



Austrian secondary school teachers' views on character education: initial qualitative insights from a mixed methods study

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 11th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 5th – Saturday 7th January 2023.

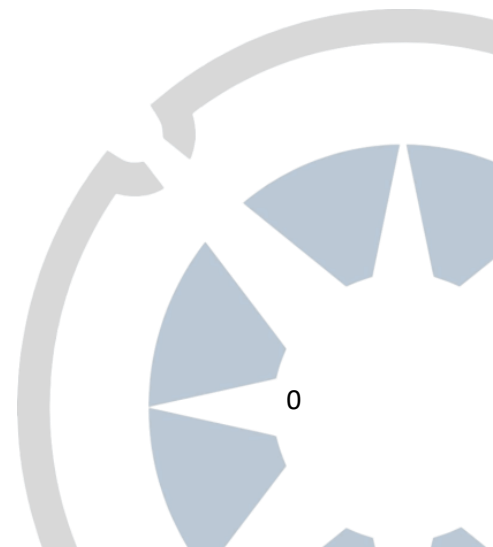
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Kropfreiter, Evelyn/Bernhard, Roland: Austrian secondary school teachers' views on character education: initial qualitative insights from a mixed methods study

Abstract

Recent years have seen heightened interest in school-based whole child development in the Austrian education system. In this context, our paper will provide some insights into the results of a qualitative interview study that examined teachers' beliefs about character education as part of a mixed-methods doctoral project conducted at the University of Salzburg. The interviewees were teachers in Austrian schools. Most of them regard character education as an important aspect of schools' remit. Alongside general consensus among the interviewees on the significance of families to young people's character development, we noted a belief expressed by many participants that schools as institutions have an equally important role to play in this regard. In light of this awareness around the centrality of character development, it is a notable finding that most interviewees feel that neither their initial teacher education nor their continuous professional development have prepared them adequately for the challenge of character education.

Keywords: character education, teachers' beliefs, mixed methods, whole child development

Introduction

In German-speaking regions, technological, political and social change has initiated an ongoing rise in the significance of schools as institutions of children's socialisation (Budde & Weuster, 2018b; Eder & Hofmann, 2012; Siebertz-Reckzeh & Hofmann, 2017). Nevertheless, schools continue to come in for criticism of their alleged one-sided emphasis on teaching subject knowledge (Astleitner, 2009, 2015; Hofer, 2014; Rodenstock & Sevsay-Tegethoff, 2018). Character education, as part of a whole child development approach, appears to play a minor role in German-speaking educational settings, in both theory and practice, and education research in these regions has likewise paid little attention to the issue to date. Internationally, by contrast, character education is becoming increasingly prominent in school settings and in research alike (Berkowitz, Lickona, Nast, Schaeffer, & Bohlin, 2020; Budde & Weuster, 2018a; Lickona, 1993). Various of scholars have described a renaissance of character education (Arthur, 2020; Arthur, Kristjánsson, Harrison, Sanderse, & Wright, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2015; Lickona, 1993; A. Peterson & Arthur, 2020), with neo-Aristotelian approaches that centre the active acquisition of character strengths or virtues acquiring increasing predominance in both the practices of schools and academic discourse in this area (Arthur et al., 2017; Arthur, Kristjánsson, Walker, Sanderse, & Jones, 2015; Berkowitz et al., 2020; Cooke & Carr, 2014; Kristjánsson, 2013, 2015; C. Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Schuhmacher, 2012). Arthur and colleagues (2017, p. 20) have defined neo-Aristotelian character education as a form of values education, or, more specifically, moral education, that seeks to cultivate positive personal strengths, termed 'virtues', with the ultimate aim of individual and societal flourishing (Jubilee Centre, 2017, 2022b). The approach proceeds from the assumption that such personal strengths are constituent elements of an individual's character and that education can modify them and evaluate them in moral terms (Arthur et al., 2017; Pike, Hart, Paul, Lickona, &

Clarke, 2021). We may read the interest in virtue ethics that is a concomitant of this development as a critique of and corrective to Kantian ethics and utilitarianism and the theories of moral education derived from them, particularly the work of Lawrence Kohlberg (Arthur et al., 2015; Lapsley & Carlo, 2014; Lickona, 1993).

Points of criticism directed at the research on pupils' personal development in Austria have included a lack of empirical and theoretical foundations and a failure to operationalise nonspecific educational objectives (Astleitner, 2015; Eder & Hofmann, 2012; Grob & Merki, 2001; Grob, Merki, & Büeler, 2003; Hofer, 2014). Further, the field has, to date, produced very little work around the views on this issue held by those charged with managing and delivering education on the ground – teachers and headteachers, the key actors in schools. Thus far, the Austrian research landscape is missing an extensive empirical study on teachers' ideas, views and beliefs around character education and their approaches to it.

We are presenting this paper in light of this return' of character education to the educational scene (Lickona, 1993) and the concomitantly increasing theoretical and empirical interest in how schools handle the topic, of which the Jubilee Centre has been a key inspiration. We will outline details of a mixed methods project currently in progress in Austria with the aim of ascertaining the beliefs on character education held by Austrian teachers at lower secondary level and their practices in this regard. Drawing on interviews conducted as part of the project, this paper, in describing initial qualitative insights into Austrian teachers' perspectives, seeks to add to the theoretical discourse on character education and provide preliminary qualitative empirical data as potential input into its practical implementation in schools.

Theoretical background to the study

Empirical evidence suggests that promoting positive character traits and social attitudes in the classroom boosts academic achievement (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2006; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, Kelly, & Carver, 2007; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Jeynes, 2019; Levi, Einav, Ziv, Raskind, & Margalit, 2014). Jeynes' meta-study (2019) stands out in this context. Its review of 52 studies into the impact of character education programmes on student academic achievement uncovered positive associations between the overt delivery of character education in schools and an improved grade point average in standardised and nonstandardised tests. Positive associations with attainment were strongest in reading and mathematics. Jeynes found these effects to be independent of students' ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Jeynes, 2019). Accordingly, Benninga and colleagues (2006) call for the establishment of educational schemes around developing positive character traits alongside the implementation of high academic expectations in schools (Benninga et al., 2006, p. 452).

Research additionally indicates that many teachers would like to incorporate more character education approaches into their classroom teaching, but do not put this interest into practice. Two key reasons for this are apparent. First, education policy in many countries emphasises exams and standardised testing, leaving teachers with the subjective impression that there is no time for teaching character. In this context, schools are frequently unaware of the correlation between structured character education and improved attainment in standardised test scores, as identified in the studies by Jeynes (2019) and Benninga and colleagues (2003) referenced above, and additionally by Wagner and Ruch (2015) and Weber and Ruch (2012). Second, findings in this area report that in many instances, teacher education does not address the issue of students' character education to a sufficient degree, with the result that teachers do not feel adequately prepared for incorporating character education into their classes (Arthur et al., 2015; Jeynes, 2019; Jones, Ryan, & Bohlin, 1999)

Let us now widen the picture and explore what lies at the roots of the model of character education that is at the centre of this paper: an approach to ethics known as virtue ethics, that encompasses emotions and motivations alongside morality's cognitive side. Accordingly, virtue ethicists claim to offer a particularly comprehensive approach to education and a notably realistic picture of moral life because they consider affective and behavioural aspects of moral education in addition to the cognitive (Arthur et al., 2015; Carr, 2006; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2005; Sanderse, 2016; Willems, Denessen, Hermans, & Vermeer, 2012). Although this approach has attracted controversy (Allen & Bull, 2018; Jerome & Kisby, 2019), it does seem to provide a framework for character education in schools that attempt to promote 'human flourishing' (Arthur et al., 2017; Kristjánsson, 2015, 2019) and to nurture the 'whole child' (Arthur et al., 2015; Noddings, 2005; Sanderse, Walker, David, Ian, & Jones, 2015). It broadly defines the aim of school-based education as enabling children to achieve a successful and happy life, in both personal and professional terms (Arthur et al., 2015; Arthur et al., 2017; Berkowitz et al., 2020; Kristjánsson, 2019; Lickona, 1993). It seeks to achieve this objective in line with Aristotle's centuries-old dictum, now substantiated by empirical research (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; C. Peterson & Park, 2009; Wagner & Ruch, 2015), that virtues and character strengths are integral to attaining and leading a happy life.

Virtues are as numerous as the human experience is rich and diverse, so there is no exhaustive list of virtues that may be relevant in the context of school-based character education. Those typically promoted as part of comprehensive character education in school settings are often divided into three (Seider, 2012) or four categories (Arthur et al., 2017; Baehr, 2013, 2017; Jubilee Centre, 2022a; Shields, 2011), that collectively define the 'building blocks of good character' (Jubilee Centre, 2017, 2022b) and have found repeated use in various empirical studies that have sought to identify the different types of virtues (Harrison, Dineen, & Moller, 2022; Sanderse & Cooke, 2021). In this paper, we have chosen to use the Jubilee Centre's classification of virtues in four categories, moral, civic, intellectual and performance virtues (Jubilee Centre, 2017, 2022b).

Moral virtues (Lickona, 1993) include prototypical virtues recognised in all cultures and religions, such as courage, justice (fair and just behaviour), honesty, compassion, gratitude, humility, integrity and respect (Jubilee Centre 2022a, p. 8). Civic virtues are specifically societal in character, and include service, social engagement and citizenship (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). The category of intellectual virtues (Baehr, 2013) encompasses character strengths such as curiosity and critical thinking (Jubilee Centre, 2022b, p. 8). Fourth, specific character traits known as performance virtues and frequently referred to in other discourses as 'soft skills' include, for example, resilience, teamwork, self-confidence and determination (Jubilee Centre, 2022b, p. 8). Following the Aristotelian doctrine of virtue, this approach to virtues places particular emphasis on the role of practical wisdom, or, using the Greek term, *phronesis*. The virtue of practical wisdom guides every other virtue and therefore acts as a meta-virtue that helps decide which virtue takes precedence when several virtues are in conflict with one another (ibid., p. 8; see Kristjánsson, 2015; Kristjánsson, Fowers, Darnell, & Pollard, 2021, for a more thorough exploration of the concept of *phronesis* and approaches to defining and quantifying it).

How does all this fit into school settings, and specifically into teachers' day-to-day classroom practice? The study of teachers' beliefs has been an integral component of research on the teaching profession since the 1990s, in line with the insight that what teachers believe 'play[s] a significant role in the quality of [their] professional action' (Reusser & Pauli, 2014, p. 642). It appears to be a matter of general consensus that teachers' job-related beliefs serve to guide their actions (Messner & Reusser, 2000, p. 166); they play a major role in teachers' planning, design and perception of their instruction (Calderhead, 1996; Richardson, 1996). A model proposed by Baumert and Kunter (2006)

asserts that teachers' professional competence emerges from the interplay of professional knowledge, motivation, self-regulatory abilities, and beliefs/values. Reusser and Pauli (2014), noting the emphatic 'significance of profession-related beliefs to the orientation and quality of professional actions' – even from an empirical point of view (p. 655), – define such beliefs as ones that are affectively charged and include an evaluative component and, in the eyes of their holder, are true or valuable. These beliefs provide 'structure, support, security, and orientation' to teachers' professional thinking and actions (Reusser & Pauli, 2014, pp. 642–643).

Harrison and colleagues (2022) surveyed beliefs of parents (n = 376) and teachers (n = 137) on character education and found that both groups prioritised character over academic attainment and considered moral virtues, such as honesty, to be the most important type of virtues to teach about. A handful of studies in the US context has surveyed teachers' or student teachers' beliefs about various aspects of character education. These studies include work by Mathison (1999), Jones, Ryan & Bohlin (1999), and Beachum and colleagues (2013). Their findings suggest that student teachers and qualified teachers alike consider character education important (Beachum et al., 2013; Jones et al., 1999; Mathison, 1999), but hold a range of diverging views about what character education is and how it should be taught in schools (Mathison, 1999). The research also indicates that current teacher training programmes fail to adequately address various aspects of character education (Beachum et al., 2013; Jones et al., 1999). A study conducted in the UK by Revell and Arthur (2007) asked more than 1000 student teachers whether their training was preparing them for developing pupils' characters and values. The findings appear in line with those generated in the US context, with a large majority stating that their training did not include sufficient work on character and values, while noting that they considered teaching and learning in school to be a moral endeavour. The findings of an interview study by Sanderse and colleagues (2015), involving 102 teachers in 33 UK secondary schools, suggest that teachers support the idea of 'developing the whole child', but that the majority regard the current system of pupil assessment as an obstacle to its realisation. Arthur and colleagues (2015) have carried out one of the most extensive studies of character education ever undertaken, including over 10,000 students and 255 teachers in schools across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. The study's findings showed that, although teachers reported substantial interest in developing the child's character as a whole, only 33% of the interviewees had undergone specific training in moral or character education. This figure may go some way towards explaining the relatively low moral competence of adolescents participating in moral dilemma tests (Arthur et al., 2015, p. 5). Of a sample of teachers surveyed by the Jubilee Centre in 2018 (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2018), 98 % believed that schools should deliver character education. A high number considered that character education would have a positive impact on pupil attainment. The majority stated that they had not attended any training related to character education because no training was available. An interview study by Metcalfe and Moulin-Stožek (2021) examined the views of religious education teachers (n = 30) in the context of character education.

In Austria, empirical work has explored teachers' beliefs on various school-related topics (Bernhard, 2019, 2020, 2021; Erling, Foltz, & Wiener, 2021; Raggl, 2015), but, to our knowledge, no research to date has examined Austrian teachers' beliefs around aspects of school-based character education.

Research questions

The doctoral project of which this research is part addresses a broader variety of topics related to Austrian teachers' beliefs on character education. This paper addresses research questions from the qualitative part of the project, as follows:

1. What importance do teachers at lower secondary schools in Austria (teaching students aged 11 to 14) attribute to character education when asked about it in interviews?
2. Which character strengths do Austrian teachers consider particularly worthy of promoting at lower secondary level?
3. To what extent do teachers feel prepared to teach character education?

Research design and methods

Interviews within a mixed methods study

The wider project uses a mixed methods design. In so doing, it harnesses the benefits of combining qualitative and quantitative research in the social sciences, specifically the ability of mixed methods to incorporate the strengths of each methodological tradition and mitigate the weaknesses shown by each of them used alone (Bernhard, 2019; Bernhard, Bramann, & Kühberger, 2019; Creswell, 2003; Kelle, 2017; Kelle, Kühberger, & Bernhard, 2019; Kuckartz, 2014; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). The part of the study we discuss in this paper used a sequential qualitative–quantitative design, which has the purpose of ‘develop[ing] theoretical concepts, hypotheses or measurement instruments in a qualitative study, which are [then] further elaborated and tested in a quantitative study’ (Kelle, Kühberger, & Bernhard, 2019, p. 14). The investigation began with an interview study; this will inform a quantitative questionnaire which we will administer at a later stage of the project. The results of the qualitative study and those of the quantitative study will have equal weight in terms of answering the research questions. In our view, this approach will enable us to explore teachers’ beliefs about character education comprehensively, combining research traditions to achieve both breadth (quantitative study) and depth (qualitative study) (Bernhard, 2019, p. 65).

The qualitative study: its context and sample

We conducted expert interviews with 25 teachers working in schools in Vienna and Lower Austria (Bogner, 2014; Gläser & Laudel, 2009). To ensure our study represented a broad spectrum of settings and views, we recruited interviewees from 16 schools. Thirteen participants teach in middle schools (*Mittelschulen*, catering for students aged approximately 10 to 14, without being selective), and twelve teach at moderately selective secondary schools (*Gymnasien*). Among the teachers interviewed were two headteachers; both of them were also actively engaged in teaching. The interviewees represent a broad array of different subjects; we sought to interview teachers of almost all compulsory subjects in the interest of gaining a diverse range of perspectives.

We recruited participants by sending information about the project to school headteachers. We followed up by telephone when we did not receive a response; in these calls, we asked headteachers to nominate any randomly selected teacher from their school who might be willing to be interviewed about their teaching philosophy, their aims in teaching and their experiences in schools. A criterion for inclusion was that participants had worked in schools for at least four years. We attempted to recruit balanced numbers of men and women into the sample. In line with the gender distribution of teachers in Austria, nine of the final interview participants were male and 16 were female.¹

¹ In the 2020/21 academic year, only 29.7 % percent of middle school teachers in Vienna were male; in Lower

Those teachers who were willing to take part in the research received information about the project by email and telephone (Gläser & Laudel, 2009, p. 118). Socio-demographic data are available for all respondents, enabling us to accurately reconstruct the age and teaching experience of the participants and the subjects they teach ([APPENDIX 1](#)). On average, the interviewees are 45 years old and have 17.4 years of professional experience in schools. All participants gave their informed consent to inclusion in the study. The University of Salzburg granted ethical clearance to the study in October 2021.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews are a method of qualitative data collection that researchers perceive as particularly useful in ascertaining people's beliefs and attitudes (Mayring, 2002; Misoch, 2019; Reinders, 2016). We created the interview guide for our expert interviews on the basis of the research questions and in line with the process set out by Kaiser (2014) and adapted it slightly after two pre-tests. The final version of the interview guide contains seven central questions ([APPENDIX 2](#)). Qualitative data collection took place in the autumn of 2021. In general, interviews lasted between 25 and 60 minutes (average time: 34 minutes, total audio: 850 minutes). Due to the Covid pandemic, all but one of the interviews took place online via Zoom, which allowed for flexibility as regarded time and place (Gnamb & Batinic, 2020; Misoch, 2019). Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed according to Dresing and Pehls (simple transcription system, 2012).

We adapted the interview guide to the specific situation in each interview, in accordance with the principle of flexibility (Lamnek & Krell, 2016, p. 331). The interviewer, also a teacher, positioned herself consciously as a co-expert and colleague, enabling interviewer and interviewee to draw on a shared stock of knowledge and creating a conversational situation that was as natural as possible given the interview setting.

Data analysis

We conducted content analysis according to Kuckartz (2018) on the interview data. After reading the fully transcribed interviews several times, we established a system of categories that we subsequently discussed with experts and colleagues and adapted a number of times. Categories were created both deductively, using the interview guide and the Jubilee Centre's character education framework as points of reference, and inductively (Kuckartz, 2018, p. 97). Coding took place using the MAXQDA software (VERBI Software 2022). The final system contains eight main categories and 27 subcategories. To increase the intersubjectivity of the analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2020, p. 287), we ran an intercoder reliability check on 20% of the data; for this, a doctoral student of education science coded seven randomly selected interviews (Döring & Bortz, 2016, p. 566). The corrected coefficient kappa (Brennan & Prediger, 1981) finally yielded a very good value ($k = 0.85$). The following results are preliminary in nature and will be extended in further analyses of the data material. Final qualitative results will be published in journal articles.

Austria, the proportion of male teachers was 22.5 %. The number of male teachers in *Gymnasien* and *Mittelschulen* in Vienna and Lower Austria is also significantly lower than that of female teachers (Statistics Austria, 2021 (<https://www.statistik.at/statistiken/bevoelkerung-und-soziales/bildung/lehrpersonen>)).

Results

Teachers regard character education as an important aspect of education in schools

Although many of the interviewees consider the principal responsibility for young people's character education to lie with their families, they also attributed an important role in character education to schools. According to most interviewees (n = 20), everyone working in a school should take equal responsibility for instilling particular attitudes and values in pupils.

[...]. Every teacher is responsible for character education. Yes. I definitely believe that.
(M_L3_N, pos. 41)²

In general, interviewees consider character education to be as important as or even more important than the teaching of subject knowledge – a view reflected in the findings of Harrison

and colleagues (2022), who noted that, in interviews, teachers and parents alike prioritised character education over academic attainment. One of our interviewees observed:

[...] So communicating knowledge is one thing [...] This communicating of knowledge has been going on for centuries to millennia. But in this case, it is becoming increasingly important that this character development also happens in schools, that certain children are exposed to certain values. (M_L2_N, pos. 13)

Many interviewees consider themselves to be moral role models for their students. They place emphasis on schools holding shared values that staff acknowledge and that all those working in the school live by:

All those who work in a school, including all teachers, need to actually exemplify what is important to them, that is, this valuing and appreciation of one another and [this] recognition that there is a system of values that the school articulates and sets out accordingly. This doesn't mean lecturing people, but simply adopting this attitude yourself.
(G_L4_W, pos. 23)³

One participant highlighted the link between academic attainment and input into character development and expressed the belief that students can only achieve well academically if they also receive support on an emotional level and in their social learning (G_L8_N, pos. 13).

Teachers note that a significant proportion of character education takes place ad hoc and within subject teaching. Some participants consider it imperative for the teaching of character strengths, values and social interaction to occur primarily within subject lessons:

So, my personal opinion is, I can offer as many supplementary activities for character development as I want, if it doesn't happen in mandatory subjects, it goes nowhere. [...] I think that teachers should be encouraged to place more emphasis on [character education] in the subjects they teach and not so much on the content and on subject knowledge and additional activities. (M_L8, pos. 25)

² M = *Mittelschule*, G = *Gymnasium*, L3 = teacher 3, N = Lower Austria

³ W = Wien (Vienna)

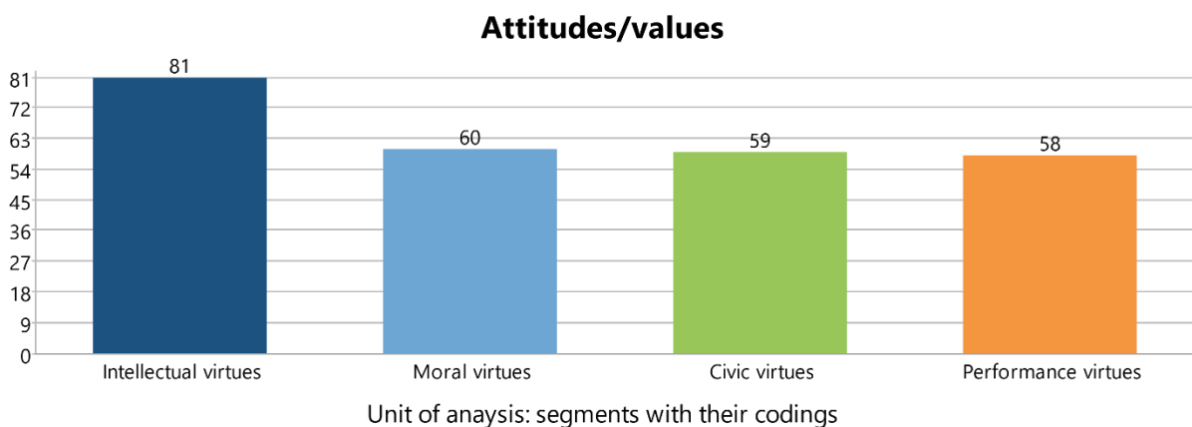
Others, by contrast, stress the importance of additional classes that are separate from subject lessons, such as personal and social education or lessons with the class teacher that devote extra time to character development topics. Fourteen of the interviewees make mention of conversations between teacher and student and among the students themselves as vital to facilitating the teaching of values and to delivering personal and social education. A

headteacher from Vienna, asked if he placed value on supporting his students’ character development, replied:

Yes, I think so, by talking about it with the young people as well, yes. That you reflect back to them how they’re perceived, exchanging our perceptions of each other, so to speak, in one-t-one conversations, or in class as well, by all means (G_L4_W, pos. 34). Further activities conducive, in teachers’ view, to supporting young people’s character development outside of regular lessons include optional or extracurricular classes and activities, and the allocation of tasks and roles in the life of the school, such as head girl/boy, representatives for environmental issues, class reps on the school council, and so on. Schools seek to strengthen their sense of community via activities above and beyond subject lessons; alongside designated classes such as personal and social education, some schools run special team-building sessions. Schools also report finding positive value in extracurricular activities such as sport and drama, trips, and other extramural events.

Teachers’ views on key virtues within character education

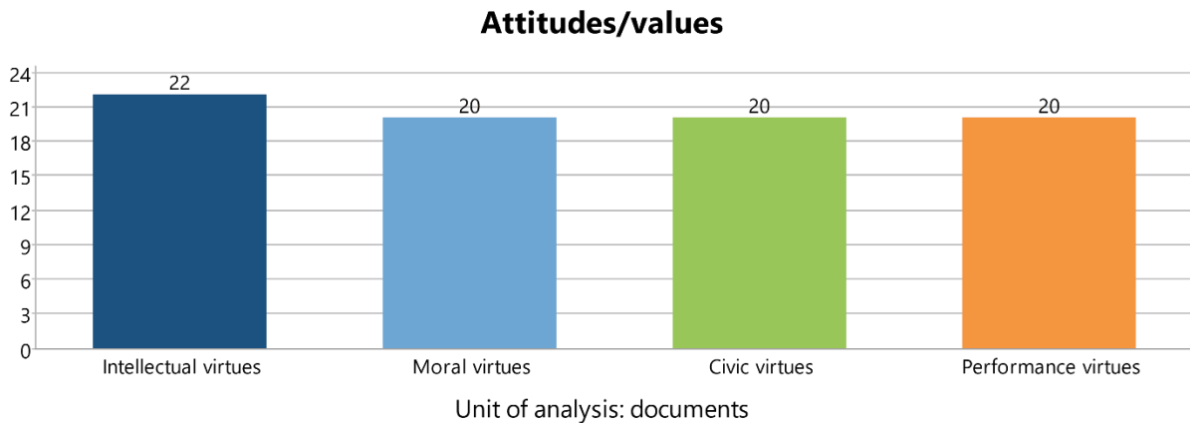
We asked interviewees to identify the character strengths, values and/or skills on which they believed schools should place particular emphasis. Most participants gave examples of character strengths they would like to cultivate in their students. They rarely used the term ‘virtue’ (*Tugend*) in the interviews; the word is not well-established in current Germanlanguage discourse around schools and has somewhat anachronistic connotations. Instead, interviewees spoke of character strengths/traits, attitudes, and values. We coded all these traits and subsequently assigned each to one of the four overarching categories of character education outlined above (Jubilee Centre, 2017, 2022b): intellectual virtues, moral virtues, civic virtues and performance virtues. The most frequently coded terms were in the category of ‘intellectual virtues’ (81); followed by ‘moral virtues’ (60), ‘civic virtues’ (59) and ‘performance virtues’ (58) were approximately equal.



The chart shows how often coding to each of these overarching categories took place across all interviews.

Among the intellectual virtues, the category of critical thinking and forming judgements was coded most often (25 times), followed by 'openness to new things/curiosity' (15 times). Of the moral virtues, the most frequently coded traits were tolerance (23 times) and respect (14 times). A sense of community stands out among the civic virtues in terms of frequency of mentions (22 times). The performance virtue referenced most often (14 times) was selfawareness/self-confidence.

The chart below shows how many interviewees in total referred to each of these overarching categories.



Notably, respondents frequently appeared to make a spontaneous association between the key term 'character education' and the 'intellectual virtues', especially the category of critical thinking and the ability to arrive at a well-founded opinion. One teacher, asked what she associated with character education, stated:

Working with the parents to turn a ten-year-old who wouldn't say boo to a goose into a self-confident, critically thinking young person. (M_L5_N, pos. 33)

Teachers' views on obstacles to realising character education in schools

The interviewees raised various factors they considered as presenting challenges to the teaching of character in the school context. The most frequently coded factor in this regard was 'official requirements' (18 times). Respondents noted that there is not enough time to teach character alongside the topics whose coverage the curriculum requires. Three interviewees pointed particularly, and highly critically, to the standardisation and the introduction of competency-based educational discourses currently in progress in the Austrian school system (see also Bernhard, 2020, 2021 on this topic). They felt that this development places too much emphasis on performance and detracts from the notion of learning as valuable in and of itself (*Bildung*), degrading it to an instrument for the attainment of good test scores. In the view of a teacher at a secondary school in Lower Austria,

What is important to me, what I haven't mentioned yet, and what isn't actually such a problem in our middle school, is this standardisation that is taking place now. I don't agree with it, and I think it's very much the wrong direction to take in terms of personality development. So, you can, it's so extremely focused on academic performance. (M_L1_N, pos. 39)

A teacher from a middle school in Lower Austria asserted that the discourse around skills reduces the true value of education to a matter of utility:

[...] competencies make a useful person. But I don't want a useful person, I want an educated person. An educated person is a critical, independent thinker. (G_L11_N, pos. 15)

Alongside these concerns, interviewees describe a very high administrative burden in Austrian schools. Teachers experience the many official requirements with which schools must comply as a hindrance to their autonomy (see Bernhard, et al. 2022 for the views of headteachers in relation to this issue); this situation leaves teachers struggling to incorporate character education into their teaching.

Austrian teachers do not feel prepared to deliver character education

Notwithstanding the evidence discussed above that teachers consider character education a core part of schools' remit, the vast majority (22) of our interviewees do not feel that their initial teacher education or the continuous professional development in which they engage have prepared them for teaching character education:

I don't think that we teachers are sufficiently trained in terms of character education. (G_L2_W, pos. 43)

Only three teachers among our sample affirmed that their training had prepared them to support young people in their character development. Training courses cited as helpful (by one teacher each) related to supporting gifted and talented students, career orientation, preventing addiction and violence, and individual learning support. Two interviewees had engaged in coaching programmes and found them useful in this regard.

Discussion

This paper has outlined initial findings from the qualitative strand of a mixed methods study on character education in Austria. The results presented here are preliminary; we plan to conduct further analysis of the data, which will add to these findings. In the autumn of 2021, we interviewed twenty-five teachers at schools in Vienna and Lower Austria about their beliefs around character education. Although character education does not have a prominent place in the Austrian school system and very few schools run structured programmes in this area, most interviewees consider aspects of character education to be among their core responsibilities. Many of our interviewees professed their belief that schools can and should work alongside parents and carers to contribute to young people's character development. Our preliminary findings thus appear to confirm those of previous studies conducted by the Jubilee Centre (2018), Harrison and colleagues (2022) and Mathison (1999), among others.

Our participants considered that subject teaching and various extracurricular activities have a role to play in implicit and overt character education. These findings are of interest in the light of a report by Arthur and colleagues (2022) which details a range of effective approaches to and activities for character education in the school setting (Arthur, J., Fullard, M., O'Leary, C., 2022). Several of these, including drama workshops, classroom discussions and community outreach, also found mention in our interviews as conducive to character development. Our findings indicate that the interviewed teachers attach particular significance to virtues such as critical thinking and openness to new things/curiosity, both of which the Jubilee Centre framework categorises as among the intellectual virtues. Traits such as tolerance and respect, considered as moral virtues, also received emphasis. In

line with the findings of Harrison and colleagues (2022), interviewees would prioritise character education over academic attainment.

The value thus placed on character education by our interviewees contrasts concerningly with the lack of preparation they feel they have had when it comes to delivering it in the classroom. Almost all of our interviewees stated that neither their initial teacher education nor their continuous professional development had equipped them with the knowledge and skills they felt necessary for providing character education in their school (there are similar findings in Arthur et al., 2015; Jeynes, 2019; Jones et al., 1999; Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2018). Teachers also took the view that the general conditions within which education takes place in Austria today, alongside and including the official requirements which teachers and schools face, are unhelpful to those educators who would like to implement structured schoolbased character education programmes. Schools in Austria generally have limited autonomy in curriculum design due to the fact that curricula are the preserve of the state. Some interviewees cited what they perceived as an increasing emphasis on standardised testing as a factor deleterious to a whole child learning approach. Prior research published by Sanderse et al. (2015), Jones et al. (1999) and Arthur et al. (2015) has described similar findings.

The results of our study confirm those of other work in the area of character education from various countries. They are consistent with studies that surveyed qualified or student teachers' perspectives on the importance of character education in schools, whose results indicate that teachers see character education as a core responsibility of their profession (Arthur et al., 2015; Beachum et al., 2013; Jones et al., 1999; Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2018; Mathison, 1999). Findings that mirror our observations on teachers' sense of being ill-prepared for delivering character education have been reported by Mathison (1999) for the US and by Arthur et al. (2015) and the Jubilee Centre (2018) for the British context.

We close our paper by suggesting that these initial insights into Austrian teachers' views on character education allow us to form the hypothesis that teachers in Austria would like to teach character education, but that structural conditions and insufficient training frequently prevent them from doing so as they would wish to.

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