
Statement on Embedding Civic Character in Schools

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Introduction

This *Statement* has three aims. The first aim is to illuminate the important role that schools play in the civic lives of their communities and in providing experiences of communities (including those of the classroom and the school itself) for pupils. The second aim is to identify how civic character can be embedded in schools with the goal of educating pupils to be active, informed and morally responsible citizens who are helped to understand and be able to contribute to the good of their communities. There are fundamental social and moral responsibilities that lie at the heart of education for citizenship (see Peterson and Civil, 2022). Indeed, ‘moral values and personal development are essential preconditions of citizenship’ (QCA, 1998: 11). It is equally important to recognise the diverse viewpoints about morality and citizenship in democratic life today. In doing so, the third aim of this *Statement* is to stimulate further dialogue about the civic role of schools, as well as about the importance and nature of civic character for healthy and flourishing democratic life. This *Statement*, developed in consultation with school and community-based leaders, builds on and is informed by the extensive research conducted by the *Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues* since its inception in 2012, including the recent *Civic Virtues Through Service to Others* study.

The significance placed within this *Statement* on the adjective ‘civic’ is important (Jubilee Centre, 2019). Civic denotes the expansive scope of virtues and character education, the importance of political and community identities, and the social connectedness of humans to their wider, plural communities.

Furthermore, civic is a positive descriptor that includes citizenship and ideas about the good citizen. It also speaks to the communal and community ties through which civic life is engaged and through which concepts such as democracy, representation, freedom, equality and power are manifested, experienced and contested.

The importance of civic character in schools

All schools cultivate character, and, when appropriately focused, do so in ways that support the development of pupils as active, informed and morally responsible citizens. Important questions about this work of schools include whether educating civic character is intentional, whether it is planned and what form such education takes. Intentionality, planning and clarity regarding form and purpose are essential foundations for embedding civic character in schools.

Central to understanding civic character is to comprehend those civic virtues that enable citizens to engage and participate in the civic lives of their communities, both within and beyond the school gates. Understood broadly, **civic virtues are positive and stable character traits that enable citizens to participate in the public life of their communities, whether locally, nationally or globally.** In a plural democracy, civic virtues help citizens to understand themselves, understand and get along with others and enable effective participation in the various institutions and organisations of political and civil society that comprise the public domain and which exist beyond immediate familial and peer relationships.

Social and political associations are needed if humans are to form and express virtue and, ultimately, are to flourish given that the good life is realised at least in part through our attachments to others.

The formation and expression of civic virtues are vital for individual and societal flourishing, particularly because they enable citizens to come together through their relationships with others to contribute to the common good and to discuss common interests. In addition, civic virtues influence how citizens encounter and engage with core political concepts and processes, including democracy, as well as legitimacy, authority, representation, equality and power. Important civic virtues include, but are not limited to, **civility**, **service to others**, **volunteering**, **community awareness** and **neighbourliness**. These civic virtues are only truly possible in communities characterised by trust, care and equity and in which citizens have critical and reflective agency over their lives.

Civic virtues are not all that civic character requires. Civic character is a wider term that recognises that other categories of virtues – most importantly moral and intellectual virtues – are important for being a good citizen. While at times they are cast as separate fields, the philosophical, conceptual and educational links between character and citizenship are both possible and necessary, particularly if the agency and potential of pupils as active and positive members of their communities are to be recognised and promoted (Crick, 2000). In addition, pupils (just as with all citizens) require important knowledge, understanding and skills if their democratic participation is to be informed and effective, and if they are to understand themselves and society. Intimately linked to this concern is the necessity that pupils have access to extensive and sustained opportunities to form, express and enact their civic character through experiential activities. Understood in this way, civic character is concerned with, and involves discussion about: (1) *the relationship between the moral, civic and intellectual virtues necessary for good citizenship*; (2) *the connections between the individual and the community*; (3) *the importance of critical thought, reflection and action within social, cultural*

and political frameworks and traditions; and, (4) *the value of supporting pupils to understand contemporary society and to develop the knowledge, skills and virtues needed to contribute to their communities*. The outcome of developing civic character that addresses these four points is to strengthen social justice in diverse communities.

Embedding civic character in schools is, in the face of many contemporary discontents within and beyond democracies (including polarisation, fake news, authoritarianism and apathy), a significant undertaking. In this context, it is vital to emphasise that educating for civic character is not a remedial activity directed at 'fixing' pupils, much less 'fixing' certain groups of pupils. Rather, developing the character required for being a good citizen, like citizenship itself, should be viewed as a positive activity exercised together with others. This can recognise and further cultivate the essential ties and bonds between citizens, and allow discussion of ideas of the common good (Arthur, Kristjánsson and Vogler, 2021; Peterson, 2020). Indeed, and as Aristotle made clear, social and political associations are needed if humans are to form and express virtue and, ultimately, are to flourish given that the good life is realised at least in part through our attachments to others.

The opportunity and experiences needed to form and express civic character is an entitlement that all pupils deserve and need.

The virtues at the heart of civic character, and the knowledge, reasoning, emotions, relationships and experiences that sustain them, cannot be taken for granted. Nor can it be expected that the virtues necessary for civic character will develop without careful, intentional and systematic education in schools and other public institutions. For these reasons, the opportunity and experiences needed to form and express civic character are an entitlement that all pupils deserve and need. With this in mind, it is also important to recognise that not all pupils have equal access and opportunity to develop their civic characters – including discussing what forms such expression might take. Efforts to embed civic character in schools must work to involve and include all pupils in equitable and just ways given, not least, that civic character is essential for, and to, just, equitable and inclusive communities.

Embedding civic character

Embedding civic character in schools needs to be intentional, and is at its best when it combines clear language, action, criticality and reflection in the pursuit of autonomous, wise judgement. As with character education more generally, where it is prioritised by committed leadership, teachers and other staff, it can be cultivated as part of a school's ethics and culture (Jubilee Centre, 2019; Jubilee Centre 2022). Here, the 'caught, taught and sought' typology set out in *The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools* (Jubilee Centre, 2022) and *The Character Teaching Inventory* (Arthur, Fullard and O'Leary, 2022) offers a helpful and positive structure for identifying the various strategies and mechanisms through which schools can, and do, embed civic character. A caught, taught and sought approach to civic character enables schools to develop a cohesive and consistent approach throughout the school, including the development of the language and vocabulary necessary for pupils to understand and reflect critically on the virtues involved. Through a caught, taught and sought approach, all members of the school community (most importantly pupils) are able to 'join the dots' between the various elements of their education that contributes to the development and expression of civic character.

Core aspects of a caught, taught and sought approach to embedding civic character include:

- *Civic character caught*: civic virtues and other virtues necessary for civic character lie at the heart of the school's mission and vision, and these are articulated clearly in the daily life of the school as a community. A clear language of civic character is in place within the school, is actively used by and within the school community and provides the basis for critical reflection and dialogue about the meaning and purpose of civic virtues and civic character.

Relationships within the school are civil and democratic, and a strong sense of belonging to the school community, the local community and beyond is supported in pupils, staff and families.

- *Civic character taught*: the virtues that underpin the school's vision of, and for, good citizenship are taught explicitly within the formal curriculum. The key concepts that underpin civic character are identified and explored, and, in turn, are understood and practised through active and reflective pedagogies. Teaching civic character opens opportunities for pupils to engage in discussion about issues and matters that are relevant to their own lives as young citizens. Teaching and learning approaches are attentive to civic character and seek to promote dialogue, positive classroom climates and enquiry-based learning – all underpinned by the core knowledge, understanding and skills required for civic character to be informed and wise. Civic character depends on pupils learning about, through and for deliberative and dialogical engagement with their peers, their teachers, their families and others within and beyond their immediate communities.
- *Civic character sought*: a range of opportunities and experiences are provided for all pupils to engage in enrichment and other activities through which they can engage in community with others to engage in dialogue, learn about the interests and views of others, volunteer, serve others, influence change and address injustices. Through such activities and advocacy, pupils can develop a habit of working with and for others, and can learn through their demonstration of civic leadership to take responsibility for their own civic engagement and social action on matters of concern to themselves and their communities.

Character sought is particularly important. In terms of character education more generally, character sought 'involves the desire to discern and freely pursue one's own character development. It involves reflection and ultimately planning and setting your own character commitments – that is commitments to something worthwhile' (Arthur and Kristjánsson, 2022: 2). Transferred to the more specific focus on civic character, civic character sought entails that pupils are educated to have autonomy and good judgement (appropriate to their age) in choosing those activities and connections that chime with their own worthwhile character commitments, including those commitments chosen in community with others (Callan, 1997).

To be truly educational and democratic, this autonomy and good judgement, which involves and is developed through deliberation, will necessarily involve pupils in giving due thought and reflection to the sort of democracy in which they live and wish to live (Peterson, 2020).

Schools and communities

Adopting a caught, taught and sought approach to embedding civic character cannot be understood properly without paying due attention to the relationship between schools and communities. Schools have long stood and acted as formative institutions within, and for, their communities. A common way to understand schools is to identify them as, at the same time, being communities in and of themselves and being situated actively within the wider community. This way of conceiving schools as communities and as active participants within communities is instructive and raises important questions about how civic character is cultivated within and beyond the school. The findings of various research studies, including the Centre's recent *Schools, Civic Virtues and the Good Citizen* report, have examined and illustrated how schools act as 'hubs', actively contributing to the civic lives of their communities. It may well be the case, indeed, that there is an important reciprocal relationship between (1) *the school being a positive civic community itself*; (2) *the school playing an active role within and for its communities*; and (3) *the school providing a range of opportunities for pupils to engage within their communities*.

Of course, engaging with communities is not always easy and straightforward. Schools need to define and understand the communities that they are part of, as well as how they can ensure that their mission and ethos is inclusive of everyone in the school community itself. There are significant resource, logistical and practical constraints that inhibit what is possible for schools and, ultimately, what is experienced by pupils. In plural democracies today, it is vital that civic character, and the associated virtues, are not defined in fixed and inflexible terms. As such, the development of reflective and considered forms of civic character is a necessary prerequisite if pupils are to form their own commitments and views about what it means to be a good citizen and about what it means to live a good life, which will support them to enter meaningful and constructive dialogue on such matters with others who may hold different views.

Given the diversity and plurality of interests within contemporary democracies, school leaders and teachers may not feel comfortable or supported to engage pupils in what are often sensitive and, at times, controversial matters.

Specific and focused pre- and in-service teacher education and professional development is crucial in supporting teachers – who often stand as civic role models for their pupils – to understand and prepare for the educational work involved in embedding civic character. Indeed, schools, leaders and teachers need support if they are to embed civic character effectively and are to do so through equitable and sustainable relationships. Whether provided by government, community organisations or families, developing civic character is the responsibility of society as a whole, and all societal institutions must take the role seriously and be vigilant to the needs of, and the challenges faced by, schools. Only when all institutions come together in a collective effort will the civic role of schools, including the embedding of civic character, be fully realised. This role is not one that can be left to chance. To do so would compromise further the stability of democratic society and reduce the possibility that more just, healthy and flourishing communities might exist.

A caught, taught and sought approach to civic character enables schools to develop a cohesive and consistent approach throughout the school, including the development of the language and vocabulary necessary for pupils to understand and reflect critically on the virtues involved.

References and Further Reading

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