

LASAR Epistemic Insight Project Symposium

Character Education

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Character formation has been intrinsic to notions of education since the earliest times and is embedded in the thought of philosophers such as Aristotle and the teachings of religious leaders.

Some contemporary visions of character education have focused on the performance and citizenship dimensions which are relatively quantifiable and with definable outcomes such as economic output and compliance with legal systems. In particular, it is clear from UK Government documents that policy emphasis in this context is focussed on what might be termed ‘performance character’ in areas such as resilience, leadership and teamwork. Another important aspect of character is, however, ‘moral character’ which relates to the full development of the person, notions of flourishing, and how this relates to the individual’s or society’s understanding of what it is to be human.

Additionally, it appears that current efforts in character education are aimed at seeking specific places within the curriculum or school structure in which to locate the subject. Thus, funding is being given to sports organisations to promote resilience, leadership and teamwork and material is being developed for citizenship classes elsewhere. The recently opened Birmingham University School has character education as intrinsic to its mission yet presents such education through specified character mentor sessions at set times in the school week. This raises the question of whether character education can/should be seen as any other ‘subject’ in education with efforts to clearly delineate the subject boundaries and outcomes, define times and places in which it is taught, and associate its delivery with specified subject experts.

Work as part of the Being Human project has indicated a number of issues which may impact on attempts to integrate character education into the school curriculum:

- A high level of compartmentalisation of subject material based on curriculum areas. Thus, young people are very adept at limiting some ideas and ways of thinking to specific classrooms or when speaking to particular teachers. Even more so when considering appropriate answers to questions in particular subjects. This indicates that young people are very adept at putting on certain subject ‘masks’ in which they present what they perceive as desired



characteristics in particular subjects. There is little reason to presume that this will be different for character education if a standard compartmentalised model is used.

- Strong notions of reductionism and determinism in their understanding of science. This is apparent in research outcomes that indicate belief in the genetic determination of personality and the limitation of personal choice and free will. This has implications for their belief in the notion of character formation per se and of its value.
- A tendency towards conflict models between subject areas that appear to make differing claims about reality. This is perhaps most apparent with regard to science and religion but is also apparent in broader relationships between science and culture. Linked with this is a development of unconscious creeping scientism in which scientific knowledge is placed at the top of a hierarchy and other forms of knowledge are devalued or dismissed. If character education is taught in a compartmentalised way it is likely to become subject to a similar process of scientific evaluation. Similarly, if certain elements within character education are presented as being ‘scientific’ in their origins then it is possible that other areas will be reduced in value compared to them.

