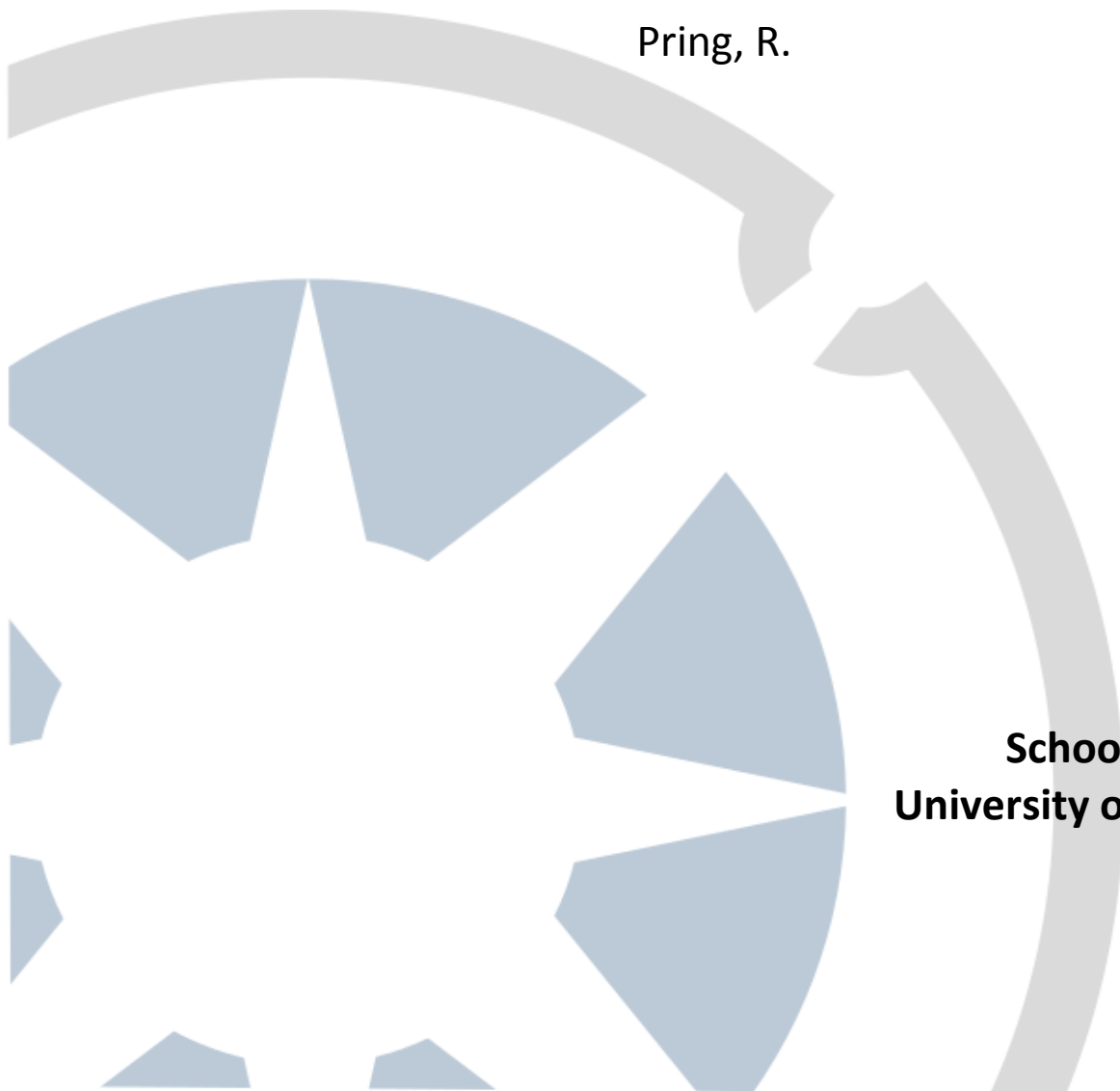Formation of Character: the partnership
between school and parents

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Formation of Character: the partnership between school and parents

Overview

This paper
- points to the need for the virtue of 'caring' in the development of character;
- argues that such a virtue needs to be nurtured and reinforced through the child's different relationships and social contexts;
- provides a practical example of 'caring' in action and the reciprocal reinforcement between school and parents in its development;
- proposes the kind of research which would show how that partnership between school and parents might be enhanced in promoting the virtue of caring.

'Caring' and the development of character

The philosopher John Macmurray was concerned with the 'depersonalisation' of people within modern society - for example (mine, not Macmurray's) the child at school being seen as a 'D Grade', and thereby seen as a risk to the school's position in the league table. This is reflected in the language of schools *hitting targets*, schools judged by *performance indicators*, learners and parents treated as *customers,* and teachers seen as *curriculum deliverers*. What we need to be reminded of, in the words of Macmurray, is the 'form of the personal'[1]. By that he meant the indispensable features of what it means to be and to grow as a person, as opposed to being just a physical object or a commodity used for interests other than those of the person concerned. Such features include the capacity to think and feel, the propensity to think of the life worth living, the quality of relations necessarily occurring with other persons, and the respect due to oneself and to others as persons – that is, as centres of consciousness, of feeling, of aspirations, and of moral deliberation.

To engage in such relationships with other persons *as persons* requires attentiveness to their concerns and to their capacity to understand and to appreciate. It requires, too, a respect for the feelings and thinking of others, even where those do not tally with one's own. It requires, in other words, what Nel Noddings refers to as a 'caring for others'.

> When I really care, I hear, see or feel what the other tries to convey[2].

That caring is a two-way relationship. On the one hand, there is the recognition by the 'carer' of the needs, wants, concerns of the other and sensitivity to how the 'other' (the 'cared for') wants such attention. On the other hand, there is the sensitivity of the 'cared for' to the readiness of the carer to pay attention and to respond. Such caring and its development entail mutual support and understanding – a 'caring community'.

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[1] Macmurray, J., 1961, *Persons in Relation,* London: Faber and Faber
[2] Noddings, N., 1992, *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, NY: Teachers College Press, p.16.

'Caring', as that has been briefly outlined, should be recognised as a virtue crucial to most, if not all, other virtues – for example, kindness, humility, modesty, loyalty – since they all involve some relation with persons, characterised in some degree by caring for them, recognising with concern their troubled state of mind, paying attention to their joys and sorrows, not allowing egoistical concerns to blind one to the needs of others. To an extent, their problems and achievements become one's own. But, as with all virtues, 'caring' is an acquired disposition, enhanced through practice and through the development of habits of attentiveness. It requires nurturing. Otherwise, there is a failure to recognise others (or some others) as 'persons', worthy of respect and sensitive to hurt and disappointment.

It is important, however, to analyse a little more the elements of that caring relationship – and thus the extent to which one might be considered more or less virtuous and in need of education.

First, the caring person needs to develop 'empathy' – the capacity to enter into the feelings and thoughts of the other person, to understand sympathetically how and why the other thinks and feels as he or she does. That other may well come from a very different background – religious, social, cultural – which requires an effort to appreciate, and openness to different points of view.

Second, the caring person needs to develop the language through which to understand and articulate emotions and feelings which underlie behaviour and relationships. How often the emotional outburst arises from the failure to be able to articulate one's feeling of anger or of frustration. Moreover, to be angry with someone assumes that he or she is *responsible* for doing something which is seen to be wrong. Moral appraisals are an indispensable part of our relationships with other persons in which elements of trust, honesty and concern seem to be necessary, and such moral appraisal needs to be learnt.

Third, a caring relationship involves the ability and readiness to communicate, and thus a 'common language' through which one is able to articulate one's feelings and emotions in a way in which the other is able to understand. The importance of this becomes clear when, below, that communication takes place between school and parents. Reinforcement of what is nurtured in schools requires a common language and common understanding

Fourth, such nurturing of the dispositions to act in a caring and sensitive manner require the context of a caring community – one which embodies, in its very organisation and modes of behaviour, the virtues it claims to believe in. Such a community (the family, the friendships, the school, the classroom, the professional environment) should be places which help the members to recognise the value of each other, which provide the safe environment where members can struggle to articulate their feelings and anxieties, and where promptings are given for each to help those in the community who are in need of attention and support. As Kohlberg found out, no amount of teaching young people to

reason in terms of justice would lead them to behave justly unless the virtue of justice shaped the relationships within a 'just community school'[3].

Developing the virtue of caring.

That coming to see others as persons with ideas, feelings and aspirations different from one's own (that is, as 'ends in themselves', not as objects to suit one's own projects or as mere means to some other end) is only gradually acquired. And indeed it may be acquired only partially where, for example, racism or egocentrism or social class bias might implicitly deny to others the personhood which is attributable to one's closest friends. The caring relationship might remain exceedingly limited.

Development lies in the gradual transformation of the self-centredness of infancy and early childhood – the restructurings of the modes of thinking or functioning at previous stages. This process of development can be either ended or thwarted at any stage (we talk of 'stunted growth') or, on the contrary, helped and enhanced through planned. Much of that early development arises from interactions with immediate family. But formal *education* (as opposed to mere training) would seek to enhance those attributes – that is: to extend and deepen the different forms of thinking through which we have come to understand the interpersonal world we inhabit; to shift from an egocentric way of understanding the intentions and motives of others; to come to see others as valuable ends in themselves rather than as means to serve one's own ends; and to come to realise how oneself and others have responsibility for one's actions and preferred way of life.

This 'transformation' of existing states of awareness and motivation has been well covered by developmental psychologists and indeed philosophers. Piaget describes the transition from 'ego-centrism' to 'altruism', whereby one recognises that the motives and understandings of another may be different from one's own, a capacity which can be more or less strong. Or, even if the capacity is there, there may be lacking the tendency to exercise it in certain situations. Communication breaks down, even between teacher and pupil, through failure to grasp the fact that others may not see things as one does oneself.[4] Robert Selman charted the growing ability to appreciate the perspective of another – the coming to recognise that other people might see things differently, the gradual shift towards the recognition that others may feel differently even where there is no disagreement on the facts, the growing ability to examine the interpersonal differences more impartially (without coming to blows, physical or verbal), and finally the extension of such mutuality to wider groups in society. [5] See also Laurence Kohlberg's developmental account of the growth of moral reasoning[6]. Richard Peters briefly mapped out such qualitative change in relationships. In very early years ('pre-rational' and then 'ego-centric') the child might not recognise that others see things differently. People are

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[3] Wasserman, E.R., 1976, 'Implementing Kohlberg's "Just Community School" in an Alternative High School', *Educational Analysis,* 5(1).

[4] Piaget, J. 1926, *The Language and Thought of the Child,* London: RKP

[5] Selman, R., 1976, 'Social cognitive understanding: a guide to educational and clinical practice', in Lickona, T., *Moral Development and Behaviour,* NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston

[6] Kohlberg, L., 1971, 'Stages of moral development as a basis for education', in Beck, C. *et al, Moral Education Interdisciplinary Approaches,* University of Toronto Press.

appraised in self-referential terms. Later the child reaches the stage of 'realism' in which others are seen to have distinctive roles and points of view. Later still (the stage of 'autonomy') does one come to recognise the individuality of a person's point of view – what the other has worked out for himself, enabling one to relate to that person not instrumentally but as a unique individual[7].

Key, therefore, to this development of a person are:

- the growing capacity to see others (as well as oneself) as persons with minds, feelings and interests of their own;
- the tendency to relate to them as persons – ends in themselves, not as means to one's personal aspirations;
- entering into personal relationships which reflect that understanding and tendency;

At the same time, such development can get stuck; it needs the appropriate social ambiance and encouragement. For example, it requires the acquisition of the appropriate language and concepts. The following elements in these deliberations and social interactions might be summarised thus:

- exposure to possible conflict over real issues within the class or school community;
- trying to understand the source of conflict from the other's point of view;
- considering the rival points of view from the perspective of fairness, prompting a higher level of thinking (for example, from the appropriate principle of action);
- participation in the development of group rules which respect the needs of all, not the power of some.

Noddings[8] spells out the conditions for such social development: the *modelling* of caring by teachers and the school as a whole; the place of *dialogue* (the open-ended conversations in which each contribution, however disagreeable, is taken seriously); the *practice* of caring (such as taking care of a pupil who feels isolated or engaging in a project aimed at helping the less fortunate); and *confirmation* (that is, showing recognition of the person's contribution, often given with difficulty).

In all this, the pedagogical skills of the teacher are vital: namely:

- insights into possible areas of conflict within the group;
- refereeing interactions between differences;
- incorporating more principled modes of thinking into dialogue;
- providing a more extended vocabulary for expressing emotions and reasons;
- enabling the individual pupils to respect differences in points of view;

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[7] Peters, R., 1974, 'Personal understanding and personal relations', in Miscel, T., *Understanding Other Persons,* Oxford: Blackwells

[8] Noddings, *op.cit.*

- helping them to articulate these different points of view.

Example: Family Links

A primary school (one of many working with Family Links) has placed the nurturing of caring at the centre of its school's programme. The whole school embodies the values implied in caring for each other – pupil for pupil, teachers for the pupils and each other, the school for the parents of the pupils. It is crucial to create a caring community.

> A class of 10 year olds were gathered together for their weekly sharing of their problems and their reactions to them. The school was in one of the most disadvantaged districts of England. Of the class of 30, 11 were on the social services' 'at risk' register. The father of one boys had just been murdered on the nearby estate. Over the last couple of years they had learnt the rules for engaging in discussion (dialogue): only one person at a time (he or she who holds the ball); nothing hurtful of another in the group to be allowed; everyone to listen to what each says; no forced to speak, though everyone has the opportunity to do so. It was crucial to have developed a safe environment in which each could speak honestly about what he or she thought and felt. They were talking about events in their lives which they had found hurtful. Some were of bullying. One was of the anger of her stepfather who had confined her to her bedroom. Discussion was of how one felt, how to deal with one's feelings, how to manage the situation. The courage in engaging in such personal exposure and the caring reactions of the others were quite remarkable.

Family Links (FL) is a charity, working in over a hundred schools not only with pupils and their teachers, but also with their parents – hence, family *links*. Its goal is to promote personal development and character very much along the lines described above as a central educational aim, and fundamental to general achievement in school and beyond.

At the core of that personal development, as argued above, lie qualities of personal relations, self-esteem and emotional well-being. Such qualities can remain undeveloped, indeed stunted by the social conditions and relations in which young people live at home and in their wider social networks. That is why FL insists upon working with the wider school community as well as with parents. As Kohlberg argued, it is difficult to foster moral attitudes and principled thinking unless these are embodied in the very institutions in which they are being fostered.

FL, therefore, aims to 'nurture' the appropriate skills, attitudes and capacities. 'Nurture' is an important word since it contrasts with 'instructing' or mere 'training'. It presupposes the capacities are embryonically present. 'Development', as argued above, is more a *transformation* of a previous state of thinking or functioning than something to be transmitted.

That nurturing programme has the following features.

First, there is a need for a common language through which feelings can be spoken about, 'managed', and understood – what is referred to as 'emotional literacy'. Issues of justice and fairness are at the heart of so many disputes and soured relationships. As one evaluation study reported,

> the language had helped the whole school community to have a common way of discussing feelings and behaviour and children to reflect on their behaviour.[9]

Or again, according to the deputy head of a secondary school,

> We have learnt the vocabulary and model to hang our own approach and values on. It has given the community a common language to enter into dialogue with students, each other and parents. Changing culture starts with changing the language we use.

Second, the capacity to see things from the point of view of others and to respect that perspective even when disagreeing with it (that is, respecting others as persons with minds of their own) is crucial, requiring considerable pedagogic skills on the part of the teacher. FL has developed classroom strategies through which that interpersonal knowledge and respect are developed – the group settings in which feelings and matters of interpersonal concern are discussed, albeit within a context of anonymity. For example, matters of interpersonal concern, though without clues to identity, are submitted for discussion. There are 'rules of engagement' such as only one person speaking at the same time and no interruptions. As Ofsted reported

> through the well structured nurturing programme the children have developed a mature awareness of the feelings, values and beliefs of others.

The work with prisoners has been instructive. Those committed to prison are often victims of their own undeveloped capacity to relate to and to respect others of different persuasions. Furthermore, as parents, they may fail to respect differences in the family or to respond appropriately to difficulties encountered by their children. As one stated,

> The Family Links deal with my anger – when I get out, instead of throwing my weight around I'm going to listen to their point of view.

Given the fact that here are 160,000 children with a parent in prison, work with their parents (often disconnected emotionally from their offspring) is crucial.

Third, the ability to articulate one's point of view, to talk about feelings and to disagree with the contribution of others requires the development of self-confidence and self-esteem (in a place where one feels 'emotionally secure'). Crucial to the FL philosophy and programmes is the positive atmosphere, particularly the use of praise ('confirmation') not only by the teachers but also by the pupils with each other.

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[9]   Eaude Report

Fourth, though the programmes are developed for the classroom with curriculum time allocated, they require a school ethos which embodies the principle of fairness, positive respect for each person, finding opportunities for increasing self-respect, building good relationships, and openness to discussion of controversial matter which divide people.

Finally, such wider understanding, respect and empathy need to extend beyond the school community. That is why, uniquely, the school programmes are *linked* to parenting programmes[10]. There is little point is nurturing such capacities and interpersonal understanding and respect at school, if they are to be negated by the lack of understanding and respect at home - sometimes breaking the cycle of ineffective, neglectful or abusive parenting.

> The school referred to above has set aside a room where parents can call any time. There they can meet other parents over a coffee or a snack lunch. But formal parenting groups make the explicit links with what is undertaken in the school. The parents, too, learn how to *model* caring behaviour, engage in *dialogue* with their children, come to see the point of the specific *practices* of caring promoted by the school, and learn to *confirm* the different acts of caring which occur at home. Where violence is often the normal way of control, more positive approaches are learnt.

The philosophy and the skills which lie behind the parenting programme are clearly expressed in FL's *The Parenting Puzzle,* which sold 14,808 copies in 2011-12. Amore recent publication is entitled *The Classroom Climate.* FL currently supports 778 professionals working with parents in groups, as well as 475 teachers working with the children of these parents, thereby ensuring a well coordinated programme in schools, homes and prisons.

Need for research

Previous research into the programmes of Family Links has focused more upon the work in schools[11]. But evaluation of the impact on parents attending parent groups run by FL's trained practitioners has shown statistically significant shifts in both children's behaviour and parental well-being (which is known to impact on children's outcomes)[12]

But home-school relations and, in particular, parental understanding of what schools are trying to do (such as mutual trust and support, empathy with others, capacity to handle difficult social situations) are essential for successful learning and for developing the values and virtues needed for future citizens. It would seem that many parents need and welcome support in the development of the parenting skills consonant with the *nurturing programme* promoted in the FL schools. What is attempted at school needs to be

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[10] Family Links, 2010, *The Parenting Puzzle*
[11] See Eaude, T., ….; Roker, D., 2011, 'An evaluation of Family Links training in the Nurturing Programme', in *Young People in Focus*.
[12] 'Evaluation of the Nurturing Programme for parents and carers', January 2012

reinforced at home. The programme is proving particularly popular with parents whose children have special educational needs as well as with Muslim families, for whom the programme has been 'mapped' to Islamic values.

However, there is a need for more extensive and systematic research with a view to
- evaluating the effectiveness of existing practice;
- seeing what lessons can be learnt for the improvement of the programme, the liaison with schools and the preparation of, and support for, those who conduct the parenting groups.

With this in view FL wishes to
- create, within a sample of schools (which reflect differences in social and ethnic population) school-home cooperation, based on the Nurturing Programme, for the development of character and in particular the virtue of caring;
- evaluate that initiative with a view to improving existing practices and contributing to the philosophical and practical work of the Jubilee Centre.

The precise nature, extent and cost of the evaluation have to be worked out in detail. But they would involve a minimum of ten schools over a two year period with close observation of the sessions and with interviews of parents, teachers, pupils and trainers.

Concluding comment

This paper and proposal aim to make a contribution to the thinking and work of the Jubilee Centre and to its aim to understand and to promote the development of character and virtue. The paper has argued that one most important quality or virtue in character development is that of caring for others and of developing caring relationships - or, in the words of the 'open society', promoting solidarity.

But the paper also seeks to draw attention to work which is successfully promoting the virtue of caring, namely, that of Family Links' Nurturing Programme, and in particular to the central element of that programme, namely, the links with parents in developing mutual and reciprocal understanding.

That however is in need of further research, and it is hoped that such important research might contribute to the Centre's programme.