Character and Resilience in English Education Policy: Social Mobility, Self-governance, and Biopolitics

In recent years, character education has enjoyed a resurgence of interest in different national contexts. In England, the publication of a ‘Character and Resilience Manifesto’ by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility in 2014 put character education on the government’s agenda, primarily as a means to improve social mobility. Drawing on Foucault’s notion of ‘problematization’, this article examines how ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ are constructed and legitimised through expert knowledges in the Manifesto. We find that by drawing on evidence from psychology and behavioural economics, ‘character’ is predominantly understood as a set of skills and dispositions to be developed in order to boost individual labour market outcomes and wider economic growth. Hence, social mobility is framed a (increasingly) biological and psychological understanding following a logic of human capital enhancement. Contextualising the findings in Foucault’s work on ‘governmentality’ and ‘biopolitics’, we argue that the call for character education is part of a wider intensification of the demand for self-government and self-investment – a demand that is particularly pronounced for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Keywords: character education; biopolitics; governmentality; education policy; social mobility; resilience

# Introduction

In the United Kingdom, explicit forms of character education have seen a renaissance over the last 15 years (Allen & Bull, 2018; Ecclestone, 2012; Kisby, 2017). The publication of a ‘Character and Resilience Manifesto’ by the All-Party Parliamentary group on Social Mobility (Paterson, Tyler & Lexmond, 2014) is an indicator of the broad support for character education across the political spectrum in England. In the wake of the manifesto, former education secretary Nicky Morgan announced a £3.5 million grant scheme to support character education projects in schools and other organisations with the aim to make England a ‘global leader’ in teaching character in 2014 (Department for Education, 2014). After a second round of funding was made available in 2016, the initiative was replaced in 2017 by a £22 million scheme to develop ‘essential life skills’ in twelve ‘opportunity areas’ across England. Despite this development, it appears that character education is here to stay: In his first speech in January 2018, newly appointed Education Secretary for England, Damian Hinds, suggested that ‘soft-skills’, including ‘character and resilience’ were ‘important for what anybody can achieve in life, as well as for the success of our economies.’ (Department for Education, 2018).

While character education is a century-old phenomenon, we can observe a recent resurgence in a range of countries, including in Italy (e.g. Maccarini 2016), the US (e.g. Smagorinsky & Taxel 2005; Saltman, 2014), Canada (e.g. Winton 2008), Australia (e.g. Cranston, Kimber, Mulford, Reid, & Keating, 2010), and Singapore (Tan & Tan 2014). In the USA, character education in schools has been promoted since the 1990s through non-profit organisations, such as Character.org (https://character.org)1, whileCanada has seen government-orchestrated initiatives at district level (Winton, 2008, 2010). Critics have argued that the adopted models are largely based on ‘traditional’ (Winton, 2008) or ‘simple’ (Davis, 2003) approaches to character education with a focus on transmitting values through methods based on a ‘negative’ behaviourist understandings of human nature (Winton, 2008).

These value-based approaches to character education have more recently given way to (although they are not necessarily incompatible with) transnational educational agendas which emphasise the development of skills – variably branded ‘21st century skills’, ‘social and emotional skills’ or non-cognitive skills’ (see for example, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015; World Bank, 2017). Influenced by research in the fields of cognitive and positive psychology, spearheaded by figures such as Martin Seligman, Angela Duckworth and James Heckman, character is now widely defined as encompassing both traits relating to performance, such as ‘grit’ and ‘resilience’, and ethical values and understanding (see, for example, character.org, 2018). While appealing to psychological notions of wellbeing, the recent emphasis on character in policy is markedly influenced by a new human capital paradigm, according to which the development of personal traits is imperative for future economic prosperity. This ‘widening of the concept of human capital’ (Sellar and Zipin, 2018, p. 4) appears key to the re-emergence of character education in recent years.

Both character education initiatives from 1990s and 2000s and the latest efforts of developing ‘non-cognitive skills’ have been criticised for being part of neo-conservative or neo-liberal policies with the aim to promote market-values and shape conformist and competitive citizens (see Winton, 2008; Kohn, 1997; Allen and Bull, 2018). In this paper, we take a step back and analyse the conditions that make current thinking about ‘character’ possible. We examine the discursive construction of ‘character’ in the United Kingdom, focussing on the Character and Resilience Manifesto, published in 2014 (Paterson, Tyler & Lexmond, 2014), which we regard as central to influencing the government agenda. A previous analysis of the document by Burman (2018) highlights the ways in which emotion is evoked in the document and observes a ‘recoding’ of feelings and traits as ‘masculine’ and argues that the document precludes critical engagement with character education and an analysis of social dimensions along the lines of class, gender and race.

In this article, we draw on the notion of ‘problematization’ (Foucault, 1994; Webb, 2014) in order to analyse how ‘character education’ is cast as a problem and solution to (perceived) social mobility problems and is indicative of a shift in the government of populations. In doing so, we not only add to the emerging body of critical scholarship on character education, but also contribute to existing literature on psychological governance in social and education policy (see, de Vos, 2012; Ecclestone, 2017; Pykett, Jones & Whitehad, 2016). In our analysis, we show how the call for social mobility is framed by drawing on a (increasingly) biological and psychological understanding, following a logic of human capital enhancement. We argue that this is likely to result in an intensified imperative on individuals to improve their biological ‘capital’, a demand that affects disadvantaged groups more acutely.

The following section outlines the conceptual and methodological approach adopted in the paper. This is followed by a summary of the context of the Character and Resilience Manifesto and three analysis sections that examine the document. Finally, we discuss the findings in light of Foucault’s notion of biopolitics and highlight implications that follow from the infiltration of bio-psychological knowledge into the educational field. We conclude by calling for a critical debate of current forms of character education, including the assumptions and values underpinning them.

# Character Education from the perspective of governmentality and biopolitics

This paper draws on Foucault's notions of ‘governmentality’ and ‘biopolitics’ in order to analyse how the CRM problematizes the behaviour, dispositions, and internal make-up of the individual and wider population, and seeks to shape these towards certain governmental ends. Governmentality refers to ‘[h]ow we think about governing others and ourselves in a wide variety of contexts’, and ‘in a more limited sense, the different ways governing is thought about in the contemporary world and which can in large part be traced to Western Europe from the sixteenth century’ (Dean 2010, p. 267).

Governmentality refers to the ‘conduct of conduct’, that is, the ways in which conduct and subjectivity are shaped by the self and others in myriad different sites. As Ball (2013, p. 121, *italics in original*) puts it, governmentality ‘*refers not to forms of domination but technologies of government that may lead to a state of domination’,* usefullyciting as an example the articulation of ‘a new kind of [neoliberal] individualism that draws upon “character” and worth to explain and justify inequalities, that constructs its own particular subjectivities, and that insinuates itself in our ethical practices’ (ibid, p. 121).

Such objectifications of those in need of ‘repair’ and ‘intervention’, moreover, are significant when considering Foucault’s concept ‘biopolitics’, which broadly refers to the management and regulation of population by diverse authorities. The techniques of biopolitics are regulatory, implicated in what Stoler (1995, p. 82) calls the ‘bio-regulation of the state’ and ‘concerned with the internal dangers to society at large’ (Ball, 2013, p. 45). It is important to add here that, while the domains and knowledges of the bio-political target the pathology and vitality of the biological and medical body, they also problematize and target the social, cultural, moral, behavioural and economic body – what Dean (2010) calls ‘[bio-economic’ and ‘bio-sociological’ forms of problematization](#_ENREF_77).

Biopolitics hence comprises ‘fields of visibility’, which encompass various, more or less rationalized, operations which serve to intervene into the vitality of human populations and their vital existences (Rabinow & Rose, 2006). Indeed, the CRM (p. 5) notes that ‘policymakers and practitioners have a key role to play in encouraging the development of Character and Resilience throughout the population’. As Lemm and Vatter (2017, pp. 40-41) suggest,

… the Foucaultian idea that biological existence is reflected in political existence…develops a conception of life as a function of a discourse about how best to govern and control this very life. Today a typical example…is the concept of resilience where ideas about biology are meshed together with discourses on public policy and genres of self-help…With biopolitics it is the human species as a species of living beings that becomes the subject of political rationality and government.

While the relationships between Foucault’s ’governmentality’ and ‘biopolitics’ are subject to ongoing debate in the literature (see, for example, Dean, 2010; Lemke, 2011), here we consider them as two interrelated ‘forms or levels of power which intertwine with the aim of the management of the population’ (Ball, 2013, p. 45). Rather than treating these concepts separately, then, we take Lemke’s (2011, p. 9) approach of ‘rearticulating the concept of bio-politics from within an analytics of government’. This will be in order to show how ‘bio-politics does not only include the physical [and subjective] being, but also its moral and political existence’ (ibid, p. 9). Taken together, this conceptual apparatus aims to address, locate and identify the rising ‘biological’ imperatives in policy towards the problematization and shaping of conduct, indexed at the level of both the individual *and* the population.

# Policy problematization as analytical lens

Our analysis of the Character and Resilience Manifesto (henceforth referred to as ‘the Manifesto’ or ‘CRM’) is an instance of ‘policy problematization’, a post-structural approach to policy analysis informed by the thought of Michel Foucault (1994, 1986). Foucault practised a dual understanding of problematization in his work. On the one hand, it is a diagnostic tool for exploring the productive intersections between knowledge and power, that is, those (historical) practices of government whereby diverse experts or authorities, and the knowledges they postulate as ‘truths’, converge around and contribute expertise to an issue considered to be of some pressing social, economic, moral and/or political (read: governmental) importance.2 As Foucault (1994, p. 670) notes, problematization,

… does not mean the representation of a pre-existent object nor the creation through discourse of an object that did not exist. It is the ensemble of discursive and non-discursive practices that make something enter into the play of true and false and constitute it as an object of thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.).

On the other hand, for Foucault problematization is a research sensibility or ethos of critique described by Bacchi (2012) as ‘thinking problematically’. This latter understanding relates to Foucault’s interest in the archaeology of knowledge and genealogy of power, two interrelated, supplementary but still quite distinct modes of historical enquiry (Koopman, 2008).

In this paper, we draw on the notion of ‘policy problematization’ in particular as elaborated by Carol Bacchi and Taylor Webb. Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, p. 34, citing Rabinow, 2003, p. 49, and citing Foucault, 1986, pp. 12-13) note that

To undertake this kind of analysis Foucault recommends starting from “practical texts”, “the supposedly minor texts of those who actually made policy and wielded power”. These policy texts, he tells us, introduce “programmes of conduct written for the purpose of offering rules, opinion and advice on how to behave as one should”.

It is for this reason that we consider the *governmental* work of the CRM, that is, how it articulates ways of thinking about, rationalising and practising governing, and in particular how it articulates an ‘ideal’ relation between the state and its citizens in a post-welfare context. More specifically, we draw on Webb’s articulation of ‘policy problematization’ as a form of policy analysis that not only addresses the contingency of policy knowledge and production (and enactment), but also critiques ‘the persistence of rationalistic policy methodologies that claim to solve problems’ (2014, p. 365, emphasis in original). As Webb (2014, p. 365) puts it, this is about problematizing ‘education policy rather than accepting the normative practices of government, institutions and analysts that weigh policy down with developing, designing, implementing, and evaluating solutions’. Furthermore, Webb argues for paying attention to the temporal dimension of policy: in addition to analysing a policy’s past (recursion), we also need to engage with the utopias and fantasies created by policy and, going beyond these, the ‘heterotopias’, i.e. ‘analytic space that signals the creative possibilities within a policy problematization” (ibid, p. 370). While we do comment on the temporal dimensions of character education policy, Webb’s further elucidation of problematization as opening up creative possibilities and responses could be further explored in subsequent research.

In order to develop the notion of problematization for the analysis of the Character and Resilience Manifesto, we draw on Dean’s (2010) four overlapping dimensions or axes of government, which together comprise what he terms an *analytics of government*: fields of visibility, the episteme of government, the techne of government, and the formation of individual and collective identities. The following questions have initially guided our analysis: what aspects of ‘the body and/or the soul’ constitute ‘character’? What ‘problem’ is identified to which character is the ‘solution’? On what forms of knowledge is this based? What is the difference with regard to earlier forms? How does this (re)inscribe ideal relations between the state and its citizens?

# The Character and Resilience Manifesto

The Character and Resilience Manifesto (Paterson, Tyler & Lexmond, 2014) was published in 2014 by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Mobility3 in collaboration with liberal think tank CentreForum (now Education Policy Institute)4, and research and innovation company Character Counts5. The publication of the CRM followed the 2013 ‘Character and resilience summit’, organised by the APPG on Social Mobility. The Manifesto itself traces its origin back to the report ‘Seven key truths about social mobility’ from 2012 (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility, 2012), published shortly after the inception of the group and based on a consultation with ‘expert witnesses’ from academia, politics, non-governmental organisations and the private sector.

The Manifesto is divided in two parts; the first part discusses the relationship between character, resilience and social mobility, citing predominantly research that investigates the relationship between ‘non-cognitive skills’, educational and labour market outcomes, and, hence, social mobility. Part two of the Manifesto sets out 18 policy recommendations in relation to ‘early years’, ‘school’ and ‘transition to adulthood and employment’, drawing on research literature and a number of case studies that exemplify ‘good practice’ both from the UK and abroad. As we will show in the following analysis sections, the call for character development is predominantly underpinned through a mobilisation of the biological, by drawing on research from the fields of personality psychology and behavioural economics, presenting ‘non-cognitive skills’ as key to educational and labour market outcomes.

# Social (im)mobility and the cure of character

This section analyses the ways in which the CRM renders ‘character and resilience’ visible, and, hence, ‘governable’ and ‘intelligible’. It also begins to analyse the ‘epistemological’ dimension of government (Dean, 2010), examining the text for the images, metaphors and illustrations, the knowledges it draws on, and the logics and rationality it employs and constructs.

In the foreword, the CRM sets the scene through a number of questions it seeks to answer. The Manifesto is presented as the outcome of a process of gathering evidence in order to find solutions to:

… one of the most knotty and seemingly intractable social policy challenges we face as a country. Why do some talented children grow up to fulfil their ambitions and become leaders in any number of fields, while others never realise their full potential? What can be done to help more people succeed in life? How do we create a UK in which a person’s life chances are determined by their talent, not the circumstances of their birth? (CRM, p. 4)

The quotation indicates that a lack of upward social immobility – although not explicitly mentioned – is identified as a key ‘problem’ for policy; it is presented foremost as a problem of unrealised human ‘potential’ in children from less privileged backgrounds, in particular those ‘talented’ children who are unable to reach the higher ranks of the professions (‘leaders in their fields’). Thus, the text creates a distinction between those disadvantaged children who are worthy of investment and those who are not, which indicates that the concern with social mobility is couched in an investment-return logic that privileges the development of human capital required to fuel economic productivity (Sellar, 2015; Spring, 2015). In a move to identify the cause for the problem of lacking upward mobility, the CRM (p. 4) asserts:

There is a growing body of research linking social mobility to social and emotional skills, which range from empathy and the ability to make and maintain relationships to application, mental toughness, delayed gratification and self-control. These research findings all point to the same conclusion: character counts.

Drawing on the authority of research, character is here presented as the solution to social immobility. This link between character and social immobility is further rendered intelligible by drawing on the ‘gap’ in outcomes for children from different backgrounds and the notion of a ‘chain’ to illustrate the idea of the intergenerational transmission of poverty and disadvantage:

After reviewing evidence across all stages of the life cycle, the report [‘Seven key truths about social mobility’ by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility, 2012] concluded that “personal resilience and emotional wellbeing are the missing link in the chain”.

The imaginaries of the cycle and the chain evoke the inevitability of a ‘viscous circle’ in which socially disadvantaged positions are passed on between the generations (akin to an inherited trait). While these images suggest a sequence in which one element is linked to the other in cause-effect relationship, they also harbour the promise of ‘breaking the chain’ through intervention – thus reinforcing notions of salvation that characterise much of the contemporary policy discourse on social mobility (see, for example, Maslen, 2018). The idea of a breakthrough scientific discovery is further emphasised by quoting a talk by former Prime Minister David Cameron on parenting, given at think tank Demos in 2010:

The increasing recognition of the relationship between these character-based skills and desirable life outcomes has been hailed by David Cameron as a “new law for social mobility” and “one of the most important findings in a generation for those who care about fairness and inequality” (CRM, p. 11).

The idea that social mobility is subject to a scientific ‘law’ seems contradictory to the way it is also depicted as a plague that has infested the nation:

Excitingly, this evidence suggests that concerted endeavours to enhance Character and Resilience could provide particularly fruitful ground for policy makers grappling with the stubborn blight of social immobility in Britain (CRM, p. 15).

While the image of a ‘blight’ suggests the workings of some higher power, a practical solution, namely enhancing character and resilience, is deemed possible. This contradiction may point to a shift in public policy to treat social problems like social mobility as (public) health issues. According to this logic, social problems spread like a disease, but have their roots and can be ‘treated’ by altering behaviour, attitudes and cultural norms (Author et al., 2017; Rose, 2007). It seems that on the one hand, that this is reflective of a policy approach that seeks to sell ‘magic bullets’, while suppressing other ‘solutions’ – e.g. targeting economic inequality, school funding etc. At the same time, the attention to the inner attributes of the individual suggests a shift towards an invasive form of government, i.e. a situation in which interventions are aimed at enabling individuals to control their thinking, feelings and behaviours.

# An alliance between behavioural economics and personality psychology

In this section we analyse the CRM for its ‘episteme’, that is we examine how the document ‘give[s] rise to specific forms of truth’ and ‘render[s] particular issues, domains and problems governable’ (Dean, 2010 p. 42). While the CRM draws on a range of sources of knowledge and expertise, there is a particularly marked influence of research from the fields of (personality) psychology and behavioural economics, ‘an emerging hybrid field’ that is increasingly drawn upon in public policy making (McGimpsey, Bradbury & Santori (2017). The CRM states that ‘character and resilience’, are used:

… as an umbrella term for a range of concepts variously categorised as aspects of social and emotional development and as ‘non-cognitive’ or – somewhat incongruously – ‘soft’ skills. In basic terms, these are the attributes that enable individuals to make the most of opportunities that present themselves, to stick with things when the going gets tough, to bounce back from adversity and to forge and maintain meaningful relationships. (CRM, p. 11)

The aspects highlighted in this definition suggest that ‘character’ is understood in a broad sense (‘umbrella term’), comprising or being equivalent with other labels, such as ‘non-cognitive skills’6 or ‘social and emotional’ skills – terms which have their origins in different psychological or behavioural paradigms.7

In the remainder of the Manifesto, character is equated with attributes connected to perseverance, resisting adversity and sociality, implying that children from disadvantaged backgrounds lack these attributes. As Taylor (2018) points out, there are choses in current character education discourse with Victorian approaches and their efforts instil the qualities of future-orientation and self-reliance in working-class individuals. The call on individuals to develop (‘mental’) toughness suggests that the Manifesto privileges a particular individualised version of the white, male middle-class subject (Burman, 2018). What becomes clear in the document is the close adherence to the terminology of ‘non-cognitive skills’ by relying heavily on the literature review by Gutman and Schoon (2013) and research by Chicago-based economist James J. Heckman.

In the CRM, these ‘non-cognitive skills’ are connected to social mobility based on the claim that there is a ‘growing body of research highlighting how character traits and resilience are directly linked to being able to do well both at school and in the workplace.’ (p. 5). This is further detailed and supported with references to James Heckman and Leon Feinstein:

There is now a well-established body of literature outlining a clear link between non-cognitive attributes and a range of desirable life outcomes. As Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman puts it, “Character matters”: “for many outcomes, personality measures are just as predictive as cognitive measures, even after controlling for family background and cognition. Moreover, standard measures of cognition are heavily influenced by personality traits.” (CRM, p. 12, citing Heckman, 2011a)

Similarly, in a UK context, Professor Leon Feinstein, Director of Evidence at the Early Intervention Foundation, has demonstrated “substantial labour market returns to non-academic human capital”, highlighting the importance of behavioural and psychological factors in the intergenerational transmission of inequality. (CRM, p. 13-14, citing Feinstein, 2000)

As these quotations demonstrate, ‘character’ is here imagined as a quantifiable entity and dimension of ‘human capital’ that can be can be invested in with the promise of (economic) return. According to this ‘new human capital paradigm’, advanced by James Heckman and others, investments in ‘character attributes’ are equally, or in some cases more predictive of economic outcomes than so-called ‘cognitive attributes’, such as IQ8. In the Manifesto, this assumption is taken up with enthusiasm, as also because ‘non-cognitive skills’ are presented as more malleable than IQ,9 in particular in the early years of a person’s life:

The evidence also makes clear that people are not just born with or without Character and Resilience traits. Rather, a person learns to develop and use these abilities throughout their life. They can be taught and learnt at all stages of life. (CRM, p. 5)

Analysis of high profile initiatives in the USA indicates not only that non-cognitive traits can be enhanced with positive results, but also that they may in some instances be more readily cultivated and sustained than enhancements in cognitive traits (at least as measured by IQ). (CRM, p. 15)

The idea that character traits are not innate and fixed, but can be learnt and developed, resonates with recent findings generated in the areas of neuroscience and epigenetics about the plasticity of the brain (see, for example, Gulson & Webb, 2018; Pitts-Taylor, 2010). These new scientific findings make it possible for the Manifesto to identify ‘character’ as the yet to be exploited target of policy interventions and to envisage a world in which the social is transformed by altering the psychological make-up of individuals. Through the confluence of psychology and economics in new human capital theory it is possible to side-step other policy approaches, such as economic reorganisation, investment in infrastructure, etc. Biology – encompassing the psychological – becomes the primary arena for government and consequently, the productivity of the population.

# Efficient ‘solutions’: Early intervention and improved parenting

This section examines the CRM through the lenses of ‘formation of identities’ and ‘techne’ (Dean, 2010). This includes identifying ‘what statuses, capacities, attributes and orientations are assumed of those who exercise authority and those who are to be governed’ (Dean, 2010, p. 43), and by ‘what means, mechanisms, procedures, instruments, tactics, techniques, technologies and vocabularies’ transformations of subjects are imagined to be achieved (Dean, 2010, p. 42).

Although the CRM asserts that the development of character and resilience should be developed across the population, its policy recommendations target in particular the behaviours and attitudes of children from disadvantaged backgrounds who are described as ‘less likely than their more fortunate peers to develop these [personal and social] skills’ (CRM, p. 12) and therefore less capable to ‘realise their full potential’ (CRM, p. 4). There is a marked emphasis on interventions in the early years, underpinned by the rationale of a ‘gap’ in cognitive development between children from different socio-economic backgrounds that widens with increasing age, a logic that has gained wide traction in policy circles and has inspired international organisations, such as the World Bank to invest in early years education (Hunkin, 2017).

The notion of early intervention is extended to character, stating that interventions

… must be targeted not only at cognitive outcomes but also at non-cognitive development. Indeed, he [James Heckman] finds a clear and significant economic return for investing in character capabilities early, particularly for disadvantaged children. (CRM, p. 19)

The quotation shows how character development, in particular for children from disadvantaged backgrounds is presented as a matter or economic rationality. While this rationale has been a characteristic of neo-liberal social and educational policies for some time, the influence of human capital theory on early years policy suggests an intensification of intervention in the inner make-up of individuals that is justified by drawing on biological knowledge, and, more specifically, brain development (Gillies and Edwards, 2016; McGimspey, Bradbury & Santori, 2017).

Subsequently, the Manifesto identifies poor parenting as the root of inadequate character development in disadvantaged children, citing Heckman’s statement that ‘“the true measure of child affluence and poverty is the quality of parenting”’ (CRM, p. 20, citing Heckman, 2011b). Casting the quality of parenting as the main indicator of poverty implies that interventions do not need to target material deprivation but deficient parental behaviours and attitudes. Based on this assumption, the subsequent part of the Manifesto makes a range of suggestions with view to helping poorer parents to change their behaviours. Although the document recommends ‘parenting advice and support to be considered the norm’ (CRM, p. 27), the reference to ‘poor parents’ makes clear whose behaviours are to be altered.

With Foucault, this could be read as an instance of ‘dividing practices’ whereby the population is divided into those who can, cannot yet or will not conduct themselves responsibly, with some groups identified for targeted biopolitical intervention and cure. This is consolidated by and legitimated in accordance with expert and authoritative invocations of the norm and the normal, a correlate of which is the legitimated exclusion, partitioning, and attempted correction of those deemed abnormal (Ball, 2013).

The various policy recommendations made in the Manifesto reflect both recent attempts to target and ‘turn around’ ‘troubled families’ (see, for example, National Audit Office, 2016) and the recent proliferation of ‘nudge’ in several areas of public policy aiming to alter the behaviours of the population towards more ‘responsible’ ways of living their lives (Bradbury, McGimpsey & Santori, 2013; Ecclestone, 2017; Pykett et al., 2016). This is based on the assumption that, in line with public health interventions, a complex *social* phenomenon like social mobility can be influenced by simple changes in (aggregated) *individual* behaviour. Thus, the CRM is an example of how ‘education policy functions as a kind of “attenuated” or “conjugate” vaccine for a variety of different societal and “schooling” problems’ (Gulson and Webb, 2017, p. 28). This latter point will be developed further in the next section, where we discuss the relevance of Foucault’s notion of biopolitics for our analysis of the CRM.

# The CRM, biopolitics and governing the social

In this article, we have examined the call for character and resilience as an example of a particular new form of bio-power, operating at the level of psyche of individuals and resulting in a greater expectation of self-government. In the following, we draw the analysis together by returning to Foucault’s ideas on governmentality and biopolitics.

In the Character and Resilience Manifesto, character education is presented optimistically as a new miracle cure for reanimating social mobility and therefore solving associated social ‘problems’, including poverty, stagnating growth and productivity. In order to do so, the Manifesto draws enthusiastically – and in doing so, tends to simplify and exaggerate – the claims made by cognitive psychologists and behavioural economists about the positive effects of character development on individual economic outcomes and the ensuing economic prosperity of the nation. In the Manifesto, problems and solutions tend to be couched in a biological language, equating a deficit in social mobility an ‘infestation’ that – as seen in public health approaches – can best be ‘treated’ through attitude behaviour change in individuals. Moreover, by emphasising the (economic) value of early interventions programmes, investment in character education is cast as a means of (cost-effective) prevention.

The emphasis on the development of ‘character’ and ‘resilience’ as a policy solution can be seen as part of a related shift towards psychologisation of public governance (de Vos, 2012; Pykett et al., 2016) manifest in ‘attempts to advance, manage and regulate the social good through targeting the minds of individuals as a means of changing their behaviour’ (Gillies & Edwards, 2016, p. 98). This suggests not only that structural inequalities remain undiscussed (Zembylas, 2016) but also that subjects are encouraged to understand themselves purely as psychological - instead of social and political - beings (de Vos, 2012; see also Suissa, 2015).

We argue that the idea of a ‘malleability’ of character traits, undergirded by findings from the new biological sciences, such as epigenetics, neuro-science, developmental and personality psychology, drawn upon in the Manifesto, allows for a more invasive and, at the same time, more insidious mode of the government. As opposed to simply identifying and managing individuals’ dispositions and attitudes, there is a promise that individuals’ consciousness can be manipulated at the level of molecular biological structures and processes, pointing to what some scholars have referred to as a new form of bio-power, indexed and targeted at a different scale. This is a new substrate and strata of biopolitics, situated ‘below the classic bio-political poles of “individual” and “population”’ (Lemke, 2011, p. 94; Rose, 2007).

As we have shown above, the rationale for character education in the CRM rests to a large extent on a new ‘human capital paradigm’, advanced by economist James Heckman. Heckman argues that in order to increase economic returns, individuals and nation states should invest in malleable dimensions of attitudes and dispositions instead of IQ. This redefinition of the biological not as fixed but as a structure harbouring ‘potential’, paves the way for what Pierce (2013, p. 3), calls the ‘biocapitalist imperative’, which is concerned with increasing the ‘productive potential of life’. Character education could be seen as the corresponding educational technology to maximise this potential.

It is in this particular sense that the CRM and its framing of social (im)mobility as a result not of structural factors but of the ‘character’ and ‘resilience’ of the individual articulates, at least in part, a neo-liberal form of both governmentality and biopolitics. That is to say, we can see here a form of post-welfare biopolitics (Cooper, 2008, p. 13) whereby the state not only reduces public expenditures but also relinquishes some of its responsibilities for the welfare of its citizens by advancing solutions to social problems which are located in, and viewed as the outcome of, individual decisions, choices and ‘character’. Ironically, this requires new forms of intervention – a tension that is solved in the Manifesto with the reference to early intervention as a cost-effective, preventative approach.

O’Malley (2010) concludes that resilience discourse, which we locate within a broader assemblage or ‘dispositif’ (Foucault, 2006; Author, 2013) of character, ‘now takes its place as part of a complex of scientifically grounded techniques of the self, necessary to optimize autonomous subjects in an age of high uncertainty’ (p. 488). In this vein, character education can be seen as preparing individuals to (be able to) adapt to the requirement of an uncertain, changing labour market by working on enhancing their psychological dispositions which now constitute the most valuable form of capital. While this resonates with the neo-liberal expectation for the individual to become an ‘entrepreneur of the self’ (Foucault, 2010; see also, Down, 2009), we argue that the focus on character suggests a subtle shift in the object of (self-) government; it no longer is the actual skills and knowledge that are to be enhanced, but the dispositions that potentially bring success in the future (Feher, 2009).

Considering more specifically how people are expected to transform themselves into subjects of value, we argue that children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their parents are associated with a deficit in the capacity for self-management. Although all citizens are now supposed to adopt techniques that influence their mood, behaviour, and thinking, the expectation to better self-manage is pronounced for children and parents living in poverty. Indeed, we can observe this in the ways the population is split or divided into different sections: those who can manage themselves and those who are in need of therapeutic, disciplinary and pedagogical forms of intervention (Dean, 2010; Nadesan, 2008). While such ‘dividing practices’ are not new, in the post-welfare context this trend could be indicative of a remaking of inequalities along psycho-biological lines where those who are portrayed as not worthy of human capital enhancement are simply ‘discarded’ (Pierce, 2013). As particular classed, raced and gendered notions of subjectivity are privileged, it is likely that already advantaged groups are able to mobilise the resources required to embody the desired competitive, self-enhancing entrepreneurial subject (De Lissovoy, 2017; Vassallo, 2013).

As we hope to have shown in this paper, character traits are not to be seen as common-sense qualities, but part of a historically emergent formation of subjectivity privileged by current neo-liberal rationalities and agendas. We therefore suggest that it is imperative to examine critically the intellectual influences and interests underpinning supposedly benign endeavours manifest in various forms of character education.

# Notes

Character.org (formerly CEP) (see, character.org) directs and certifies character education initiatives in schools, workplaces, sports and families. It runs the National schools of character programme, which validates schools’ character education initiatives based on the ‘11 principles of effective character education’ guide devised by Tom Lickona (1996).

We are also aware of a further use of this term within Foucault’s work, that of the reflexive (ethical) individual. However, this is not relevant for our specific purposes here.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility was formed in 2011 and declares as its aim to ‘discuss and promote the cause of social mobility; to raise issues of concern and help inform policy makers and opinion formers.’ (http://www.socialmobilityappg.co.uk). Since 2015, its secretariat has been hosted by the Sutton Trust.

CentreForum was renamed Education Policy Institute in 2016. It describes itself as an ‘independent, impartial and evidence-based research institute that aims to promote high quality education outcomes for all children and young people, regardless of social backgrounds.’ (https://epi.org.uk).

Character Counts describes itself as a social research and innovation company. Its director Jen Lexmond, one of the authors of the Character and Resilience Manifesto, previously worked for think tank Demos on projects related to character, parenting and social mobility and is the author of a range of reports (see, Lexmond, Bazalgette & Margo, 2010; Lexmond & Grist, 2011; Lexmond & Reeves, 2009).

According to Gutman & Schoon (2013), the term ‘non-cognitive skills’, ‘refers to a set of attitudes, behaviours, and strategies that are thought to underpin success in school and at work, such as motivation, perseverance, and self-control.’ (p.3) The authors highlight that there is considerable disagreement about ways of differentiating between and classifying this ‘very broad range of characteristics’ (p.8).

See, for example Humphrey’s (2013) discussion of the origins of the notion of social and emotional skills in theories on multiple intelligences. In her analysis of the CRM, Burman (2018) highlights the imprecise use of psychological concepts, such as ‘resilience’ and the exaggerated claims attached to their impact on educational and other outcomes.

In several papers cited in the CRM, Heckman advances this paradigm rejecting the centrality of general intelligence (‘g’) in personality psychology and human capital theory for predicting behaviour and socio-economic outcomes (see, for example, Heckman, Humphries & Kautz, 2014). Problems of differentiating and measuring personality traits are largely glossed over in Heckman’s work and solved, in a behaviourist fashion, by measuring non-cognitive skills in terms of behaviours and actions (see, for example, Heckman, 2011b).

The question whether and how ‘non-cognitive’ skills can be altered is largely ignored in the CRM. While citing Gutman & Schoon’s (2013) literature review, the CRM omits their cautionary claims that ‘robust evidence of a causal relationship is limited’ (Gutman & Schoon, 2013, p. 3). Furthermore, the Manifesto brushes aside caveats regarding the possibility to develop non-cognitive skills through interventions. According to Gutman & Schoon (2013, p. 3) there is evidence that this may be possible for some skills, but not for others.

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