



Cultivating virtue literacy in postgraduates: A content analysis of writing samples

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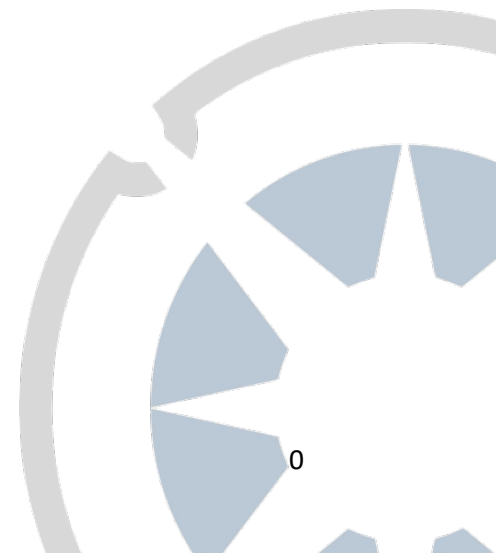
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Abstract

Virtue literacy, as defined by the Jubilee Centre for Character & virtue is comprised of virtue perception, virtue knowledge & understanding, and virtue reasoning. This study explored the impact of pedagogical interventions designed to develop virtue literacy in postgraduate students. Instructional strategies, course activities, and assignments were intentionally designed to cultivate the elements of virtue literacy. The hypothesis predicted that leadership candidates would advance in their development of virtue literacy. Students completed writing samples at three distinct points throughout the two-year program in educational leadership (n=49). A quantitative review of frequency counts demonstrate growth in the use of 16 specific virtues in writing samples. Analysis of the rich qualitative data represented in the writing samples demonstrates a noticeable increase in naming and describing virtues, recognizing situations involving virtues, and discernment regarding situation requiring the application of virtue.

Introduction

Higher education has a long history of preparing leaders. But in this unique paradigm of the 21st century, it has become critically apparent that leaders, particularly in education, need to be prepared to lead in a way that is virtuous and oriented toward a global comm. Traditionally, educational leadership programs in the U.S. have focused on the competencies needed to lead effectively in complex and challenging environments. But if these programs are to produce leaders who are not only competent managers, but also wise thinkers and ethical leaders, then institutions of higher education need to have an equal emphasis on developing the character and virtues of the future leaders who will guide schools in this increasingly global context (Sturm, Vera, and Crossan, 2017; Brooks, Brant, and Lamb, 2019; Jubilee Centre & Oxford Character Project, 2020; Lamb, Brandt, and Brooks, 2021).

Character & virtue-based leadership programs have the potential to equip aspiring school leaders with intellectual, moral, and civic virtues, as well as performance strengths that will enable them to make wise choices and contribute to not only their own flourishing, but also to that of the entire school community (Jubilee Centre and Oxford Character Project, 2020). The educational

leadership program at North Central College is focused on the moral purpose of developing leaders who foster educational environments where all individuals can flourish. The curriculum cultivates practical wisdom through the development of professional competencies in tandem with the virtues and character of aspiring leaders. This unique program prepares candidates to create cultures of character through a study of textualized leadership styles and strategies to support culturally responsive leadership. While the development of leader character, leader virtues, and practical wisdom are the end goals of this two-year educational leadership program, the character and virtue outcomes are introduced, developed, reinforced, and assessed in a planned progression throughout the series of ten courses. This study is focused on the impact of character and virtue-based interventions on candidates' development of virtue literacy

Literature Review

Defining Virtues

Julia Annas (2011) describes virtue as a disposition that is active within an individual, develops in response to situations, and persists over time. She suggests that virtues are deeply ingrained features that develop an individual's character through formation and education. Annas (2011) offers the view that virtues can be compared to skills in that developing virtue takes time, experience, and practice. She describes virtues as habituated dispositions representing states of character that enable individuals to respond to challenges in creative and imaginative ways (Annas, 2011).

Peterson and Seligman (2004) define virtues differently and describe them as core characteristics that emerged from their study of historical surveys. Their seminal work identified six virtues that appear to be universal across a broad range of cultures (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). The *Character Strengths & Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* is organized around the conceptual values of virtues, character strengths, and situational themes (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This dense volume classifies virtues and describes the cognitive strengths underlying the virtue of wisdom, the emotional strengths related to the virtue of courage, the social and community strengths aligned with the virtues of humanity & justice, the protective strengths

under the umbrella of temperance, and the spiritual strengths associated with the virtue of transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Michael Ignatieff (2017) offers yet another perspective as he discusses the ordinary virtues that transcend culture and context. His research suggests that trust, tolerance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and resilience are shared by human beings across all cultures and societies (Ignatieff, 2017). He advances the concept that these ordinary virtues demonstrate a purpose and common cause shared by citizens around the world.

Virtue Development

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1999) explains that having virtue means doing the right thing, in relation to the right person, at the right time, to the right extent, in the right manner, and for the right purpose. He further describes virtue as a set of character traits that, once developed, lead to flourishing behavior. Aristotle's Golden Mean can be described as the sweet spot between excess and deficiency - the midpoint between two extremes. However, he also taught that virtuous actions need to be considered within the context of a situation (Aristotle, 1999). Aristotle believed that virtues are developed through practice and thus can become part of the individual's character.

In 2022, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues proposed a framework for character education in elementary and secondary schools. That framework lists seven discrete components of a virtue: perception, knowledge & understanding, emotion, identity, motivation, reasoning, and action/practice. While cultivating each of these components can lead to mastery of a particular virtue, the foundation must first be laid through the development of a common virtue vocabulary and opportunities to translate that knowledge into action. The authors of Jubilee Centre Framework (2022) propose that three specific virtue components combine to provide a base of common terms along with opportunities for practice and habituation. Virtue literacy is defined as being composed of three of the seven components of virtue described in the Jubilee Centre's *A Framework for Character Education in Schools* (Jubilee Centre, 2022)

- virtue perception – noticing situations involving or standing in need of the virtues,

- virtue knowledge & understanding – understanding the meaning of the virtue term and why the virtue is important, individually and as part of a well-rounded, flourishing life of overall virtue, and being able to apply the virtue to episodes of one's own and others' lives, and
- virtue reasoning – discernment and deliberative action about virtues, including situations where virtues conflict or collide.

Wright, Warren, & Snow (2021) take a modified Aristotelian position that posits virtues can best be described as a subset of personality traits. They define virtues as entrenched dispositions that are consistent in the behaviors of an individual regardless of the situation. Wright, et al., agree with Annas (2011) that virtues develop over a lifetime with habituation and repeated practice. Sadler-Smith (2012) appear to concur, and note that educational programs can provide instruction in the foundations. Sadler-Smith (2012) theorize that the acquisition of moral virtues requires habituation and thoughtful reflection processes. Similarly, Crossan, et al., (2016) posit that virtues are patterns of behavior that are developed over a lifetime and can be enhanced through habituation. These scholars appear to support Aristotle's implication that virtues and character strengths need to be developed over time and within the parameters of virtuous communities.

Leadership Virtues

In subsequent article, Sturm, Vera, and Crossan (2017) note that the increasingly complex and challenging global contexts demand more and more from leaders. They point to the fact that leaders in the current environment need to lead effectively across multiple levels, roles, and responsibilities and thus the need to entangle both competence and character to produce the leadership that is needed in these complex times. Newstead *et al.*, (2019) assert that virtue-based leadership development can be a powerful approach to cultivating ethical leaders and prudent leadership: they suggest that virtues should be part of a lifelong development effort, and that leaders should first develop their own virtues; their own character (Newstead *et al.*, 2019). Newstead *et al.*, (2019) further discuss the potential value of developing virtue-based leadership programs that emphasize intentional reflection on leadership practice, with the goal of building the capacity of aspiring leaders to lead well and engage in wise leadership practices.

McKenna and Rooney (2019) argue that virtues are the foundation upon which wise leadership is built. They note that the development of wise leaders requires direct instruction, mentoring, and significant time for deep reflection (McKenna & Rooney, 2019). Wright, Warren, and Snow (2021) offer a modified Aristotelian model of virtues that they suggest can be thought of as a subset of personality traits that develop over time through guided practice. In addition, Wright, Warren, and Snow (2021) integrate Fleeson and Gallagher's (2009) whole trait theory with Aristotle's conceptually rich theory of virtue. Their perspective is a developmental one, and they offer an integration thesis that describes how virtues relate to one another within the individual's personality to create a stable, virtuous character (Wright, Warren, and Snow, 2021). If we agree that virtue is about becoming whole-hearted people who live flourishing lives, then understanding and studying virtue is critical for leaders (Brown, 2018; Wright, Warren, and Snow, 2021)

Hackett & Wang (2012) studied the Aristotelian and Confucian literature on virtue ethics through the lens of leadership. Their meta-analysis searched for virtues that seem to be common across strong leaders – regardless of leadership style. To begin their work, Hackett & Wang dug deeply into the writings of Aristotle and Confucius and came up with a set of what they deemed to be cardinal virtues related to leadership. From their study of the works of Aristotle, they selected courage, temperance, justice, and prudence. In their study of Confucian literature, they found some overlap with the four Aristotelian virtues, and then added humanity and truthfulness. (Hackett & Wang, 2012). These scholars concluded that these six cardinal virtues were common across all leadership styles explored in their study and are culturally universal. Drawing upon these Aristotelian and Confucian perspectives, Hackett and Wang derived a working definition of leader virtues – “. . . we suggest that leader virtue is a disposition: a character trait that a leader acquires and maintains primarily through learning and continuous practice and is expressed through voluntary actions undertaken in context relevant situations” (Hackett & Wang, 2012, p. 874).

Mary Crossan and her colleagues explored the concept of leadership virtues in an extensive research study that engaged over 300 global business leaders in focus group conversations. In their 2016 book, *Developing Leadership Character*, Mary Crossan and her colleagues

synthesized the data and recast the virtues emerging from the study as leader character dimensions. They identified eleven dimensions that are demonstrated by successful leaders: drive, collaboration, humanity, humility, integrity, temperance, justice, accountability, courage, transcendence, and judgment (Crossan, et al., 2016).

Amy Newman (2019) agrees that virtues and character continue to develop over a lifetime. Her previous experience in leadership development in the business world informs her current role as a researcher and lecturer in higher education. In *Building Leadership Character*, Newman explores seven leadership virtues/dimensions that come to the forefront in crisis scenarios: vulnerability, authenticity, integrity, accountability, courage, humility, and compassion (Newman, 2019). She uses a storytelling approach to explore exemplars and non-exemplars from leaders facing moral dilemmas.

Virtue Literacy

In *Teaching Character and Virtue in Schools* (2017) Arthur et al., define character education as a subset of moral education concerned with the cultivation of positive traits of good character called virtues. They argue that character traits developmentally, logically and motivationally lay the groundwork for moral development. Arthur et al., (2017) propose that a basic challenge in character and virtue-based education is the need for a common foundational set of terms; a common vocabulary. They propose that virtues can be caught, taught, and learned. Taking a page from literacy education, Arthur (2017) and his colleagues suggested the concept of virtue literacy. They argue that the terms ‘character’ and ‘virtue’ should be understood as part of the development of ‘virtue literacy’ in terms of moral sensitivity, moral judgement, moral motivation and moral character (Arthur, et al., 2017). They discuss the importance of becoming virtue literate, which they define as perceiving, knowing, and understanding virtue language and concepts needed to make reasoned judgements (Arthur, et al., 2017).

Dr. Scott Parsons, assistant vice chancellor for Leader & Culture Development for the Texas Tech University System, advances the belief that virtue literacy needs to be the foundation of a character education program. (2021). He describes the need for a shared virtue vocabulary that is rich and complex. Parsons explains that such a shared virtue vocabulary would provide a

common language necessary to understand, discuss, reflect, and put virtues into actions. Parsons (2021) expresses the belief that virtue literacy needs to be the first aspect addressed in character education programs at any level. Parson agrees that virtue literacy provides a shared virtue vocabulary that is rich and complex. Just as developing vocabulary builds literacy comprehension, a shared vocabulary around virtues can support the knowledge and understanding needed to help aspiring leaders learn, understand, reflect upon, and discuss leadership virtues. A common vocabulary is necessary to support the ability to understand leadership virtues and apply them in professional contexts.

The Oxford Character Project has been conducting research with graduate students through the Global Leadership Initiative (Brooks, Brandt, & Lamb, 2019). The major objective of this initiative is to provide a program that helps to develop ethical leaders and wise thinkers who can then go forward and contribute to social flourishing. The designers follow a character formation model that is generally patterned after an Aristotelian approach (Brooks, et al., 2019; Lamb, et al., 2021). The fourth strategy discussed in this model is focused on creating opportunities for dialogue to increase virtue literacy (Lamb, et al., 2021). Lamb, et al., (2021) postulate that “. . . dialogue can help us to understand why specific virtues are important and how they can be developed, practiced, or applied . . .” (p. 23). Educators often used discussions of moral dilemmas to increase moral reasoning and the development of skills in ethical judgment. More recently, these discussions have evolved away from analysis and toward building the capacity to acquire the necessary language and virtue concepts needed to evaluate moral dilemmas – thus, increasing virtue literacy (Arthur, et al., 2017).

Method

Research Design

The rich background literature around virtue education provided the motivation to study the development of virtue literacy in aspiring school leaders. Scholars in the field of virtue ethics are inclined to agree that individuals continue to deepen their acquisition of virtues throughout a lifetime (Annas, 2011; Navarez, 2016; Swanton, 2016). Annas (2011) posits that the intentional threading of opportunities to explore and practice virtues throughout the curriculum can provide the time, experience, and habituation needed to develop and internalize virtuous behavior. A

similar stance is offered by Newstead et al., (2019) suggesting that moral leadership is informed by virtue, and mapping leadership virtues throughout the program curriculum can support the development of future leaders to be not only effective but also ethical. “The relationship between virtues and character suggests that virtues-based leadership development will facilitate the character development of leaders and the propensity for ethical leadership practices. . .” (Newstead *et al.*, 2019, p. 5).

The primary aim of this research was to explore whether intentional character & virtue-based interventions would advance leadership candidates’ perception, knowledge, and understanding of leader character virtues along with and their ability to reflect upon the appropriate application of these virtues (virtue reasoning). In addition, the data was studied to determine if there was an increase in the use of virtue language from the beginning to the end of this two-year leader preparation program. Instructional strategies, course activities, assignments, and aligned rubrics were intentionally designed to cultivate the development of virtue literacy. It is important to preface this study with an understanding of the unique nature of character education as well as the challenges associated with measuring the development of character. Kristjánsson (2015) describes Aristotelian character education as the umbrella terminology for moral education focused on the acquisition of virtues and the cultivation of good character. He ascertains that moral development is a lifelong process of not only acquiring a knowledge and understanding of virtues, but also repeatedly applying those virtues in authentic situations, thus internalizing virtuous habits (Kristjánsson, 2015).

The educational leadership curriculum at North Central College consists of a variety of activities, experiences, and challenges designed to better prepare aspiring leaders to exit the program as virtuous practitioners. With the intent of supporting growth in virtue perception and virtue knowledge & understanding, intervention participants engaged in:

- *Flipped classroom presentations around the targeted moral, intellectual, and civic virtues and performance strengths.* Leadership candidates in the initial and final program courses engaged with pre-recorded lectures housed in asynchronous modules on a weekly basis. This pedagogical approach allows candidates to learn at their own pace while also

taking responsibility for their own learning. Discussions around the asynchronous presentations were reinforced through either discussion board or face to face conversations.

- *Direct instruction focused on leadership virtues, character development, and practical wisdom.* Direct instruction during face-to-face or online synchronous meetings helps to develop foundational knowledge with the support and guidance of the instructor and classmates. Direct instruction sessions allow the instructor to present new material, demonstrate concepts, provide guided practice, and provide feedback on new learning.
- *Discussions focused on exploring leadership journal articles through the lens of virtue ethics.* Discussion around journal articles encourages active learning, deepens critical thinking skills, exposes students to diverse perspectives within a field, promotes intellectual engagement, and helps students develop their ability to analyze and interpret complex information.
- *Discussions around asynchronous presentations with the intentional threading of virtue language via questions and prompts.* Engaging students with questions and prompts around asynchronous presentations actively engages students with the material and encourages critical thinking. This can spark lively classroom discussions where students share different perspectives and build on each other's ideas. In addition, these discussions allow the instructor to assess understanding, facilitate discussion, and promote deeper learning by prompting active processing.
- *Dialogue around authentic ethical dilemmas to increase virtue literacy.* Using dialogue around ethical dilemmas in the classroom encourages critical thinking, empathy for different perspectives, personal reflection, and the development of ethical decision-making skills. As they dialogue, students actively discuss and analyze complex moral issues, consider various viewpoints and potential consequences of their choices. These experiences help in preparing them to navigate real-life ethical situations with greater awareness and responsibility.
- *Assignment rubrics requiring specific virtue literacy criteria.* Rubrics help clarify expectations and help students understand how to meet those expectations. Adding character and/or virtue focused criteria to assignment rubrics encourages reflective practice and character development.

Two research questions sought to determine if and to what extent participants demonstrated the following:

- Will cohort candidates participating in character & virtue-based interventions demonstrate advancements in the development of virtue literacy in the initial course of an educational leadership program?
- Will cohort candidates participating in character & virtue-based interventions maintain and/or continue to demonstrate improvement along with a deepening understanding in the area of virtue literacy at the end of a two-year program?

Participants

From the summer of 2021 through the fall of 2024, participants in the research study included a convenience sampling composed of 49 candidates enrolled in an Educational Leadership Program leading to M. Ed. with Principal Endorsement in Illinois. The five distinct cohorts included 33 female and 16 male aspiring school leader candidates. Each participant was a practicing educator with a minimum of two-years of experience. A wide variety of roles were represented in the participant groups including classroom teachers (preschool, elementary, middle school, high school, all levels of special educators) and school support personnel (counselors, social workers, school psychologists, instructional coaches, reading specialists, technology coaches, interventionists, transition specialists, band/vocal directors, assistant principals).

Procedure

This mixed method study used both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze data. Qualitative data is descriptive and non-numerical, focusing on qualities and characteristics; while quantitative data is numerical and measurable, focusing on quantities and amounts. In this study the exploration of virtue language frequencies involved the qualitative approach of collecting and analyzing numerical data. In particular, the qualitative portion of the study explored how often specific virtues appeared in the data set. This qualitative approach was used to measure the use of specific virtue language in the first semester and then again at the conclusion of the educational leadership program. The virtue frequency counts produced via the Dedoose qualitative software represent the number of times each of the 16 program-specific virtues

occurred in the data set. The data was then organized into tables according to the categories of intellectual, moral, civic virtues, and performance strengths.

The qualitative portion of the study involved an exploration of the words, descriptions, and interpretation found in students’ writing samples. By allowing participants to express themselves freely, qualitative research can reveal unexpected patterns, opinions, and issues that might not be captured through standardized questions. Collecting rich, detailed data through open-ended questions allowed for the exploration of complex phenomena, uncovering of nuanced meanings, and a deeper exploration of participants perspectives and motivations.

Qualitative data for this study was collected prior to the start of the first course of a graduate educational leadership program, at the end of that initial course, and again at the conclusion of the two-year program. Aspiring school leaders completed writing samples responding to specific prompts at the three aforementioned distinct points throughout the program:

- *How would you describe an ideal school leader?*
- *Share your impressions of an effective and ethical school leader you have known.*
- *What character strengths describe the type of school leader you aspire to become?*

Figure 1. Educational Leadership Program Leadership Virtues



The data were initially analyzed using the cloud-based application Dedoose. This research tool was initially used to run frequency counts using 16 program specific virtues as codes. The frequency tests produced counts for virtue terminology in pre-, post, and post-post writing samples.

Next, emic codes were created based on the definition of virtue literacy offered by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue. Analysis involved a close read of coded excerpts to choose representative (emblematic) samples for discussion.

Disaggregated data

- Each sample was labeled by cohort (e.g. Summer 2021)
- Each sample was also labeled (Pre, Post, Post-Post)
- Each sample was labeled with numeric identification

Disaggregating writing samples allowed for analysis across cohorts

- Samples Total:
 - Pre 49
 - Post 49
 - Post-Post 49

Results – Virtue Frequencies

Table 1. Intellectual Virtues Frequency Counts

Critical thinking		
Pre 0/49	Post 8/49 (16%)	Post-Post 4/49 (8%)
Curiosity		
Pre 1/49 (2%)	Post 2/49 (4%)	Post-Post 9/49 (18%)
Judgment		
Pre 2/49 (2%)	Post 7/49 (14%)	Post-Post 5/49 (10%)
Reflection/reflect		
Pre 18/49 (37%)	Post 44/49 (90%)	Post-Post 22/49 (45%)

An analysis of participants use of the intellectual virtues in their writing samples demonstrates that the pre and post counts moved in a positive directory over the course of the first semester. While not as large as seen in the pre-post data, the pre- to post-post frequency maintained an increase for all four intellectual virtues at the end of the program. The intellectual virtues of curiosity (1/49 2% – 9/49 18%) and reflection (18/49 37% - 22/49 45%) demonstrated noteworthy increases over the two years period of the study.

Table 2. Moral Virtues Frequency Counts

Gratitude/grateful		
Pre 3/49 (6%)	Post 2/49 (4%)	Post-Post 5/49 (10%)
Courage		
Pre 6/49 (12%)	Post 43/49 (88%)	Post-Post 29/49 (59%)
Integrity		
Pre 15/49 (31%)	Post 14/49 (29%)	Post-Post 38/49 (77%)
Respect/respectful		
Pre 21/49 (43%)	Post 34/49 (69%)	Post-Post 36/49 (73.5%)

An analysis of participants use of the moral virtues demonstrates that the pre to post counts in the first semester fluctuated. However, the pre- to post-post frequency increased for each moral virtue. The virtues of courage, integrity, and respect demonstrated noteworthy increases over the two-year period of the study.

Table 3. Civic Virtues Frequency Counts

Citizen/Citizenship		
Pre 3/49 (6%)	Post 3/49 (6%)	Post-Post 9/49 (18%)
Service/ Servant Leader		
Pre 3/49 (6%)	Post 16/49 (33%)	Post-Post 29/49 (59%)
Social Responsibility		
Pre 2 (4%)	Post 11 (22%)	Post-Post 12/49 (24.5%)
Justice		
Pre 3 (6%)	Post 19/49 (39%)	Post-Post 13/49 (25%)

An analysis of participants use of the civic virtues demonstrates that the pre and post counts moved in a positive direction for three of the four civic virtues with citizenship remaining unchanged. The pre- to post-post data displayed shows an increase in all four civic virtues, with the virtues of service, social responsibility, and justice demonstrating noteworthy increases in the two-year period of the study.

Table 4. Performance Virtues Frequency Counts

Collaboration/collaborate/collaborative		
Pre 23/49 (47%)	Post 41/49 (84%)	Post-Post 42/49 (85%)
Resilient/Resilience		
Pre 4/49 (8%)	Post 8/49 (16%)	Post-Post 15/49 (30%)
Steward/Stewardship		
Pre 0/49	Post 1/49 (2%)	Post-Post 1/49 (2%)

Advocate/Advocacy		
Pre 5/49 (10%)	Post 6/49 (12%)	Post-Post 8/49 (16%)

Participants use of the performance virtues in their writing samples illustrates a positive trajectory in pre- to post data. The pre- to post-post data demonstrates an increase in the use of all four performance virtues, with a noticeable increase in the frequency of the performance virtue of collaboration in writing samples.

Results – Virtue Literacy

Emic codes based on the Jubilee Centre’s definition of virtue literacy were created during a deeper dive into the writing samples. The first exploration focused on virtue perception – noticing situations involving or standing in need of the virtues. The following quotes from candidates’ writing samples represent emblematic excerpts aligned with virtue perception.

Pre – “An ethical leader implements new changes that are in the best interests of students and staff while also being able to put their foot down when needed.”

Post – “I find it extremely important that the school leader portray an ethical foundation. An effective and ethical leader I have gotten to know this year is a leader who came into our school [a school] with a history of major trust issues. She came in and clearly established all goals would be aligned with our district goals. From there she went over our building goals. Then she challenged each of us to work on goals that aligned with the building goals. It has been amazing to watch as we are meeting goals within a few months because we are all focused on the same things. This has been effective in bringing our teachers together and aligning us to collaborate more naturally. I find that this leader shows virtues of courage, honesty, and integrity.”

Post-Post – “Relationships are essential to school leaders as well as curiosity and reflection. Curiosity is needed because effective leaders should always be lead learners. They should model a growth mindset and learn from their mistakes and successes. An

ideal school leader implements character education and positive school culture initiatives with fidelity and understands that social emotional learning is the foundation for academic success. Lastly, an ideal school leader should grow leaders and practice distributed leadership to provide staff opportunities for growth.”

The second focus was related to virtue knowledge & understanding— understanding the meaning of the virtue term and why the virtue is important, individually and as part of a well-rounded, flourishing life of overall virtue, and being able to apply the virtue to episodes of one’s own and others’ lives. The following quotes from candidates’ writing samples represent emblematic excerpts aligned with virtue knowledge & understanding.

Pre: *“Fairness, social & emotional intelligence, kindness, and teamwork” . . . “I will need to have patience. . .”*

Post: *“I aspire to become a leader who is courageous, just, compassionate, self-reflective, and acts with integrity. As a leader I will strive to be collaborative in decision-making, but also to have the fortitude to stand up for what is right even in situations where that courage can feel uncomfortable. I hope to become a leader who consistency makes intentional decisions in order to model the virtues and values that I expect to see in my staff.”*

Post-Post: *“This leader was a great example of visionary leadership, emotional intelligence, and ethical integrity. They foster a culture of inclusivity, collaboration, and continuous improvement, prioritizing both academic achievement and the well-being of students, staff, and the larger community. This leader empowers others by cultivating shared leadership, creating spaces for open dialogue, and encouraging innovative practices. An ideal school leader also has the resilience to navigate challenges with grace and the humility to learn from both successes and failures.”*

The final exercise probed for evidence related to virtue reasoning – discernment and deliberative action about virtues, including situations where virtues conflict or collide. The following quotes from candidates’ writing samples represent emblematic excerpts aligned with virtue reasoning.

***Pre** – “School leaders can often be faced with tough decisions, which is why a strong moral compass is crucial to develop in an administrative position.”*

***Post** – “Having the trustworthy character strength will help me lead my school better. Teachers, staff, and students would create better relationships with me and be more open to changes and directions. Having the equitable character strength will help all students and staff succeed to the best of their ability. Students would all have equal opportunities to learn, as well as teachers having equal opportunities to grow as an educator. Having the integrity character strength is extremely important as a leader to ensure I am making decisions in a moral and ethical way. I would need to consider all stakeholders and do what is best for everyone. Lastly, the kind character strength is extremely important for building trust and creating relationships. Being kind to students and staff shows that you care about them and want what is best for them.”*

***Post-Post** – “Based on the four virtues, I aspire to become a model of judgment, integrity, civility and resilience as an educational leader. While there are more virtues and character strengths that are inspiring, a couple fall onto the umbrella of these four character virtues. While reflection is an essential, perhaps most important or one of my favorite virtues, I recognize that judgment happens continuously in the decisions made by an educational leader, and certainly one virtue that I seek to improve upon. There are thousands of decisions per month that are made by a leader, and for all of them, specifically the ones requiring immediate attention, judgment is an important part of character. A second virtue shaping my inspiration as a character leader is integrity. Courage and honesty are critical, although I see these virtues under the umbrella of integrity.”*

Discussion

Jubilee Centre researchers agree that character can be taught, caught, sought, and is holistically measurable (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, (2022)). However, there are a plethora of concerns regarding the lack of valid tools designed to measure virtue and character development (Kristjánsson, 2015; Wright, et al., 2021). Wright, et al., (2021) believe that educators need a clear concept of virtue and character as well as ways to measure the success of character-based interventions. Kristjánsson (2015) notes that even when objective criteria are utilized, clear and accurate interpretation of those findings remains problematic. Most of the existing character and virtue instruments take the form of self-report tools which have the potential to provide information regarding virtue and character development, but these tools are limited by a surfeit of issues (Kristjánsson, 2015; Wright, et al., 2021).

The research study was guided by these questions:

- 1.) Will cohort candidates participating in character & virtue-based interventions demonstrate advancements in the development of virtue literacy in the initial course of an educational leadership program? and,
- 2.) Will cohort candidates participating in character & virtue-based interventions maintain and/or continue to demonstrate improvement along with a deepening understanding in the area of virtue literacy at the end of a two- year program?

Throughout the three years of this study, an abundance of qualitative data was gathered from candidates' pre, post, and post-post writing samples. The examination of the data involved the management of a plethora of metrics in a manner that could inform analysis and judgment (Mueller, 2018). Qualitative data offers a vehicle for a deeper understanding of the perceptions of participants. The danger of personal and subjective judgment certainly exists; but combined with careful judgment, qualitative data can provide insights that provide depth to the quantitative numbers (Mueller, 2018). The qualitative data analysis undertaken in this study offered an opportunity to understand how aspiring school leaders began to internalize virtue perception, knowledge & understanding, and apply virtue reasoning.

Virtue Frequency Data

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue (2022) describes these categories of virtue as building blocks that support the development of character. King (2021) describes intellectual virtues as positive dispositions related to truth, knowledge, and understanding that require thought motivation and action. Similarly, the Jubilee Center posits that intellectual virtues are character traits necessary for discernment, right action, and the pursuit of knowledge, truth and understanding.

Intellectual virtues can be described as deep personal qualities or character strengths required for wise thinking and deep learning. The data displayed in Table 1 suggests that leadership candidates in this study moved in a positive trajectory in their use of the intellectual virtues of critical thinking, curiosity, judgment, and reflection from pre- to post-post writing samples. The virtue of reflection appeared in 45% of the final writing samples. Interestingly, references to the virtue of judgment improved only slightly from the pre- to post-post writing samples. This may be a semantic issue that could be attributed to the emphasis within all program courses on the use of the term practical wisdom, particularly in ethical dilemmas and problem-solving scenarios.

Wright, et al., (2021) note that moral virtues are considered virtues of character in the Aristotelian sense. The Jubilee Centre (2022) defines moral virtues as character traits that enable individuals to act wisely when an ethical response is warranted. Table 2 offers a snapshot of the moral virtues captured in the Dedoose frequency count. The data suggests that candidates' use of moral virtues increased for all four from pre- to post-post writing samples. Integrity was found in 77% of the writing samples completed at the end of the program; the virtue of respect appeared in 73.5% of the final samples. Courage was referenced in 59% of the samples. Moral virtues were noted as essential to ethical leadership, which is aligned with the thinking that moral virtues (or lack of) can be seen in a leader's actions and interactions with others.

Civic virtues tend to result from the cultivation of habits important for the success of a society. Civic virtues are frequently linked to the concept of citizenship and extend beyond family and friends to society as a whole (King, 2021). The Jubilee Centre (2022) states that civic virtues are the foundation for engaged and responsible citizenship. The frequency data displayed in Table 3

reveals gains in the use of the terms citizenship, service, social responsibility, and justice from pre- to post-post writing samples. References to the concept of service, including servant leadership, was found in 59% of the writing samples across the two years of this leadership program.

Performance strengths can be described as traits that enable individuals to fulfill their potential as well as habits of action. While sometimes described as ‘soft skills’, performance virtues can be seen as having instrumental value in enabling the intellectual, moral, and civic virtues (Jubilee Centre, 2022). The data in Table 4 showcases a steady forward progression in the use of performance virtue language. The virtue of collaboration stands out as it was referenced in 85% of the post-post writing samples. This trend may have been facilitated by the program emphasis on collective wisdom supported by the regular participation in small breakout conversations and working in teams to grapple with ethical dilemmas.

Overall, the largest percentage of increase in virtue language was represented by the four civic virtues of citizenship, service, social responsibility, and justice. References to the moral virtues of gratitude, courage, integrity, and respect demonstrated the second largest increase; the performance virtues of collaboration, resilience, stewardship, and advocacy followed. The smallest gains were in the use of the intellectual virtues of critical thinking, curiosity, judgment, and reflection.

Virtue Literacy

There appears to be a gap in the literature in terms of exploring the development of virtue literacy with adult learners. Empirical studies have found that young students can acquire virtue literacy and learn to apply virtue language through the study of literature (Arthur, Harrison and Davison, 2015). For example, literacy projects such as Knightly Virtues highlight the success of using of literature in virtue literacy with elementary age students (Davison et al., 2016). Research specifically using text conducted by Frernandez-Quinanill (2020), has shown positive trend of participants using virtue terminology. Although these studies were conducted with younger students, they reinforce the notion that the development virtue literacy is more than the

development of vocabulary. Virtue literacy development requires a focus on perception, knowledge and understanding, and deliberative application.

Moving to the virtue literacy element of virtue perception, excerpts from pre-writing samples denoted that candidates generally noticed or commented that virtues were important. In post writing samples candidates tended to describe and evaluate situations where virtues can/should be utilized. There was a noticeable increase from 10% pre to 61% post. The post-post narratives illustrate that candidates further elaborated on both virtues and their application. There was another noticeable increase to 80% of participants describing situations that demand virtues.

An exploration of writing samples focused on virtue knowledge & understanding revealed that in pre-writing samples candidates tended to name virtues and note that they are desirable for leaders. In post writing samples candidates moved toward naming and describing virtues and narratives demonstrate an understanding of their application and value. Candidates continued to name and describe virtues and offer comments demonstrating understanding of their application and value in post-post writing samples. This was especially cited in terms of having a positive influence on school culture and being helpful in scaling up capacity in others.

Probing the writing samples for elements of virtue reasoning provided evidence that in pre-writing samples candidates generally recognized that virtues were important and showed some level of discernment. Post writing samples indicated candidates were beginning to use their growing knowledge of virtue reasoning and ethical leadership to describe in detail how virtues play out in authentic contexts. In post-post writing samples, candidates tended to apply knowledge of virtue reasoning and ethical leadership in a similar fashion as demonstrated in the post assessment. However, there was a slight increase in the percentage of participants who discussed and applied their knowledge to either the leader they aspire to become or to an ethical leader they have known.

In summary, the emblematic excerpts revealed that aspiring leaders moved from naming virtues as desirable (prior to the first course), to naming, describing, and demonstrating an understanding of the application and value of virtues (at the conclusion of the first course), and finally naming,

describing, and demonstrating an understanding of the application and value of virtues to positively influence the school environment and scale up the capacity of the school community.

Conclusion

Limitations

There are several limitations that must be considered in this research study. To begin, this study was not intended to present generalizable findings, and the conclusions are applicable only to this unique educational leadership program. The data collected will primarily be used to improve future programming. That being noted, the findings may also be of interest to other institutions and programs focused on the development of virtue literacy in aspiring leaders. The study is also limited due to the small data set and the fact that the convenience sampling presents the possibility of bias. This small sample size does not provide the quantity of data needed to extrapolate findings to larger populations.

Potential applications

This manuscript shares the analysis of qualitative data representing one effort to cultivate virtue literacy in a graduate educational leadership program. The findings of this small study are promising, given that the participants demonstrated a positive trajectory in the use of virtue terminology and in the development of virtue literacy. The findings may have the potential to spark a larger conversation around the value of intentionally infusing leadership preparation programs with interventions designed to build virtue literacy. Postgraduate candidates represent a population that has been neglected in the field of character and virtue development. The modest improvements demonstrated in this study suggest that grounds do exist for ongoing research in the cultivation of virtue literacy in postgraduate candidates, particularly those in leadership preparation programs. Future research might incorporate larger samples by partnering with leadership faculty in other institutions. In addition, future studies might incorporate additional quantitative and self-report measures to triangulate the data.

Concluding comments

The aim of this research study and this paper has been to explore how character and virtue-based interventions could be integrated into a postgraduate course to show an increase in the use of virtue terminology as well as in the development of virtue literacy. The results of the frequency count demonstrate that 11 of the 16 targeted virtues showed an observable increase in usage. In addition, the emblematic excerpts underscore the development of virtue literacy components.

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