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On the Role of Future-Mindedness in Character Education

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This paper discusses the place of future-mindedness in character education. It starts by providing a background to the literature and moves on to seeing how this played out in practice through the My Character project¹. Interviews were conducted with 3 teachers and 49 students in Y7, Y8 and Y9. The students were mostly interviewed in small groups but some data were also gathered from a class of 27 Y9 students. The purpose of the paper is to give an overview of the theme in the light of evidence drawn from teachers and young people about how it is viewed and operationalised in teaching and learning about character and virtues.

The opinions expressed in this piece are those of the author and are not necessarily shared by the My Character development team.

Introduction

Future-Mindedness can be defined as when an individual sets goals and makes a plan to achieve them. Establishing sound life goals should require considerable moral reflection and to achieve such worthwhile aims requires character traits such as diligence, thrift and the capacity to delay gratification.

The My Character project team identified future-mindedness as being composed of four key virtues. These were diligence, delayed gratification, thrift and beneficial purpose. Translating these terms into language more familiar to adolescents rendered them as determination, patience, saving for the future and helping others. In addition, the research team were keen to learn from young people themselves about which virtues they thought were important for being future minded. During development of the journal and website the young people, acting as consultants, were invited to suggest other virtues they felt were fundamental to being future-minded. After all 250 young people involved had been consulted, 30 different virtues had been suggested. The most popular suggestions were discussed by the My Character steering group, made up of educational professionals and others, and the following four were selected: having a dream, courage, teamwork and creativity. These are the eight character virtues on which the 'My Character' project was based.

Although future-mindedness is a relatively recent term, and is not very much in use in the UK, it has clear antecedents in the classical virtues, which, according to Greek philosophy, were prudence (practical wisdom), justice (fairmindedness), temperance (self-control) and courage (determination). The latter two virtues are particularly salient to the achievement of future goals. If we add to this list the traditional Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity one can see that here there is also a strong sense that a life well

¹ The materials can be inspected at http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/projects/development-projects/My_Character_spreads.pdf and are described more fully in other papers relating to the My Character Project.

lived is one that has purpose based on optimism and belief in the rightness of the path which has been chosen. Classical virtues such as justice, prudence (wisdom) and charity (love), which are other-centred values but not included in the My Character list, are a reminder, perhaps, that virtues such as courage, determination, patience and having a dream are morally neutral insofar as they can arguably be of as much benefit to 'sinners' as to 'saints'. Thus in the My Character project the section on helping others can be seen as a counterbalance to a focus which, if not careful, could over-emphasise self-interest at the expense of that of others - though this was clearly not the intention of the project developers.

One manifestation of future-mindedness is found in the school of 'positive psychology'. Positive psychology is a branch of humanistic psychology which through investigation seeks to achieve 'a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving individuals, families and communities' (Seligman, 2000). Seligman's view of positive psychology includes understanding, appreciating, or being grateful for, positive experiences (including relationships, hobbies, and interests), leading a life of 'purposeful engagement' and developing a strong sense of meaning and purpose. The latter particularly supports the positive appreciation of future-mindedness as a significant factor in human flourishing.

Future-mindedness and the young people involved in the My Character project

Amongst the 49 students interviewed about their experiences with the My Character project, there was widespread appreciation for the fact that the project aimed to help them prepare for the future in a range of ways. In the words of one student, the project aims to:

" ... make you think what you want in life and more about your future because if you think about it more now, and use this book to find out who you are and what you want to do, it can help you more in the future." [Y8]

It is highly likely that the popularity of the 'Saving for the Future', which was often cited as the most enjoyable and memorable section, is related to the young people's awareness of the importance of being prepared financially for life as a responsible adult.

"I remember one of the things in the money section was how much it would cost on average for a family to live for a week. It was like a thousand pounds, which really, really surprised me." [Y7]

And another student commented:

"The project gives you examples and stuff that help you with things that you come across in life like debt and having patience, and like working as a team and lifeskills that you're going to need. "

Warnings about the need to be wary of getting into debt clearly seemed relevant and salient to the students.

"If you need to go to the bank when you're older, you'll be ready for it. You could get out loads of stuff and get in debt and maybe you couldn't pay it back and you would be chucked out of your house." [Y9]

And when asked about the value of having a good character, very many of the students answered in terms similar to the following two answers.

"If you have good character people respect you more and you work better with people which is really important in future because when you have a job you have to work with other people, not just be independent." [Y8]

"It's good when you meet new people, to make a good first impression. You'll have more friends in the future." [Y8]

This instrumental view of character and values, expressed in terms of the 'primitive realism' (Connell, 1971) of their existing social knowledge, is typical of many young people at this age. Socially, their practical experience of the world is still limited and, in addition, their ability to think abstractly and in detail about the future is still in the early stages of development. Nonetheless, if students can see the value of a project like this (which has no qualifications and therefore little intrinsic status in the current school system) then it is likely that they will come to the project with enthusiasm and motivation, which, I would argue, is a necessary condition for its success.

One problem is that the young people who most need to realise that their futures are in danger of being unfulfilling, are often the ones least likely to give it serious thought. In my sample, there were some students who said they either did not think about the future or they did not see the point of it. Several of the more mature students I spoke with were able to see this as something which distinguished themselves from these others.

Student 1: "Some people, like me, spend a lot of time thinking about, like, the My Character thing, like what we're going to be when we grow up - you're starting to know yourself but the vast majority of the people our age wouldn't really do that, partly because of time but mostly because they're not at that stage yet where they'd stop to think about things like this.

Interviewer: How do you know there are kids who aren't there yet?

Student 2: It's mostly by the way they behave.

Student 1: Especially as we have known them for a long time.

Student 2: And how immature they are.

Lack of thinking about the future is often seen as one of the besetting sins of our affluent age where money is often easily available for consumer goods and saving up for something, in the age of easy credit, has apparently slipped out of the culture. As one teacher put it:

"One of the problems for teachers is the number of kids who live in the now. Everything is instant. It's instant gratification. ... but getting our youngsters to invest in future-mindedness is key because they start to see their actions having consequences and they start to see that actually life's a journey rather than now, now, now."

When asked to consider their futures, the young people tended to focus on general items such as what kind of family or job they will have and hence, what kind of qualifications they might need. This was very much on the minds of the students in the Y9 group who were facing GCSE choices at the end of the year. On the other hand, there is a dark side to this issue for many young people:

"When I think about what's happening now and in the future it stresses me out because I think [bad] stuff will happen and it doesn't. Thinking of future situations causes crises in my mind." [Y9]

Another student mentioned the fear of family and friends dying which can be overwhelming. One respondent said:

"I'm more concerned with family and friends than with myself right now." [Y9]

Sometimes, anxieties about the future relate to the unpredictable nature and pace of change with the reality of some very obvious social and environmental issues ahead which are not easy for a young person to keep in perspective:

Interviewer: When you think about the future, what do you think about?

Student 1: What you will become and what will you do to make your life better. And how you would cope with the environment and what would change. So you'd be thinking of what the reality will be in the future.

Student 2: You read a lot in science, like they're saying that all these fuels are going to run out and you're thinking 'Oh my God, that's going to be, like, when I'm halfway through my life and you're thinking that that's going to really impact the world and something that could be really disastrous. You won't be able to achieve your dream. [...] It starts to make you think 'What is the future for me here?' And then if you move somewhere else the future will become even less determined.

Student 1: The earth has a certain amount of space and if it gets over-populated, you'll be wondering if there'll be enough space for everyone to live and whether you would fit into it.

The presence of anxieties of this kind makes the task of preparing young people for the future a very challenging one. On the one hand, concerns about sustainability are important and are part of living responsibly in the world where everyone's actions can impact on others. On the other hand, the anxieties of young people can become disproportionate and exaggerated by things like their lack of understanding about human capacity for adaptation in the long run. Nonetheless, they are surely entitled to enter adolescence and young adulthood with a strong sense of optimism and positivity, as far as possible. Thus, the way in which future-mindedness as an issue is dealt with needs careful thought not just within a values project such as this but across the curriculum and, indeed, the whole of school life.

Of course, there are many reasons for optimism about life in the future. For example, advances in medicine come thick and fast and some students mentioned the hope that cancer and other diseases might be cured. Others had positive hopes for their local community and for the reduction of poverty in the wider world.

Ultimately, it seems that ,for young people, issues of character and personal qualities are very closely bound up with questions surrounding who they are and what they aspire to and how they are going to achieve it. And while living in the now is a natural state for younger children, as they emerge into adolescence and their perspectives enlarge, the future becomes increasingly realistic and complex. So a project of this kind, with its emphasis on self-reflection in the context of future possibilities, is well timed for students in Key Stage 3.

In this context, one of the many quotations that were included in the book clearly resonated with one of the students:

Student 1 I thought that '*A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step*' is really good and that it's at the start of the book. That's the one that has stuck in my head.

Interviewer: What do you think it means?

Student 1 That you have to be willed enough to take a whole journey and you have to be bold enough to take the first step and sometimes the first step is the hardest step to take.
[...] I thought that was a really good section about willpower.

Perhaps the last word in this section should be given to a Y8 student who clearly responded to, and benefitted from, thinking about her future and not simply in an instrumental way:

"I enjoyed it because it helps you think about what you need in life, and at this age, you need that as soon as possible, really. You need to start thinking about it now. [...] So you did think about 'What's more important to me at the moment, qualities of my self or finding a job?'"

Discussion and Conclusion

Thinking about the future is a necessary part of a purposeful life. In the context of the My Character project, future-mindedness comes to mean more than merely making plans. It carries a sense that one's life choices should be morally worthwhile, the result of considered reflection, and guided by a strong sense of self. If this is so, it may be worth reiterating that of the eight virtues or values which form the focus of this project, only one, 'Helping Others' is 'other-regarding'. In an opening activity, where students are asked to think about what qualities a prime minister would ideally have, the list includes compassion, respect, love, fairness, forgiveness and tolerance, none of which has a section of its own. These key social values offer a balancing focus for a life which might otherwise be too centred on the attainment of success with little regard for others. As the section on Helping Others asks, 'Would you want to be successful by climbing on everyone else to get to the top?' The project's intention is clearly that students should answer 'no' to this question and the choice of inspirational people includes a range of admirable altruistic characters including Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Camila Batmanghelidjh, and Bill Gates as philanthropist. It is arguable that some of the overlapping virtues e.g. patience, determination and courage (which a number of students found similar and repetitive) might have been collapsed or condensed in order to provide a little more space for some of the virtues highlighted above such as compassion and justice, which, overall, were touched on very fleetingly.

We have already noted that many students undertaking the My Character project embraced its aims and were grateful for the chance to think about their futures. This is clearly a strong aspect of its appeal. Arguably, a project overtly focusing on 'good character' could have an image problem with many young people. It could sound boring, pious, and possibly even lecturing. Such perceptions, if they are aroused, can stimulate resistance. As one student put it, in answer to the question 'why do you think it is important to think about good character?',

"It's not good because you won't be able to drink and smoke - it gets boring after you've been good for ages."

This is a good example of a response from a young person still in a heteronomous mode of morality, where goodness is understood as 'being obedient' and 'controlled'. Arguably, some of the students who would most benefit from a project of this kind are those whose moral development is delayed compared with many of their peers. They are still at the stage where their 'locus of control' is external. When such students sense that they are about to receive another dose of adult advice about e.g. becoming responsible and more caring or respectful of others, they tend to fall back on a range of psychological devices to neutralise the message (young offenders are known for such thought patterns - see e.g. Gibbs , 2003). My point here is that a project promoted as 'helping you with your future' is likely to provoke much less psychological resistance. It has appeal and for young people it has extrinsic and instrumental value. Therefore, a section on e.g. empathy could still be included because while it is a vital component of morally responsible thought and action, it could be presented as enabling individuals to understand people better which is good in an instrumental way, as well as nurturing other-centred behaviour.

The responses of the students confirm that very many of them do think a great deal about the future. Holden (2007) suggests that:

'images of the future are a critical measure of a society's inner well being, acting as a mirror of our times. Thus finding out the views of young people towards the future gives us insights into their current concerns, beliefs and actions and indicates how they see themselves as future citizens.'

The views of the young people I interviewed indicated that, as one would expect, they have aspirations for happy lives, loving relationships and successful careers. Elm (2006) observed that primary children in Sweden felt optimistic for the future and that they could contribute to changing things for the better, findings which were in line with those of Holden who, with Hicks (2011) studied UK children in both primary and secondary schools . As they develop, adolescents become more cynical, less optimistic and have a reduced sense of empowerment (Holden, op.cit.). Even some of the high achieving students I spoke with were aware of some very negative future scenarios which could lie ahead for them. Therefore, if this project and, indeed, education as a whole are to help young people to become more resilient against negative aspects of future-mindedness, some thought should surely be given to providing more systematically what Hicks has called a 'futures education'. This would aim to help young people realistically assess the various future scenarios which the media regularly presents them with in simplistic terms. It should also, I would argue, aim to give them a sense of personal agency in respect of, e.g. , sustainability issues which can counteract the sense of helplessness and doom which newspaper headlines so regularly promote. In this way, the work carried out through the My Character project would be seen as part of a wider whole school policy developing robust forms of 'future-mindedness' in the students of today.

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