



Narnian Virtues: A Character Education English Literature Curriculum for *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis

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Virtuous Readers

In the field of character education, reading literature is often considered to have the capacity to educate us in the virtues (Carr and Harrison, 2015). Here we report on the second year (of the three year) Narnian Virtues research and draw upon initial headline quantitative and qualitative findings of 11-year-olds reading of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis to ascertain how this reading helped them to apply universal, shared, virtues in their local contexts.

The kind of person one is matters greatly from an Aristotelian perspective. On this view, 'virtuous or morally right actions can only be understood as the kinds of actions that a morally virtuous person or agent would perform' (Carr and Harrison, 2015, p. 41). Consequently, it is 'plausible to define a good book as a book which is read in one way, and a bad book as a book which is read in another' (Lewis, 1961, p.1) In our research, we were therefore asking how young people might become 'virtuous' readers who read through an ethical lens.

Yet textual choices are not insignificant. For instance, the empirical work of psychologists, Kidd and Castano (2013), recently found that reading and engaging with literary works by such authors as Charles Dickens and Téa Obrecht sharpen our ability to understand others' emotions far more than thrillers or romance novels. Clearly, a novel cannot be judged on its aesthetic or literary merits alone, especially in character education and *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis was selected as its moral stance is congruent with universal virtues that are acknowledged to pertain across cultures.

Universal Virtues in The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe

The Chronicles of Narnia are considered consistent with the Tao (Tankard, 2007, p.72) which underpins Narnian Virtues. The Tao is a term used in *The Abolition of Man – Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (Lewis, 1943) and is summed up in eight 'laws' lent credence from from major texts of cultures and traditions as diverse as the Chinese, Indian, Jewish, Roman, Greek, Australian Aboriginal, and American Indian. The diversity of sources of the Tao is illustrated below:

The Laws of the Tao, summarized

1. The Law of General Beneficence

Refrain from murder or bringing any sort of misery and suffering upon one's fellows; love others as oneself.

'Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you.' (Ancient Chinese, Analects of Confucius)

2. The Law of Special Beneficence

Fulfil the special duties we have to family or subjects. Be blameless to thy kindred.

'Take no vengeance even though they do thee wrong' (Old Norse, Sigrdrifumal)

3. Duties to Parents, Elders, Ancestors

Honour one's father and mother by supporting them, caring for them and fulfilling one's obligations to them by showing proper respect, even when they are dead.

'For him who fails to honour [father and mother] every work of piety is in vain. This is the first duty.'
(Hindu, Janet)

4. Duties to Children and Posterity

Provide for the education of the young and respect children.

'The killing of... the young boys and girls who are to go to make up the future strength of the people, is the saddest part.' (American Indian, Account of the Battle of Wounded Knee)

5. The Law of Justice

Be faithful to one's spouse. Do not steal; render to each person his rights. The legal system should not be partial and treat the poor worse than the rich.

'Justice is the settled and permanent intention of rendering to each man his rights' (Roman, Justinian, Institutions)

6. The Law of Good Faith and Veracity

Do not lie or commit fraud. Keep promises.

'Hateful to me as are the gates of Hades is that man who says one thing, and hides another in his heart' (Greek, Homer, Iliad)

7. The Law of Mercy

Care for the weak—the poor, the sick, the disabled, widows, orphans, and the elderly.

'In the Dalebura tribe, a woman, a cripple from birth, was carried about by the tribespeople in turn until her death at the age of sixty-six...They never desert the sick' (Australian Aborigines)

8. The Law of Magnanimity

Do not injure; protect others from being injured.

'The Master said, Love learning and if attacked be ready to die for the Good Way' (Ancient Chinese, Analects)

These eight 'laws' of the Tao are congruent with the 'ten essential virtues' that Lickona notes are 'affirmed by nearly all philosophical, cultural, and religious traditions' (2004, p. xxv). In increasingly plural, multi-cultural societies, it was thought that as the Chronicles of Narnia are congruent with the Tao (Tankard, 2007) this would offer a foundation for character education that transcends cultural and religious differences.

The Narnian Virtues project sought to expand previous literature-based moral education interventions (Arthur et al, 2014) by developing a curriculum based on literary protagonists (the Pevensies) who are children, of an age similar to that of the students reading the novels, and extending the curriculum beyond the upper primary age range. *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950) shows how Peter, Susan and Lucy begin by caring only about their own family and how to get their wayward brother Edmund back - and decide to fight for justice and to liberate the land of Narnia from tyranny where innocent creatures are victims, where there is scant respect for private property and arbitrary arrest by a Secret Police is the norm. In this novel we see the Pevensie siblings practice virtues such as courage, fortitude, love, wisdom, humility and self-control and grow as moral agents as a result.

The Narnian Virtues Curriculum

The second year (2017) of this empirical study investigated how young people understood and practiced a range of 'Narnian' virtues as they followed the curriculum, and read and responded to *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. The six 'Narnian' virtues, defined as follows:

Wisdom - The habit of exercising good judgement; being able to see what is true and good and choosing the best course of action.

Love - The habit of acting selflessly for the good of another, without seeking recognition or reward; willingness to sacrifice for the sake of others by putting their well-being ahead of our own; doing good for others by being kind, caring, generous and loyal.

Integrity – The habit of being true to ourselves and truthful with others; standing up for moral principles and following our conscience; not engaging in self-deception, such as telling ourselves that it's OK to do something that, deep down, we know is wrong.

Fortitude – The habit of doing what is right and necessary in the face of difficulty; the mental and emotional strength, the 'inner toughness', to endure suffering and overcome adversity; exhibiting

qualities such as confidence, courage, perseverance and resilience when challenging circumstances demand them.

Self-Control – The habit of self-restraint; the mastery and moderation of our desires, emotions, impulses, and appetites; resisting temptation; delaying gratification in order to achieve a higher goal.

Justice – The habit of treating everyone with equal respect and fairness; fulfilling our responsibilities; taking responsibility for our actions, sincerely admitting when we've done wrong, and making amends; recognising that no one – including ourselves – is 'above the law'.

The Narnian Virtues curriculum is based around twelve extracts from *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, each of about a page of the novel in length. At the start of the twelve week curriculum (to which two hours per week were devoted in English lessons), students learned what a virtue and a vice were and became familiar with each of the six virtues described. Each week children read an extract from the novel and highlighted any virtues they were able to identify in green and any vices in red. A margin was provided next to the passage for annotation and students were encouraged to link the passage with their own experience. Children's understanding was consolidated and reinforced over the 12 weeks with direct instruction about a different virtue each week supported by a detailed Teacher Handbook of lesson notes.

We designed the Narnian Virtues curriculum to have many features aimed at helping student readers relate the fictional story's characters and events to their personal lives – in particular to their character. Our curriculum design was guided in large part by a psychology of character advanced by a number of scholars (e.g. Lickona, 1991; Berkowitz and Grych, 1998; Ryan and Bohlin, 1999). As we have seen, this character psychology holds that any virtue has three interrelated components: knowing, attitude (valuing) and behaviour. We wanted young persons to understand the virtues of wisdom, love, integrity, fortitude, self-control and justice (the six 'Narnian' virtues); to value them (consider them important and be motivated to develop them); and then translate that understanding and valuing into virtuous habits in their daily conduct. Each of the five specific objectives of our Narnian Curriculum— understanding, identifying, empathising with characters, valuing the virtues, and applying the virtues— corresponds to one or more of the three goals of head, heart and hand.

These five objectives of the Narnian Virtues curriculum were incorporated into individual lessons and balanced across the curriculum in order, for research purposes, to ensure a certain level of consistency across classes and schools. Across the 12 weeks, time spent on objectives was approximately:

Understanding: 10%; Identifying: 20%; Empathising: 25%; Valuing: 20%; Applying 25%. A given activity often contributed to more than one objective. For example, when students learn to identify and understand a virtue such as courage or love in the story, they may also simultaneously be empathising with the story character who displays that virtue, growing in their own valuing of that virtue, and beginning to think about how to apply that virtue in their own lives.

Student Character: Measuring 'Head, Heart, Hand'

Aristotle taught that a virtue is not a mere capacity or ability but a disposition—a tendency to act in a good way. The ultimate measure of our character is what we do and why we do it. With regard to measurement, 'virtue' is a latent variable (Byrne, 2002). While we are unable to measure it directly, we used the observable traits we would expect to be consistent with a virtuous person to approximate students' change in virtue. Within this project we used Lickona's (1991; Lickona & Davidson, 2005) model of virtue and developed a measure of virtue utilising three aspects: Head, Heart, and Hand.

The Head: Ethical Awareness and Cognitive Response

Lickona and Davison (2005:20) argue that both performance and moral character reside firstly in knowledge of the virtues, and the ability to identify excellence, recognise the ethical dimensions of situations, and have the language and skills to grapple with moral situations. McDowell (1997) argues that a virtuous person is one who 'sees situations in a certain distinctive way'; they become a certain kind of person who is able to frame situations as a virtuous person would. Specifically, we sought to measure how the student's 'head' had developed: Does the student understand the virtues? Can the student see the situation as an ethical one? Does the student frame the situation as requiring a virtuous response? Does the student discern an appropriate response? Sample items from our survey that seek to assess the 'head' are:

- I notice opportunities to be kind to others.
- I know when people need help.
- I know how to disagree without starting a fight or argument.
- I see chances to help other people.
- I understand how other people are feeling.

The Heart: An Emotional and Identity-Based Response

Virtues also require an emotional response – an ability to empathise with others. Our measure considers whether the participants have the ‘heart’ expected of a virtuous person. That is, do they have the emotional sensitivity, internal motives, and an awareness of the virtues as central to identity formation we would expect to recognise in a virtuous person? This can be split into four constituent questions: Does the student have an appropriate emotional response to the stimuli? To what extent do they seek intrinsic rather than extrinsic reward? To what extent do students describe or infer the virtues when considering their motives? To what extent do they see their actions as building towards ‘flourishing’ of themselves or others? Sample items from our survey seeking to assess the ‘heart’ are:

- I understand how other people are feeling.
- When I see someone in difficulty, I want to help.
- Problems in other parts of the world are not my concern.
- When I hear about people who are sad I want to do something to help.
- Helping someone makes me happy.

The Hand: Action, Behaviour, and Habits

Further, a virtuous person has been defined as one who “respond[s] at the right time, to the right object, towards the right people, with the right motive, in the right way” (Carr, 2003, p. 219). However behaviour is difficult to measure quantitatively through self-completed questionnaires, hence a key part of the methodology includes a qualitative data collection to triangulate results. Our qualitative measures (one such is the ‘Letters to Lewis’ task drawn upon in this article) are better able to discern whether there has been any change in behaviour. However there are other aspects to virtue we can expect to see that can be measured that relate to the ‘hand’: in particular habits or dispositions. Virtue is more than a particular behaviour observed in isolation, but it’s a ‘system of conduct’ (Arthur, 2015, p. 26). In this sense, to be virtuous must involve becoming a particular type of person – a person of virtuous character. When measuring for students showing a consistency of applying virtue (or a disposition to act in a certain way), we look for whether students believe the virtues are important character traits, the attributes that define who they want to be, and the central attributes they think they currently possess (Cole Wright, 2014). Sample items from our survey that seek to assess the ‘hand’ are:

- I listen carefully to what other people say to me.
- Students in my English class treat each other with respect.
- Students in my English class help each other, even if they are not friends.
- When I'm having trouble with my schoolwork, at least one of my English classmates will try to help.
- I'm good at working with other students.

Year 2 Quantitative and Qualitative Data Collection

Students in an experimental group studied The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe curriculum during the first term of Year 7 (at age 11) in their English lessons whilst the students in a control group did not. Seventeen schools participated in this year of the project (9 experimental and 8 control). 858 students in the experimental schools and 418 in the control schools completed pre-and-post-tests. Control schools were matched to experimental schools on the basis of the size of school (number of students), the type of school (faith or non-faith) and socio-economic profile (taking the percentage of the students who were eligible for free school meals as a proxy for deprivation).

Children completed a 'Virtue literacy' test (the type of test that a teacher might set to establish the knowledge and understanding a child has of vocabulary and definitions) before and after the 12 weeks of teaching where 'Narnian Virtues' was followed, two hours per week. This required children to write definitions of virtues; when given a particular virtue or vice to name its opposite for instance. Questionnaires were received from students who consented to take part in the project and a 10% sub-sample was selected at random (Experimental = 108; Control = 66).

Children also completed a psychometric survey online which relied upon self-perceptions about whether, for instance, they felt their 'character' had developed over the 12 weeks and which attempted to assess their dispositions and self-perceptions. The outcome measures in the online survey were developed by the research team. The survey consists of 9 sub-scales (65 items in total). Six subscales indirectly measured Empathy, Classroom Behaviour, Intrinsic vs Extrinsic Rewards, Emotional Responses, Recognising Situations to Practice Virtues, and Social Interpersonal Skills. The other 3 subscales measured the extent to which the six Narnian Virtues are considered important (Attitudes to Virtues), students' reasons for valuing them (Virtue as a Motive), and the degree to which students' report acting upon them in their own lives (Assesses Behaviour).

As part of the qualitative data gathering, children were invited to write a 'Letter to Lewis' of up to 400 words (about 2 handwritten pages) 'explaining how you have been affected by studying his work' and 'how reading and thinking about characters or episodes in the novel have helped you'. 202 'Letters to Lewis' were received but of these 137 of these came from one high school where the task appears to have been especially popular and successful.

Headline Quantitative Findings: Virtue Literacy and Psychometric Instrument

Early interim findings for the second year of the project are provisional but we can report that there was a statistically significant improvement in virtue literacy from a low base as measured by our 'Virtue literacy' assessment. According to our psychometric instrument (self-perception), there was a slight decline in how virtuous children considered themselves to be in both experimental and control schools but this decline was significantly less pronounced in the experimental schools. Optional take-up of a Character Passport to be completed at home was included in the curriculum. Parents who were encouraged to work together with their children on these 'home' tasks reported doing so to varying degrees and recorded minutes spent on each task. Students appear to have performed better in the post-test when parents helped in many activities but a 'little and often' approach where parents avoided 'over-doing it' on any one appeared to be most effective.

Initial Qualitative Findings: Letters to Lewis

As this qualitative data is more concerned to illustrate and illuminate processes than frequency of incidence no claims are made to representativeness at this stage. The three letters drawn upon below came from a school was also featured in a national report (Devanney, 2018) to which reference will be made following brief analysis of letters. Pseudonyms are used while the character of writers' names is retained. Analysis is of students applying the fictional narrative to their own lives, which might be considered a hallmark of a 'virtuous' reader.

1. From Bobbie's letter

As I looked back on myself and reflected on my behaviour, I began to see the flaws (vices) I had and the many great things (virtues) about myself. While I improved myself, I watched the characters do the same to themselves, especially Edmund. On his path of self-deception and malice I began to think there was no hope for him but, with the help of his family and friends, he managed to turn himself around

What stands out about Bobbie's letter is not just that her self-development and the character development of the fictional character go together but that the fictional character is almost envisaged as copying the improvement of the reader: 'While I improved myself, I watched the characters do the same to themselves'. Bobbie is pleasingly balanced in that she sees 'many great things (virtues) about myself', as well as 'flaws' but appreciates the need for 'self-development and improvement'. What is also pleasing is the recognition that although friends and family may help, it is the fictional character (one senses she conceives of him in some sense as 'real') who is considered by Bobbie to be responsible for character development. Several of the letters showed readers identifying with Edmund, who is portrayed as experiencing the most dramatic character development in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*.

2. From Ted's letter

The most important virtue for me has to be Justice because they stood up for what's right, but also Love because when Edmund said he was sorry they [his siblings] said that it was alright. Even I couldn't do that if my sister kept on saying that I was lying when I wasn't. I liked it when they went into the wardrobe and found a whole new world just inside ... that was my favourite bit of the book.

Standing up for what is right (Justice) is singled out by Ted as being of importance and one valuable feature of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* is that it depicts a land suffering under tyranny that the children fight to liberate. Ted's letter also shows how he identified with Edmund and the admission that if his sibling kept accusing him of lying, it would hard to forgive.

3. From Will's letter

Fortitude has been important for me because the characters show courage even when the going gets tough. The book has made me want to try my best even when it starts getting tough for me. Also the book has made me want to resist temptation and not lose control even when I feel like shouting with

anger. I feel that the virtues and characters have made and developed me into a better person. Lucy has showed me that we don't deceive ourselves or others. Edmund has showed me that I need to resist temptation. Peter has showed me to act selflessly for the good of another. Susan has showed me to treat everyone with respect.

While the Narnian Virtues research was taking place, a request was received from another organisation to undertake independent research in the school (from which the children's letters here have been selected). This led to the publication of interviews with teachers from that school being reported. One explained:

A key feature promoted by the Narnian project was the importance of critical reflection or looking back at your own actions and critically studying yourself and seeing how you can improve as a person... after the fourth week they were able to talk more fluently about how their actions impacted other people... So they would say 'I was more like Edmund on that occasion wasn't I Sir!' On the fifth week I started to see my students thinking more about their own actions on a day-to day basis. Some could go further and compare the characters to themselves more generally, not just on one occasion. We had quite a few Susans and Edmunds not many Peters.... (Devanney, 2018, p.26)

Identification with a fictional character was clearly viewed as morally educative by teachers in the school and this is corroborated by student perspectives in their 'Letters to Lewis'.

Conclusions

The quantitative data shows a significant improvement in virtue literacy after just 2 lessons a week focussed on just one novel. However, while there is considerable evidence in the qualitative data of children applying the virtues they see in the novel to their own lives, the survey does not show the self-reported practice of virtues increasing. We do see the quantitative result as positive there was much less of a drop in the experimental schools than the control schools. There might appear to be three possible explanations for the survey findings: 1) It may be that our quantitative instrument was not sensitive enough to pick up on changes in children's practice of character virtues or 2) that children's practice of character virtues has indeed declined, (although this is the opposite of what our qualitative findings are telling us) or 3) that there is a heightened sensitivity in students after studying virtues for twelve weeks whereby they are more aware when they are not being virtuous than they were before. With regard to this last possible explanation, an analogy might help. If we asked children at the start of

term if they believed themselves to be good at mathematics they may well rate themselves reasonably highly. If we then taught a hard course such as calculus for 12 weeks and then asked them if they believed themselves to be good at mathematics, we might anticipate a rather more modest appraisal. It is entirely possible that students rate themselves less highly after doing something challenging. To consider one's 'character' to have improved significantly over the first twelve weeks in a new secondary school given the new challenges posed by the new environment might be viewed as naïve or certainly overly optimistic. In fact, given the challenges, children may well have become more aware of the character virtues they need to work on. Upon reflection, this may well have been reinforced by our educational aim for the children to come to a realistic assessment of themselves and for this to be a formative experience. We wanted them to identify the character virtues they needed to improve through practice, more than to induce some sort of 'feel-good-factor' or even moral complacency.

Certainly, according to the Virtue Literacy test where scores were very low at the outset (many 11-12-year-olds did not know what a 'virtue' was or could not define 'integrity' for instance) and that the curriculum equipped children with the language and ethical tools that helped them to see situations at school and at home through an ethical lens. Our baseline assessment of young people in the Narnian Virtues research is congruent with findings that young people who had initially revealed a 'lack of vocabulary to talk meaningfully about [their character], once they were provided with such a vocabulary, cherished it and enjoyed the opportunity to use it' (Kristjánsson, 2013, pp. 6-7).

Giving children a language with which to reflect upon and cultivate their own character would seem to warrant a privileged position on the educational agenda of schools, curriculum designers and policymakers. The advantages for schools are considerable because investing in children's acquisition of virtue literacy and having regular conversations around their character ensures that a school does not become 'behaviourist'. This is because the sort of human being a child wants to become is addressed (rather than simply the behaviours that may prompt rewards or sanctions). According to one teacher, 'The most significant thing that was lost when the [Narnian Virtues] project ended was the weekly dialogue about what they [children] were doing and how they were behaving to each other. We lost the actually discussions around love, wisdom and the other virtues' (Devanney, 2018, p.26). That the Narnian Virtues project took place in core curriculum time allocated to 'English', a high status subject at the sharp end of school and societal accountability measures, is significant. What a high quality character education curriculum such as 'Narnian Virtues' can do is to equip the child with the language and the concepts to evaluate their own character virtue strengths and weaknesses, those of others and

those of fictional characters in literary works. Virtue literacy is 'good for English' too in that it increases levels of engagement with the text being studied (as it is perceived to be relevant to a child's own life) and enables a greater level of perception and ethical judgement to be applied to the analysis of fictional characters in other texts studied. If students use their 'virtue' and 'vice' vocabulary and concepts to analyse Lady Macbeth, for instance, and to discuss her lack of integrity this will be important transferable learning. We should not underestimate the significance of children relating personally to the moral struggles, or the virtues and vices, of a fictional character. Nor should we underestimate the importance of doing so to children's own character development.

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