of virtue ethics (Aristotle, 2009), the Jubilee Centre adopts a strategy of exploring how people may live virtuously, by acquiring specific intellectual, moral, performance and civic virtues that enable them to act reflectively on well-chosen habits (Arthur, 2017). From the outset, the Jubilee Centre has posited that virtues and character are critical to individual excellence, contribute to societal flourishing, can be exercised in all human contexts, and, more importantly, are educable (Kristjánsson, 2015). In this regard, the Jubilee Centre strives to promote the teaching of character at a grassroots level (i.e. the training and education of trainee teachers), through to more established educational curriculums within primary, secondary and higher education. In accord with the Jubilee Centre's framework (Jubilee Centre, 2017), character is defined as "a set of personal traits that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivations and guide conduct" (Arthur, 2017, pp. 140). Moreover, character education reflects an umbrella term which characterises "all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people develop positive personal strengths called virtues" (Arthur, 2017, pp. 140). Despite the relatively solid philosophical underpinnings alluding to the value and importance of incorporating character education within schools, and specifically education curriculums, there is still debate regarding the empirical evidence that demonstrates the academic benefit of character education for students. The present article attempts to fill this gap by reviewing a series of meta-analyses, empirical studies, and interventions which have investigated the role that indicators of character, and the teaching of character education, may have on academic attainment. Although the arguments for promoting character go beyond simply promoting scholastic success, representing an integral component of guiding children towards a flourishing good life, the evidence presented in this paper highlights that implementing character education programmes may be beneficial for schools and teachers in fostering students' academic attainment, in conjunction with their emotional and behavioural development.

Direct Associations between Character Education and Academic Attainment

Most recently, a meta-analysis was conducted on 52 studies which examined the associations between the explicit teaching, or implementation, of character education with a

host of academic (i.e. school achievement) and positive behavioural (e.g. self-discipline or reduced disruptive behaviour) outcomes (Jeynes, 2017). For the purpose of the meta-analyses, character education was defined as “instruction designed to enhance love, integrity, self-discipline, and compassion in the lives of youth”. Out of the 52 studies, 42 were conducted after the year 2000 and 21 of the studies included a sample size of over 1000 students (the total sample size across the 52 studies was 225,779 students). The majority of the studies were conducted in the United States (US), however, the analyses also included studies in Canada, Europe and China. The calculation of composite effect sizes using both fixed-error assumptions, as well as more sophisticated random-error assumptions, revealed that character education had a positive overall association when both academic and behavioural outcomes were combined. These effects were found exclusively in the US based studies, as well as when the non-US studies were included, and existed when intervention studies were examined separately. Specifically in regards to academic attainment, positive associations were found regardless if attainment was measured using standardised or unstandardised tests, although the effects of character education on grade point average (GPA) became statistically non-significant when tested with sophisticated random-error assumptions. Furthermore, the positive associations with achievement were stronger in the school subjects of reading and mathematics, compared to science and social studies. These effects were found independent of students’ ethnicity and socio-economic status. Most notably, character education programmes that had been implemented for over a year had the strongest positive effects on academic achievement. These findings provide encouraging evidence for the academic benefit of prolonged and continuous character education for all students, regardless of ethnicity or background.

Another interesting finding from Jeynes’s (2017) meta-analysis was that the positive associations between character education and achievement were stronger for middle and high school students (aged 11-18) compared to younger elementary school children (aged 5-10). Such a finding may imply that while character education programmes are still beneficial for UK primary school students’ academic development, such programmes may become even more important for students’ academic attainment as they enter secondary school. Findings from the Learning for Life report, conducted prior to the conception of the Jubilee Centre, paint a similar picture regarding the important impact that character and virtue may have on secondary school attainment (Arthur, Deacon Crick, Samuel, Wilson & McGettrick, 2006). Principal component factor analysis identified 15 dimensions of character and revealed that UK students’ reports for the dimensions of “living my values and virtues” ($\beta = .27$; $p < .001$), “community engagement” (akin with civic virtues; $\beta = .17$; $p < .001$) and “political engagement” ($\beta = .21$; $p < .001$) all positively predicted higher GCSE achievement. It may be that as children get older, they begin to better acquire the ability for moral reasoning and judgements (Malti & Ongley, 2014). As a consequence, older secondary school children may be better placed to acquire the virtues promoted within effective character education and thus more likely to utilise these virtues to progress academically at school compared to their younger counterparts.

This is not to say that character education cannot be beneficial for younger students’ academic attainment at elementary school (or the UK equivalent in primary school) and may, in fact, need to be implemented at an earlier age given the temporal benefits of character

education evidenced earlier. For example, a study of 681 elementary schools in California showed that schools with higher total character education implementation tended to have higher academic performance index (API) in reading, language and maths, albeit these effects were small in effect size (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2003). More precisely, three specific indicators of character education emerged to show the strongest correlations with prior and current academic attainment, as well as attainment in the subsequent two school years. These indicators were when ‘teachers modelled and promoted good character education’ ($r = .20 \sim .27$; $p < .01$), when ‘students were offered opportunities to meaningfully contribute to their character development’ ($r = .20 \sim .28$; $p < .01$), and when ‘the school encompassed a safe secure environment’ for students to learn and demonstrate good character ($r = .18 \sim .22$; $p < .01$). These findings are supportive of the Jubilee Centre’s ethos that not only should character be “taught” in schools but there needs to be a school culture whereby teachers promote and act as exemplars of good character (i.e. “caught”) whilst providing students with opportunities to develop and display good character (i.e. “sought”); see Jubilee Centre Framework, 2017). The evidence demonstrated by Benninga et al. (2003) would suggest that nurturing such a school ethos, founded upon good character, may have a positive influence on students’ academic performance.

A further meta-analysis has explored the influence that character education programmes and interventions may have on students’ academic and behavioural success, as well as their social and internal perceptions (specifically in US middle schools; Diggs & Akos, 2016). In this instance, the authors refer to character education as a particular brand of social-emotional practice and any programme or intervention that aims to influence the way students use or develop their character traits for value decisions (i.e. moral beliefs that influence their actions; pp 4). Interpreting composite effect size scores (weak = 0.2 or lower; moderate = 0.5 – 0.8; strong = 0.8 or higher), the meta-analysis examined 11 studies that met the specified inclusion criteria. A significant positive overall effect was found between character education programmes and academic success, but this was negligible in effect size ($d = 0.15$). Nonetheless, this may be explained, in part, by the method used to assess academic success. Similar to Jeynes’s (2017) findings, the link between character education and GPA scores was found non-significant, however, a significant moderate effect size was found between character education and higher mathematics performance. Exploratory observations found that one study included in the meta-analysis (see Samulsson, 2008) specifically explored character traits with mathematics tests and may have contributed to this moderate effect in overall mathematics performance. Consequently, the authors concluded that implementing character education initiatives may be more impactful on academic achievement when they are incorporated within specific academic subjects and skills rather than being presented distinctly from the content of the school curriculum.

Indirect Associations between Character Education and Academic Attainment

In addition to the aforementioned direct benefits character education may have on school attainment, character education may also lead to higher scholastic achievement as a result of positively influencing students’ behaviour and well-being. Indeed, Jeynes’s (2017) meta-analysis found positive associations between character education and specific behavioural

outcomes, such as increased self-control, reduced disruptive behaviour, fewer school suspensions, better moral judgement, and higher expressions of love, honesty and compassion. However these behavioural outcomes were more difficult to analyse with sophisticated controls, in comparison to academic attainment, given limitations and variation regarding the quantity of data available across the studies. Likewise, Diggs & Akos's (2016) meta-analysis revealed character education programmes were associated with lower student school referrals (i.e. tardiness and suspensions; $d = - 0.24$) and more positive student internal perceptions (i.e. adaptive attitudes and beliefs; $d = 0.45$).

Previous evidence has shed further light on the mediating role that students' adaptive behavioural and emotional outcomes can play in the relationship between character development and academic attainment. For instance, when employing the 24 character strengths of the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), a study by Weber and Ruch (2012) drew a distinction between heart-related (e.g. gratitude, hope, zest) and mind-related (e.g. love of learning, prudence, perseverance) character strengths. The findings demonstrated that both distinctions of character traits positively correlated with students' (aged 10-14 years) satisfying school experiences, academic self-efficacy, and positive classroom behaviour (e.g. teacher rated pupil engagement, motivation, co-operation and taking responsibility). In turn, the mind-related character traits of love of learning, perseverance and prudence were found important classroom character traits which, when combined, predicted higher school achievement both directly, and as consequence of better classroom behaviour. Furthermore, students that increased in school grades across half a school year reported statistically higher scores in the character traits of perspective, gratitude, hope, self-regulation, and teamwork compared to students that decreased in school attainment. Yet no differences were found between students with improved versus decreased grades in either outcome of satisfaction with school experiences and academic self-efficacy. Thus, only character strengths were identified as being relevant for the improvement in grades, further alluding to the positive and independent role that character development can have on academic attainment.

Regarding the influence of classroom behaviour, in both primary school (mean age = 11.16 years) and secondary school (mean age = 14.4 years), students' endorsement of the VIA character strengths were positively associated with better teacher-ratings of classroom behaviour, which in turn predicted better school achievement (Wagner & Ruch, 2015). Specifically within the primary school sample, 14 character strengths positively associated with academic achievement as a consequence of positive classroom behaviour, with only humour and leadership revealing a direct relationship with greater academic attainment. In contrast, seven specific character strengths in the secondary school sample demonstrated a relationship with school attainment. The strengths of perseverance, social intelligence, self-regulation, hope, and prudence all indirectly predicted attainment via positive classroom behaviour, with love of learning and forgiveness demonstrating direct and positive relations with attainment. Similarly, students' prior prosocialness, an indicator of good character by reflecting cooperativeness, helpfulness, sharing, and being empathic, has been found to positively predict future academic achievement (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000). Furthermore, prior student prosocialness, measured by teacher, peer and student ratings, was positively associated with their peers' future desire to study, play or be associated with them.

The model accounted for 35% of variance in later academic achievement, and 37% of variance in peers' social preference, with the relationships being found even after controlling for variation in early academic achievement. These findings highlight that the promotion of good character in schools may be conducive to better student school behaviour and socialness, which appears to consequently link to better academic attainment.

Students' character has also been shown to have positive associations with better well-being which, in turn, leads to better academic attainment (Weber, Wagner & Ruch, 2016). For instance, all of the character strengths specified in the VIA, with the exception of humility, were positively correlated with higher student self-reported positive affect. Using structural equation modelling, higher student well-being was then found to mediate the relationship between students' character strengths and positive school functioning. This process, in turn, was found to lead to higher teacher-rated academic achievement. Enhancing student well-being, a fundamental component of a flourishing life (Deci & Ryan, 2008), is important for student developmental growth, and would seemingly aid better academic performance as a result. Furthermore, incorporating 15 to 20 minute character education lessons, delivered by teachers, into a year-long elementary school curriculum was found to increase teacher ($\beta = 2.63$, $p < .001$), parent ($\beta = 1.52$, $p < .001$), and student ($\beta = 1.78$, $p < .001$) perceptions of school quality (which encompassed items regarding student well-being and support at school; Snyder, Vuchinich, Acock, Washburn, & Flay, 2012). These character education lessons were tailored to enhance students' social-emotional development and covered topics regarding students' self-concept, physical and intellectual actions, social/emotional actions for managing oneself responsibly, getting along with others, being honest with yourself and others, and methods for self-improvement. Schools that implemented these lessons showed significantly improved reports of better overall school quality from baseline to the end of the 1 year trial by their teachers (21%), parents (13%), and students (16%) compared to the schools that did not implement the programme. Taken in combination, the reviewed research offers promising evidence that effective character education programmes, which target the social and emotional development of the student, may help foster supportive school environments that benefit both students' personal and academic development (also see meta-analysis regarding socio-emotional learning programmes; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Conclusion

In attempting to bridge the gap between the conceptual benefits of character education for academic success, the reviewed evidence provides empirical support for the positive association between the principals of good character, and more explicit character education, with academic attainment. A positive direct relationship is consistently evidenced between character and academic success, albeit this direct effect is often small in effect size. This small effect, however, is often demonstrated when academic attainment is assessed on average across multiple subjects (e.g. GPA). For example, higher achievements in the subjects of reading and mathematics have typically shown the strongest correspondence with character education. Thus, it may be the influence that character education programmes have on student attainment varies depending on specific school subjects.

The evidence also suggests the longer character education programmes are implemented, the more likely they will be to positively impact attainment. The Jubilee Centre promotes that character education needs to be embedded into the entire school ethos and culture, depicting a ‘top down’ approach. The evidence in this article indicates that brief attempts to use character education as a “quick fix” to increase attainment will be ineffective. Rather character education may be better employed in a school-wide approach and used as a generic foundation for school activities. Additionally, character education may be more effective in enhancing school attainment when fused into the teaching of existing academic curriculums or specific academic skills. Indeed, meta-analysis (see Diggs & Akos, 2016) provides initial suggestions for this claim but the authors could not fully explore this in their analysis due to limitations in available data. Future research or school-based programmes may be needed to clarify how character education can be best incorporated within school-based practice.

Evidence of the positive effects of character on attainment was shown across all age groups, such as primary and secondary school aged students (the UK equivalent to US’s elementary and high school age). However, character education may have the strongest benefit for academic attainment with the older secondary aged students (see Jeynes, 2017). It is difficult to assess from the current analysis if the secondary school aged students in question may have benefitted from prolonged character education from an earlier age or been introduced to character only at secondary school. Advocates of character education would endorse that character education should, and can, be introduced from a young age (e.g. see Knightly Virtues; Jubilee Centre, 2012), however, the evidence in the present article indicates that the most substantial benefit on school attainment may appear in later schooling. Regardless of students’ prior education, it would seem valuable for secondary school institutions, and teachers, to implement elements of character education into their curriculums and classroom activities at the onset of students’ secondary school education.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the reviewed evidence highlights the positive impact that character education can have on students’ behaviour and well-being, and the favourable consequential influence this can have on academic attainment. Distinct from any direct academic objectives, the founding tenet of character education is the development of human beings as good and moral beings (Kristjánsson, 2015). By fulfilling their good character, and using character education as a potential tool, students will hopefully become flourishing individuals that will experience enhanced emotional and social well-being, along with displaying more prosocial behaviours. The current review provides supplementary evidence that such “personal flourishing” may be conducive to higher academic attainment. Thus, the argument for the inclusion of character education within school practices should consider, but also extend far beyond, exclusive academic attainment objectives.

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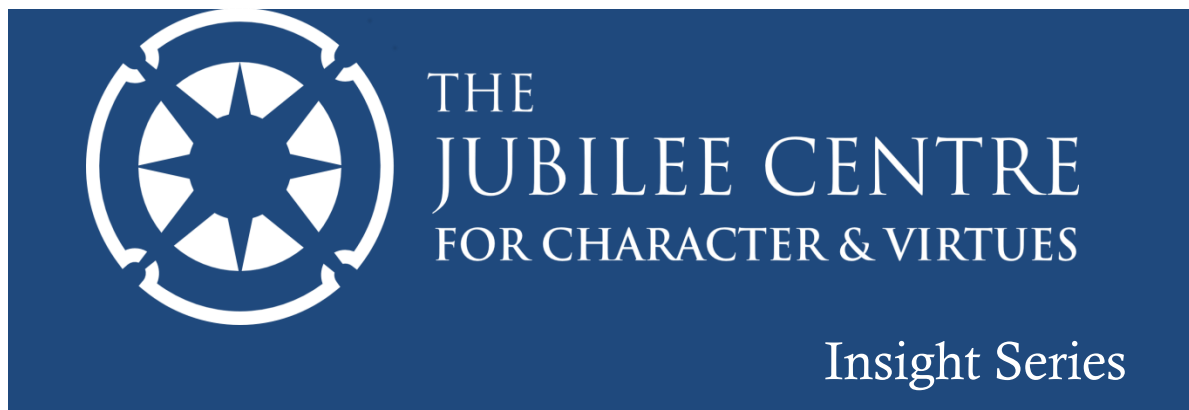
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