Putting virtue ethics to work for educational leaders at the superintendent level in Alabama – A first review of the Leadership for Character Project

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Abstract

According to virtue-ethics philosophy, character development in educational contexts emphasizes student flourishing as the rightful purpose of education. Leaders at superintendent level are perfectly situated to have a district-wide perspective for putting this into practice. Since January 2020, faculty at the University of Alabama (UA) in the Leadership for Character Project have been working toward such goals by helping aspiring and actual superintendents to understand what leadership for character through community entails. The paper reflects on our practitioner focused efforts to 1.) support ethical leaders at superintendent level and 2.) cultivate communities that prioritize character in Alabama Schools.

Introduction

According to virtue-ethics philosophy, character development in educational contexts emphasizes the pursuit of student flourishing as the rightful purpose of education (Walker, Roberts & Kristjánsson, 2015). It treats the realization of each students' human potential as a holistic educational endeavor with both moral and academic dimensions necessary for living a modern day 'good life' in line with Aristotle's original intention (Aristotle, 1999). However, in pluralistic democratic societies there cannot be a single vision of a 'good life', so educational leaders need to work to create 'just communities' where children are empowered to make progress in living well (Curren, 2017; Strike & Small 2010). Educational leaders at principal and superintendent levels often share the belief that education ought to cultivate character (Walker & Mendiola, 2021) and so are perfectly situated to have a community-wide perspective for putting this into practice.

Since January 2020, faculty at the University of Alabama (UA) in the Leadership for Character (LFC) Project, funded by the Kern Family Foundation, have been working toward such goals. The LFC project aims to cultivate professional practical wisdom among educational leaders and to motivate and inform 'just communities' in schools that prioritize students' characters as the most important aim.

Although the LFC project involves other leadership levels, this paper focusses on district wide leadership as a level of leadership often neglected in the educational literature (Huguet, 2021, Rorrer, 2008). In particular, we focus on aspiring superintendents attending the University of Alabama Superintendent's Academy (UASA) and existing superintendents attending our professional development course through the School Superintendents of Alabama (SSA). The aim of the paper is to reflect on successes and challenges faced by the LFC team in the first year as they worked at prioritizing virtue-based character education through educational leadership in Alabama. This work,

aimed at translating virtue theory into practice, has so far involved capacity building efforts among members of the LFC faculty team (mostly experienced educational leaders); recruiting new staff, faculty and PhD students; designing, running and evaluating training session for aspiring and existing superintendents in Alabama; and the creation of a framework for character education in Alabama Schools, together with a companion guide for the framework. Overall, the LFC project - housed in the Center for the Study of Ethical

Development at the University of Alabama - is designed to leverage existing UA structures with state-wide reach to develop and embed a virtue-ethics character education (VE CE) approach in educational leadership throughout Alabama (cf. Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017).

I.   LFC project overview

Aims and objectives

Over the course of 4.5 years from January 2020, the LFC project aims to cultivate among educational leaders a level of professional practical wisdom that will give them the vision, knowledge, fortitude and skill to create and maintain 'just communities' in schools whereby the cultivation of students characters is the most important aim, achieved through human relationships together with direct and indirect methods of 'teaching' and reflection. Related objectives are to:

- Prepare UA project team members and develop character education content;

- Establish a VE CE approach in UASA and associated professional development for aspiring and in-post superintendents;

- Establish a VE CE approach in UA Master of Arts degree in Educational Leadership

   (MA Ed L) for aspiring principals needing master's degree and certification;

- Design and implement professional development featuring the VE CE approach for aspiring and in-post principals and other school leaders through the Council of Leaders of Alabama Schools.

- Consolidate and build a state-wide community around a VE CE approach;

- Develop an Intermediate Concept Measure for Educational Leadership (moral dilemmas).

Project Team

Principal Investigator - Director Center for Study Ethical Development / Educational Psychology

Co-Principal Investigator - Director Superintendents' Academy / Educational Leadership

Co-Principal Investigator - Program Coordinator, MA Educational Leadership

Instructor - Educational Leadership

Post-Doctoral Fellow - Educational Leadership

Project Coordinator - Educational Leadership

3 PhD Students - Educational Leadership / Educational Psychology

(Note: team members work across the project and other roles)

II.   Local context

General

Alabama was recently positioned 47th among US states for child well-being by the Annie E. Casey Foundation[1] judged on 16 indicators across categories of health, education, economic well-being, family and community. The foundation report also states that Alabama has more children in single-parent homes than the national average, and students lag other states in reading and math proficiency.

Alabama has 1,474 public schools separated into 143 public school systems. Slightly more than half of the students are White (53%) followed by 32% Black and 9% Hispanic. The remaining 7% identify as Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native or Multi-Race. Of the state's 46,941 educators, most are White (79%) with Black educators representing just under 19% of the total and Hispanics representing under 1%. Of the 143 systems, 104 have fewer than 4,999 students with 12 having less than 1,000. Students with a language other than English (EL) make up 3.9% of the student population. The number of EL students has increased by more than 10,000 in the last six years.[2]

There are 138 superintendents in the state plus five leaders of specialty schools such as the Alabama School of Cyber Technology and Engineering. Most are males (77.6%). Of the 111 male superintendents, 82 are White, 29 are Black. Females represent approximately 23% of the superintendents, again the majority are White (20 of the 34). Turnover is about 14% annually.

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[1] Annie E. Casey Foundation 2021 Kids Count https://assets.aecf.org/m/databook/aecf-2021kidscountdatabookembargoed.pdf
[2] Alabama State Department of Education Quick Facts https://www.alabamaachieves.org/wp-content/uplo, ads/2021/06/QF-2021-Online.pdf

The student population is roughly 32% Black, approximately 30% of schools have Black superintendents. There is a growing EL population and growing Hispanic population. Hispanic educators are needed at all levels of teaching and administration.

Character education mandates in Alabama

The 1975 Code of Alabama and 1995 Accountability Law mandate character education in Alabama schools. The latter states specifically that: The State Board of Education and all local boards shall develop and implement a comprehensive character education program for all grades to consist of not less than ten minutes instruction per day focusing upon the students' development of 25 listed virtues. Despite the obvious limitation of 10 minutes a day for moral instruction, the explicit mention of virtues and a requirement that character education takes place in schools is an asset for our work with superintendents who oversee many schools in their districts, influencing day-to-day decisions about educational programs, budgeting, staff, and facilities. Superintendents may also hire, supervise, and manage the central office staff and principals.

The University of Alabama Superintendents Academy (UASA)

A key asset for the LFC project is the UASA, created in response to a 1999 consent decree which was formed to increase numbers of Black and female superintendents in the state as a result of a lawsuit (Dr. Edward Hall & Dr. Cordelia Moffett vs. Executive Director of AL Association of School Boards, State Superintendent, & Members of the Talladega BOE).   The aim of the SA continues to be:

> To train qualified and diverse leaders who can effectively manage finance resources, apply appropriate legal policies and procedures, direct appropriate school improvement activities, create positive learning environments, and direct instructional practices that will raise student achievement.

UA is contracted to provide this competitive UASA program each year for selected aspiring leaders. The program runs from October 1 to September 30 with 6 sessions - each of 2 days' duration - interspersed throughout the year. Curriculum guidelines for SA are in force from the State, with flexibility to include emerging trends and identified needs. Areas covered aside from LFC content are: finance, law, instruction, technology, diversity, safety, communications, school improvement etc. Sessions are supported by a framework of leadership standards. Participants are pre-service superintendents in various school leadership roles who aspire to be school superintendents in Alabama. There were 25 participants in 2020 and 35 participants in 2021.

School Superintendents of Alabama

School Superintendents of Alabama (SSA) is the professional association for school system superintendents and their leadership teams. The organization offers professional learning for superintendents in Alabama and provides advocacy and networking opportunities. Through close professional ties, the LFC project offers approved training in collaboration with SSA.

Superintendent's receptivity to virtue ethics character education

To inform our understanding of superintendent views of character education, 10 Alabama superintendents who had previously attended the UASA were asked about their thoughts on virtue ethics character education and ethical leadership. In focus groups the superintendents explained they framed their roles by a persisting priority on 'what's best for kids', but that the role was often solitary and full of difficult decisions, not always understood by others (Walker & Mendiola, 2021). Multiple ethical complexities including political, social media, employee issues etc. were a daily occurrence. The superintendents saw themselves as key for setting character standards: 'you set the range – you are the floor and ceiling' and realized they needed to look inward for ethical direction. However, given the isolation already mentioned, the superintendents said multiple roles

and stressors could distract them from a focus on character development and even a focus on children. Alongside a strong inner moral compass, the superintendents valued networks with other superintendent's for supporting their continued ethical leadership (phronesis). In general, superintendent roles were considered significant for character education and for influencing community beliefs and cultures, involving acting as role models. However, the superintendents cautioned that character and its education needed to be a top priority, or it is not likely to happen. The superintendents also believed that authentic ethical leadership prevented many problems from emerging in the first place.

III.   Virtue ethics leadership for character

Virtue based leadership, underpinning the LFC project, prioritizes moral character as central for professional moral agency. Good character developed through professional and personal experiences may support a developed practical wisdom or phronesis as an intellectual adjudicating virtue (Darnell et al., 2019; Schwarz and Sharpe, 2010). Judgement made by practically wise leaders can be instant (years of experience have saturated virtues with moral reasoning) or may involve protracted deliberation if the circumstances of a dilemma are especially complex or novel. While rules and guidelines are helpful and necessary, phronetic character for educational leaders is considered a main source of ethical judgement and leadership once developed, that is also conjoined with professional expertise and skill (e.g. as a teacher / administrator). Although rules and decision-making guides etc. may be supportive of wise character in a profession, practical wisdom being ethically oriented and particular to circumstance, situation and individuals has potential to reach a more excellent judgement. Approaches other than virtue ethics, might place more emphasis on rules, guides, decision making techniques, leadership styles and codes of ethics where leaders are expected to follow professional procedures and techniques more than becoming a source, motivation and

model of ethical excellence. A leader can 'tick boxes' for complying with rules and guidelines, whereas the practically wise leader will decide for themselves if more needs to be done from a situationally sensitive standard of ethical excellence. It is hard to see how approaches other than ethically oriented leadership can work for this district level of leadership that is defined by complexity (Touchton & Acker-Hocevar, 2011) and ethical risk. The notion that leaders must develop moral characters aimed at professional ethical excellence is at the heart of the LFC project. This also amounts to character education since leaders with practical wisdom will 1.) model this and 2.) motivate their students and staff to develop in the same way.

Where to start?

As illustrated, initial conditions for our work at the district level were positive given the state mandate for character education, evidence of much interest among superintendents and the inherent requirement for ethical leadership in the superintendent role. Importantly, a comprehensive approach to character education also appealed to leaders for not being a single program or the next new idea; it was important to continually make this distinction in our work since character education is often understood in Alabama as a specific or single program or intervention, sometimes contracted to schools for a fee. Instead, the LFC project builds on state mandates to propose a character education framework that is integral to everything a leader does, because if character education is a priority, then it is implicated everywhere. In taking this line, our character education framework - connected to state mandates - urges that character education requires a comprehensive approach that will need to '(1) include whatever is reasonable and necessary to students' developing good character; (2) include students at all grade levels (3) recognize that teaching about virtues for 10 minutes per day is a minimum standard overshadowed by the whole-school approach of this framework' (Curren, Walker, Mendiola & Bynum 2021, p 2). At the core of the work therefore was

a need for superintendents to develop their own ethical characters, prioritize character education as part of their role and to invest time and effort into learning more about it. After all, prioritizing character education is the 'P' in Marvin Berkowitz's (2021) excellent and respected PRIMED model for character education. In the early stages of the project, our team deliberated about whether to engage superintendent's in reflecting on their own characters at all. In hindsight, it took us too long to conclude that this was essential and would support moral growth mindsets among leaders (Han, 2018). This informed a two-pronged approach for the project, focusing on 1.) the superintendent's own ethical development (phronesis or practical wisdom) and 2.) on superintendent's cultivating communities that prioritize character in Alabama Schools. In these ways, the ethical development of leaders themselves and affording students' opportunity for character growth and development are supported. During the first year, we focused much attention on practical wisdom for superintendents and how character education could be prioritized. We also facilitated the development of a language of virtue alongside planning exercises for emphasizing character development as leaders in their areas of responsibility.

LFC Team

A small faculty group of experienced educational leaders (ex-Principal, Assistant

Superintendent, and Superintendent) and a character education researcher made up the starting

UA LFC team generating a need to share and combine knowledge across the group, especially bringing together VE CE and school leadership knowledge and skill. The starting team from the Departments of Educational Leadership and Educational studies had strength in depth and variety of experience, together with shared commitment to developing character through leadership. The process of developing team knowledge was challenging, and the concept of practical wisdom proved pivotal as a bridge for theory and practice facilitating useful connections to the team's own

leadership experiences. Practical wisdom appealed also for its insistence that leaders emphasize the ethical among other professional demands. The core team was augmented after a lengthy process of recruiting by three new staff/ faculty and three PhD students which meant further internal capacity building for VE CE was needed. We also introduced a PhD level 6 class on virtue ethics character education to the College of Education at UA.

IV. Making an impact

UASA

Because phronesis worked so well for our team as a vehicle of broader learning, we judged it would appeal to members of the UASA where early project efforts were directed, hence our decision to emphasize the leaders themselves in the early days. This involved working simultaneously on devising a program plan for the 2020 cohort of the UASA alongside learning more generally about virtue ethics character education as a team. Twenty-five aspiring superintendents attended the UASA in 2020 with a brief introduction to VE CE. A more in-depth program was introduced to 35 members off the 2021 UASA cohort through an approved professional learning unit (PLU) called 'Wise Leaders Cultivating the Character of Students' as a stand-alone addition to the curriculum covering virtue ethics character education for aspiring superintendents. The PLU includes three modules: Developing a Common Language and Approach; Exploring the Leader's Role; and Developing a Plan.

SSA

Existing superintendents are known to be a challenging audience and much like aspiring superintendents are short on time and expect learning material to: 1) appreciate their existing knowledge and 2) to be easily accessible without excessive reading. Again, aiming to have this group prioritize character education and an emphasis on practical wisdom dominated our approach. In

close partnership with, and hosted by, SSA we offer two initial in-person training events, capped at 20 participants. Our project consultants, two recent Alabama superintendents, recommended targeting superintendents in their second or third year for maximum effect since newer superintendents are especially open to new ideas but are not so new that they are overwhelmed by their first year in the role. A Professional Learning Unit (PLU) called 'Alabama Superintendents' Academy, Leaders Creating a Community of Character' is to be awarded to those completing all training. We know that leaders appreciate real experience and especially like to hear from others leading character education in schools, but this is difficult to achieve for superintendents as an often-neglected level of leadership for character education. Nevertheless, Marvin Berkowitz works with all levels of educational leaders and identified a currently practicing superintendent with expertise in character education to talk to Alabama superintendents. Members of the LFC team also attended the SSA summer conference to promote character education, distribute copies of our CE framework, and to network and recruit SA members.

Character Education Framework

Inspired by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues and in collaboration with a project consultant – Professor Randall Curren at the University of Rochester – we created a framework for character education in Alabama schools (Curren et al., 2021). This is a lengthy document intended to be read in multiple sittings by leaders in Alabama, comprising four parts:

- An overview of the regulatory context for comprehensive character education in the State of Alabama.

- A Virtue Framework for Alabama Schools.

- Nurturing Character Development – this describes a coordinated whole-school approach and identifying key elements in comprehensive character education.

- Leadership in Character Education – this addresses the role of leadership in comprehensive character education.

We also wrote a companion guide to the framework to focus leader's attention by asking questions of them for each requirement. This has four key features: defining key terms; asking yourself the right kinds of questions; assessing your progress and building on what you learn along the way.

V.   <u>Reflections</u>

The LFC team is humbled by the professionalism and dedication of the superintendents – aspiring and actual – that we have encountered. Even in a pandemic when professional worlds are in turmoil, many superintendents found time to engage with the LFC project in multiple ways. This final section describes key realizations about our work at district level as we reflect on the LFC project at this early juncture.

Overall, we found virtue ethics-based character education to have easy appeal for aspiring and actual superintendents in Alabama for its apparent connection to cultural norms, especially a familiarity with virtue that could be somewhat influenced by religion, notwithstanding formal separations between religion and education. However, the complexity of virtue ethics and its application has been challenging for the leaders and our team. In response, efforts to put virtue ethics to work in Alabama requires much work selecting appropriate training resources and readings so as not to overload leaders wanting quickly digestible information. The concept of practical wisdom helped here.

In the course of the project we also learned that prioritizing character education can be as simple as finding ways to keep it on the agenda for leaders since at district level there are so many counter forces, especially responding to dilemmas in multiple domains as described in the focus groups. The superintendent needs to live as a person of high moral character. Actions and behaviors are scrutinized, and modeling is important. The more the superintendent emphasizes character, the greater the superintendent's behavior is scrutinized. Helping leaders to use simple reminders and tangible plans of action for prioritizing character is necessary if our work is to be impactful.

There has been much benefit in connecting character education and practical wisdom development to superintendents own moral purpose and higher ideals. We also tried to show that character education is not a single program.

We are learning to see superintendents as networked players in district leadership teams as well as individual leaders of character. Another crucial network involves the superintendent's peers. After all, the unique superintendent role suggests that only other superintendents can be truly helpful for a superintendent during challenging circumstances. In future work, the LFC team intends to facilitate small networks of superintendents prioritizing character and its education, and to consider including other key district staff for this, as well as for the project in general. For example, management processes supporting character as a priority could be the responsibility of other district leaders working with the superintendent. In Alabama, supporting district level leaders often have positions of continuity unlike superintendents whose tenure can be short.

Relating to the previous point, transforming to a school system of character is time consuming and may well take years to achieve. With the average tenure of a superintendent at 3 or 4 years, a superintendent may not complete the work but can plant "seeds" that with enough structure and nourishment will continue to grow.

There can be no simple template or roadmap for superintendents wanting to establish a school system of character. Each system needs to find what works for them and what meets their needs. Without a template or roadmap, superintendents can feel they do not have the time, energy, knowledge, or focus to establish communities of character. We believe our character education framework and accompanying guide offers theoretical and practical resources that are sufficiently flexible for this challenging context. Of course, classic guides for character education have been valuable too such as 'Smart & Good High Schools' by Lickona and Davidson (2006) and 'Building Character in Schools' by Bohlin, Farmer and Ryan (2001).

More than anything else, real experience in context is valued by the leaders who often have a healthy skepticism for theoretical resources. Similarly, it is easy in universities to become detached from educational realities. Consequently, the LFC team puts a premium on locating superintendents doing this work for advice and guidance. For example, we are engaging as consultants recently retired and respected Alabama superintendents who continue to work in the field, including direct instruction for leaders, giving our team honest and relevant feedback.

Engagement with real experience also includes K-12 expertise of our team members (a former superintendent, two former central office administrators, a former assistant principal, and three former teachers).

Concluding remarks

Our efforts on this project so far have confirmed that putting virtue ethics character education to work on a large scale across the state must begin with school superintendents due to the infinite possibilities of their influence. Our efforts on the project also confirmed that relating theory to practice is imprecise.

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