



How do school leaders and teachers perceive virtue in leadership and character? An Australian qualitative case study

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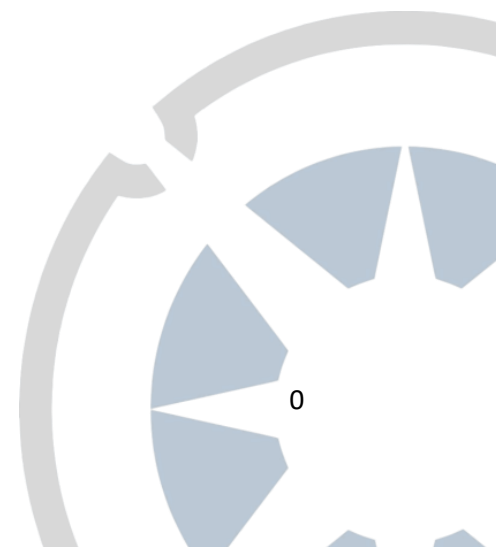
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How do school leaders and teachers perceive virtue in leadership and character?

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Abstract: As education systems worldwide transition from COVID-19 emergency to management modes, many face an unprecedented teacher shortage crisis that redefines the teaching profession and demands leadership at all levels. Character and wellbeing-related education theories and research developments have been increasingly taught in schools. These advances have helped us understand individual and collective *phronesis* and how individuals and communities flourish within various institutional structures. Examining 112 employees' perspectives at an Australian coeducation school, this presentation asks: What do school leaders and teachers think 'all teachers are leaders in the classroom' mean? and What character profile does an ideal student leader possess?

Introduction

In education settings, Bohlin (2022), Kristjánsson (2015) and Robinson (2020) argue that moral, social and intellectual virtues are character traits that often inspire individual teachers to work as teams, and students and whole school communities strive to achieve common academic, social and service-learning goals. However, as Carr (2023) cautions, it is not without its challenges. The growing interest in the character of early career teachers, as noted by Hunter and Springer (2022), reflects the well-documented reality that this stage of the career trajectory is particularly significant in teacher retention.

Internationally, interest and criticism of character education, including Jerome and Kisby (2022), has grown over the past 15 years. The term is often used to bridge various approaches to education that Lamb et al. (2022) and McGrath et al. (2022) note include virtue ethics education and other education paradigms that engage with the character, including wellbeing education. Like the growing interest in the character of teachers, there is increased awareness—as Eisenschmidt et al.'s (2019) study of ethical leadership from Estonia and Finland and Robinson (2020) claim—of the importance of virtues such as courage for effective school leaders. In the Australian context, the burgeoning interest in teacher and leader virtues may partly be influenced by the growing shortage of school leaders. The looming education leadership workforce crisis is not helped by reports of principal burnout and overworked leaders. Whang (2021) asserts there are three paths towards virtuous school leadership:

The first path of the virtue of school leadership expands the availability of positive educational reforms. Also, the second path of the virtue of school leadership helps schools realize their goals. Then, the third path of the virtue of school leadership allows schools to fulfill their visions. (p.11)

Foundational research by Watz (2011) and extended by Singh (2019) argues that character has long been a focus of schooling. Recent research by Murphy and Louis (2018) and Robinson (2020) shows there is a growing interest in virtuous school leadership. In contrast, Bingham et al. (2021) and Cann et al. (2021) suggest more wholistic and evidence-informed approaches to teaching character have formed a part of wellbeing education, with examples of student programs and approaches, teaching strategies and activities that complement neo-Aristotelian approaches to teaching virtues, ethics and more attention focused on the moral character of education leaders. Over the past five years, the disruption of COVID-19 on the education system has also heightened public awareness of the complexities of school leadership and governance and teachers' critical roles in educating the next generation (Fotheringham et al., 2022; Pollock, 2020). The public is now conscious of the complexity of the classroom environment and the significance of educating the whole child.

In the Australian context, character, moral or virtue education does not appear to be key to current government education reforms. Yet, as Reynolds et al. (2020) and Heggart et al. (2019) emphasise, it is a sub-theme within the Civics and Citizenship curriculum of the Year 7–10 Australian Curriculum, which explores topics including government, the Constitution, the legal system, rights, participating in a democracy, making laws, political parties, policy and international comparisons of systems.

This conference paper explores early findings of one section of data related to teachers' perceptions of virtue in leadership. It is a part of a larger mixed-methods study investigating the wellbeing of employees and students in an independent school being written at present. First, the paper briefly reviews virtues and their importance and education leadership. Following this conceptual framework, it investigates early themes of 112 employees' perceptions of virtue in leadership and character to explore questions, including: What do school leaders and teachers think 'all teachers are leaders in the classroom' mean? and What character profile does an ideal student leader possess?

Theoretical Background

Defining virtues and character education

Over 20 years ago, research by Fullan (2003) emphasised that many school leaders increasingly recognise that promoting virtues, character and character development in their workforce leads to concrete learning outcomes; for example, improved productivity and performance. This is a difficult task, as Berkowitz (2022) and Arar and Saiti (2022) note, that calls for a more wholistic approach to education to educate for both character and academic growth, and rigorous assessment. This conference paper draws on Arthur et al.'s (2016) conceptualisation of virtue, understood to be an excellent trait of character or someone who is described as morally good, admirable or excellent, expressed as *phronesis* or moral wisdom. There is a range of definitions of character education; this paper adopts Berkowitz (2022) and Berkowitz and Schwartz's (2006) definition that it is a 'comprehensive school-based approach to fostering the moral development of students and virtues are moral, social and intellectual traits' (p. 15). Eudaimonic wellbeing is understood as the state of being comfortable, healthy or happy, and positive wellbeing enables one to flourish in life (Huppert & So, 2013).

Parallel with the growth of character education initiatives in schools at the student level, more educational institutions, as Cameron et al. (2003) and Cameron and Dutton (2003) note, are adopting strategies that draw from the research on organisational scholarship to inform approaches to leadership and the development of whole-of-school strategies to operationalise and measure character education objectives (Lovat & Dally, 2018; Was et al., 2006). As schools invite students to participate in student character education programs, inviting them to reflect on and engage with character development, it naturally means that school leaders are also asked to engage with this material. Recent research emphasises how teachers plan for and implement character education programs; however, Kinchington (2023) emphasises there is a shortage of literature investigating the problem of school leaders' perception on the topic, and there appears to be even less focus on the role school governance or boards play in institutional vision, mission and objectives to promote collective *phronesis* or moral wisdom (Carr, 2023; Yacek & Jonas, 2023).

Virtues and education leadership in Australia

Surveying the role of virtues in education in Australian independent schools, this paper argues three historical waves emerge (Gurr, 2020; May, 2023; Partridge, 2014): Wave 1—character education in the 1830s–1919; Wave 2—pastoral care from the 1920s; and Wave 3—wellbeing education from the early 2000s. These waves can be used to characterise how virtue and education leadership have interacted in Australian independent schools. For example, from their foundation, character education was the focus of many independent schools to offer a broadly defined education and the development of moral virtues of character predominately drawn from the major Christian denominations (Croke, 2007; Kaye, 2013). Often, larger independent schools of this era in Australian education were colonial replicas of English public schools such as Eton, Rugby and Harrow and colonial school leaders were mainly influenced by Arnoldian views of the purpose of education (Turney, 1966). In the case of many independent schools, this also extended to 19th-century theories of academic rigour combined with muscular Christianity and godliness. Phase 2 of virtues in education leadership in Australia could be characterised as a more contemporary version of character education. More independent schools during this era adopted house-based structures—very often named after school benefactors, founders and early alumni that acted as paragons of virtue—to help promote collegial identity and use intra and inter-house sporting and cultural competitions as teaching methods for moral virtues of courage, fairness and resilience. Pastoral care was also the predominant model in Australian education leadership for independent schools until the start of the early 2000s, when more schools turned to more evidence-informed wellbeing approaches influenced, in part, by educational psychology and psychological approaches to teaching wellbeing. Here, many independent schools started to integrate evidence-informed strategies from wellbeing research focusing on the role of emotions, relations, meaning, purpose and mastery. Despite the popularity and widespread adoption of wellbeing-based programs in schools, there are few studies examining how school employees see virtue and education leadership.

Understanding Australian school leaders' and teachers' perceptions of virtue

This paper argues that understanding Australian school leaders' and teachers' perceptions of leadership and ideal leadership has theoretical and practical benefits. Providing teachers and principals with better leadership training may inform recommendations from the recently published *Improving Outcomes for All: Australian Government Summary Report of the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*. The report claims there is a need to provide 'better professional development, including

induction, mentoring and coaching' (2024, p. 17). It enables researchers to explore the role virtues may play in school leadership and the progress of leadership development programs.

Purpose of the study

The aim of this qualitative study is to understand Wave 3 of the development of virtues and education leadership in Australia, specifically school leaders' and teachers' perceptions of virtues at an Australian independent school. It reports on one part of a qualitative section of a larger mixed-methods case study that investigates leaders' perceptions at an independent school across two sites in Queensland, Australia. Specifically, the conference paper reports on qualitative elements of the much broader investigation into student and employee wellbeing at a school. The broader data collected related to student and employee wellbeing will not form part of this paper; nevertheless, it will be published in the future. The study has adopted an appreciative approach focusing on participants' subjective beliefs of how they perceive virtue in leadership and character in an Australian school. It adopts an interpretivist and constructivist approach to the interpretation of data in that the participating school leaders and teachers are active participants in their social interaction in the ecosystem of the school and broader society.

Research questions

This conference paper examines two research questions:

1. If virtue in leadership and character are important in schools, how do school leaders and teachers understand the phenomena?
2. What do Australia school teachers think the maxim 'all teachers are leaders in the classroom' means?

Methods

This case study reports on the qualitative phase of a mixed-method study of employee wellbeing in an independent school in Brisbane, Queensland, which included specific, open-ended questions based on topics related to virtues and education leadership. A voluntary Qualtrics survey was developed to measure employee wellbeing and participants' perception of a range of wellbeing-related issues. The case study adopted an interpretivist and constructivist approach as it encouraged participants to reflect on their cultural settings regarding questions related to virtues, character education and education leadership more broadly. Constructivist research asserts that individuals make sense of the world by reflecting and constructing knowledge rather than being passive recipients of information.

Participants

A total of 290 employees were invited to participate in the case study. A total of 123 participants volunteered to commence the Qualtrics survey, and 112 complete responses were analysed. Of the 112 participants, 58 were teachers, 29 had leadership roles, and 32 were non-teaching staff. Of the teaching staff, 11 had 0–5 years of teaching experience, 27 had 6–15 years of teaching experience, and 49 had more than 15 years of teaching experience, with 71% teaching both middle and secondary school students and 20% teaching early learning to Year 5. Further, 74% of participants had been employees in the education sector for more than 15 years and 14% for 10–14 years. At the research schools, 10% had been employed for more than 15 years, 14% for 10–14 years, 16% for 6–9 years, and 57% for 1–5 years. Of the participants in the survey, 73% were from the girls' school, 17% from the boys' school and 10% from both sites; 75% were employed full-time and 25% were employed part-

time, with 82% of employees permanent and 18% on contract. Lastly, 78% of employees claimed they had attended professional learning on wellbeing, 17% claimed they had not attended professional learning on wellbeing, and 5% were uncertain.

Recruitment

All employees of the research school were invited to participate via an ethics-approved group email that provided the link to the Qualtrics survey sent by the Deputy Head of Secondary (Students) via a global email distribution list. Participants were selected via a convenience sampling method. For this study, only participants employed at the research schools were invited to participate. Data were collected over two sites at the same time. The school was founded in the early 1900s as an all-girls school in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. Today, the schools include an all-boys campus, each different and unique in their own way, equally valued and respected for their different histories and cultures.

Data collection

Data were collected in the form of a Qualtrics survey. Specifically, three questions were added related to the objectives of the study. The survey contained questions about the definition of wellbeing and indicators of wellbeing (e.g., questions about their engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness and happiness). The surveys were based on well-known and tested surveys (e.g., the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Wellbeing and the teacher wellbeing survey). This conference paper reports on participants' responses to the following questions focusing on virtues in school leadership, forming part of the more comprehensive qualitative section of the mixed-methods survey. Questions asked included: 'In your own words, what do you think "all teachers are leaders in the classroom" means?' and 'In your own words, what character profile does an ideal employee leader possess?'

Participants were advised at the start and end of the survey that if the completion of the survey raised any issues or thoughts they would like to talk with someone about, they should please consider contacting their Employee Assistance Program. Data was stored in password-protected folders that only the researchers listed on the ethics-approved application could access. During data analyses, the data was kept in password-protected folders, and only the researchers listed in the application had access to the analytical outputs. Data were analysed via a mixed-methods approach—that is, both qualitative and quantitative analyses—and analyses were undertaken by the approved researchers only. Qualitative data collection in the Qualtrics survey were open-ended to encourage participants' reflection on their employment and teacher professional practice.

Ethics

Informed consent was collected when participants commenced the Qualtrics survey. No incentives were provided for participants undertaking the study. Participants were provided with all the details of the ethical processes of data collection and the consent process. Participants were free to withdraw from the project within a week of submitting responses without explanation. All data were treated confidentially, no individual reports were generated, and researchers were not able to identify individual employees as a self-generated code was used for identification. Ethics approval for the

study was granted by the University of Adelaide's Office of Research Ethics, Compliance and Integrity, Ethics Approval No: H-2023-238.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process approach to thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected. An inductive approach was adopted so that the codes produced from the content of the data collected aligned with a constructivist approach via open coding. Constructivist and interpretivist epistemology and ontology enabled meaning to be communicated by participants and the material to be interpreted by the researcher. Both semantic and latent coding were adopted for the analysis. For example, semantic codes were used when meaningful vocabulary was found related to the focus of the paper and latent codes when information was interpreted. By adopting the six-phase approach, Braun and Clarke (2006) assert the researchers should familiarise themselves with the data, generate initial codes, generate themes, review themes, define and name a theme, and write the report.

Findings

Analyses of the qualitative results revealed that the participants believed teachers as leaders meant that they were role models for students and the broader community. At the time of writing, the wider mixed-method study analysis was still being completed; therefore, this conference paper focuses on the questions specifically related to virtues in school leadership. Responses to the question, 'In your own words, what do you think "all teachers are leaders in the classroom" means?', as illustrated in Figure 1.

Theme 1: Teachers as role models

Overwhelmingly, many participants responding that teachers were role models for students specifically referenced to how teachers engage with learning and schooling more generally and their behaviours:

This phrase emphasises that every teacher, irrespective of whether they hold a formal leadership role (or not), plays a significant role in guiding, influencing, and inspiring their students' learning and development. Teaching extends beyond content delivery and encompasses the shaping of students' learning experiences, fostering positive classroom culture, being a role model, and nurturing the holistic development of students. This highlights the incredibly important impact teachers play in the lives of their students and the broader educational community. [Female, Senior School Teacher in Leadership, 6-15 yr experience].

Participants also noted the subtlety of the taught and caught curriculum 4 moral behaviour where teachers acted as significant influences:

Teachers must model the behaviours and attitudes we seek to instil in our students - the difference between the 'taught' and 'caught' curriculum. [Female, Middle & Senior School Teacher in Leadership, 6-15 yr experience].

All teachers are roles models and leaders in change, children watch us and in their eyes, we are their lighthouse on a day-to-day basis. A role that is amazing and rewarding but requires strength and a calm nature to see the best in our students. [Female, Teacher, >5 yrs experience]

Teachers are role models, and we lead students to a common goal of learning new things in a variety of processes. Lead by good example, led by our standard of dress, led using positive words, leaders in working hard and students see this. [Male, Senior & Middle School Teacher, >15 yrs experience]

The burden of responsibility of teachers as role models was captured neatly by one of the participants, who reflected:

I think this means that teachers are people who lead by example and that our role inside a classroom is one which directs and supports student learning and serves to model behaviour, standards and values in our communities. It means we have impressionable young people who rely on our education, training and life experiences to help them find their way through their academic and personal growth in quite formative years of their life. It also implies teachers have a degree of responsibility to lead well and model high standards for all learners in the classroom. [Female, Teacher in Leadership, Senior & Middle School, >15 yrs experience].

Figure 1

In your own words, what do you think 'all teachers are leaders in the classroom' means?

That every teacher has a responsibility to uphold the schools values and ethos when you step into the classroom. You are the embodiment of the leaders that are not there, so you have to make sure that the students are respectful of the expectations and school as whole. [Female, Senior School Teacher,>15 yrs experience]

It means that every teacher, regardless of their formal title or role, plays a vital role in guiding and influencing their students. It emphasises that teachers are not just educators but also role models, mentors, and facilitators of learning. Teaching is not just about transferring information but about inspiring, guiding, and positively impacting students' lives in various ways. It highlights the leadership role that teachers naturally assume in the educational process. [Male, Middle & Senior School Teacher,>15 yrs experience]

Participants at the research school were also asked to respond to the following question: 'In your own words, what character profile does an ideal employee leader possess?', as illustrated in Figure 2. After examining the many responses from participants, it was evident that three themes emerged: real, social and intellectual concerns related to ideal employee leader characteristics. For many participants, it was apparent that emotions such as kindness, caring and trustworthiness were essential in establishing strong relations between participants in the research school. Further, the ability to prioritise and solve team problems was another of the identified capabilities. Participants described their ideal employee leader in these terms; for many, they could recognise and reflect upon the excellent characteristics in the school setting.

Theme 1: Moral

- Caring, organised, able to communicate effectively, transparent [Female, contract teacher, 6-15 yrs experience]
- Kind, action-orientated, trustworthiness, initiative/problem-solving, clear communication, competence [Female, Middle & Senior School teacher, >15 yrs experience]
- Open minded, flexible, good communicator, honest, trustworthy, empathy [Female, Middle & Senior School teacher, >15 yrs experience]
- An ideal employee leader should have a clear vision and so be able to inspire their team with a clear sense of purpose and direction. They lead by example, demonstrating integrity, accountability, and humility. Effective communicators, they invite open dialogue and active listening. They are adaptable, embracing change and innovation. They are empathic and have emotional intelligence promoting a supportive and inclusive environment. They are decisive with problem-solving, which enables them to navigate challenges confidently. They nurture talent, empowering others to excel and grow. [Female, Teacher with leadership role, >15 yrs experience]

Theme 2: Social

- They work positively with a range of staff members. They advocate for colleagues, not just themselves. They are interested in the greater good, they have open communication, they model work behaviours, such as good organisation. When making hard decisions they consider all perspectives and can transparently explain the decision-making process. They help colleagues reach their goals, using language that affirms rather than demeans. [Female, part-time Middle & Senior School teacher, >15 yrs experience]

Theme 3: Intellectual

awareness of how teachers can act as positive and negative role models for students in exploring thoughts, attitudes and behaviours towards character development. Moreover, participants highlighted the significant trust that is placed in their professional responsibility to educate future generations and explore these issues. Further, participants highlighted that they were teaching within a values-based climate, requiring them to engage with the school's values and explore this outside the classroom.

This study illustrates how participants are aware of the importance of teachers' role as mentors, how it influences students' perceptions of character development and how they engage with their school's core values. This section of the more extensive mixed-method study suggests teachers are highly aware of their professional responsibilities and professional status in young people's lives. Unlike other studies of character and virtue education, this study also emphasises the importance of clear vision, mission and objectives from school strategic plans to operationalise the court, sort and teach a curriculum of virtue ethics and character education in a school setting. Future research could look in greater depth at the ecological challenges of integrating concepts of virtue ethics education more deeply into the day-to-day organisation of the case study school. In the application of research in school settings, emphasis on the school culture and climate and how this relates to the whole-of-school professional learning is an area that requires further study. This study highlights the interdependence of virtue ethics, character and wellbeing education. It also reveals there may be conceptual confusion for school teachers regarding which of these paradigms are adopted systematically. The purpose of this conference paper was to highlight the potential for teaching virtue ethics within the context of an Australian setting. The early findings of this study suggest that virtues play a significant role in leaders developing a culture of trust with their employees in schools. Further, the study found that employees (both teachers and non-teachers) could identify the moral, social and intellectual virtues and articulate the impact of these on school culture and climate. Participants also identified how trust can be eroded when misalignments between school-claimed leadership virtues and individual actions.

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