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Resilience, self-discipline and good deeds – Examining Enactments of Character Education in English Secondary Schools

# Abstract

Character education has enjoyed renewed interest both in the United Kingdom and in other parts of the world (Jerome and Kisby 2019; Pattaro 2016). However, to date, few studies have examined how character education is enacted ‘in situ’. Drawing on data from a study in three English secondary schools, this paper traces how political and scientific discourses on character are mobilised in educational practice. Employing a discourse analytic reading of teachers’ and school managers’ interview accounts, the paper examines how different semantics of character were drawn upon, negotiated, and assembled with a focus on the construction of the subject. Drawing on Maccarini’s (2016) notion of two distinct educational semantics, it was found that, depending on the school context, the participants foregrounded an ethical-culturalist or psycho-economic semantics or blended both. While the construction of a strong and self-steering subject was prominent, normative ideas of what it means to be a good person were also highlighted and suggest that local enactments of character education go beyond mere instrumentalist aims of shaping a productive workforce. The paper concludes with some reflections on the opportunities and dangers of an intensified focus on the reflexive capacities of the individual.

Keywords: Character education; policy enactment; schools; social and emotional skills; resilience; moral education

Word count: 8255 (excluding references); 9571 (including references)

# Introduction

Recent years have seen a resurgence of character education both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere (Jerome and Kisby 2019; Pattaro 2016; Spohrer and Bailey 2020). In England, character education has gained traction during the times of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition and Conservative government from 2010 onwards and was championed by Nicky Morgan who was Education Secretary between 2014 and 2016. Political attention has been aided through the work of high-profile individuals and institutions, such as the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham, who have promoted character education through a plethora of research publications and public engagements (Allen and Bull 2018). While government funding for character education initiative in schools was discontinued1 in 2016, character education – sometimes also under the banner of value or moral education – continues to be popular in schools (Vincent 2018).

The renewed emphasis on teaching ‘character’ in schools has been seen as part of a political agenda with the twin aims of conveying (neo-)conservative values and shaping neo-liberal citizens (Bates 2017; Bradbury 2019). Critics argue that the ‘rise of character education’ (Jerome and Kisby 2019) at the expense of related curriculum areas, such as citizenship education, means a shift from the political and civic dimensions of value education towards a ‘personal ethics’ (Kisby 2017; see also Suissa 2015).

This focus on developing individual traits is also noticeable in the increasingly widespread psychological understanding of ‘character’ as a set of motivational traits, such as ‘grit’ or ‘resilience’, influenced by positive psychology and behavioural science and popularised through ‘self-help’ style books and tools and technologies, often stemming from the USA (Allen and Bull 2018; Bates 2017; Williamson 2017). As such, character education seems to be an appealing proposition for recent policy makers to address a perceived crisis of both values and emotional well-being ‘within a psychological depiction’ (Ecclestone 2012, 464).

While a field of critical studies of character education is emerging, there is still a limited research base on the ways in which character education is understood in schools and other educational institutions (for exceptions, see Bates 2017; Jerome and Kisby 2019; Morrin 2018). Addressing this gap, this paper aims to examine character education discourses ‘in situ’ (McKee 2009), presenting data from interviews with school leaders and teachers conducted in three secondary schools in the North of England. The data were interpreted by drawing on the notion of ‘policy enactment’, that is the process by which policy demands are mediated, negotiated, and translated in(to) everyday practice in schools (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). Drawing on the notions of a psycho-economic and an ethical-culturalist character semantics (Maccarini 2016), the paper analyses how education practitioners make sense of character education, drawing on wider discourses, and how these wider fragments were assembled in particular ways. The analysis found that the accounts conjured up both a strong, self-disciplined subject and ideas of the ‘good person’, pointing to a possible convergence between functionalist and humanistic views of the individual. Wider psychological and values discourses featured to different extents suggesting that the local enactments of character (education) depended on school context and values. Contextualising the local enactments of character education, the next section examines how wider discourses have shaped the renewed interest in character education, both internationally and in the UK. The discussion will focus on the tension between the teaching of skills and the teaching of values.

# Character education discourses: Teaching values and skills

While definitions of character education are varied and contested, most definitions include both psychological characteristics and a value orientation (McGrath 2018). For example, Berkowitz, Althof and Bier (2012, 72) define character education as ‘the intentional attempt in schools to foster the development of students’ psychological characteristics that motivate and enable them to act in ethical, democratic, and socially effective and productive ways’. Humphrey (2013) argues that although, traditionally, character education focusses on the moral dimension, which distinguishes it from the skills-based approach of ‘social and emotional learning’, the two are often blurred in practice. This seems to apply to the UK-where, as Taylor (2018, 407) argues, the recent interest in character education ‘resuscitates an explicit focus on moral education … [but] also incorporates the business case for character education using the literature that links attitudes and personality traits, soft skills and human capital formation to social mobility and employability.’ This ’business case’ of shaping economically successful citizens, is referred to in policy documents, such as the government’s white paper Educational Excellence Everywhere, in which character education features prominently:

A 21st century education should prepare children for adult life by instilling the character traits and fundamental British values that will help them succeed: being resilient and knowing how to persevere, how to bounce back if faced with failure, and how to collaborate with others at work and in their private lives. (Department for Education 2016, 94).

Psychological traits, such as resilience and perseverance, have been increasingly identified as part of the response to years of economic stagnation (Bates 2019), which itself is associated with slow levels of social mobility. Several previous analyses have argued that the teaching of social and emotional skills and character is primarily underpinned by a ‘psycho-economic’ rationality, aiming at developing children’s ability to ‘manage’ and ‘regulate’ their emotions (Bates 2017; Bradbury 2019). Bates (2017, 69) therefore locates character education in England within a trend of increasing ‘corporatisation’, aimed at ‘“producing” a resilient workforce’.

The idea that character education can boost social mobility is highlighted in the Character and Resilience Manifesto published by the APPG on Social Mobility – a major influence on the government’s character education programmes in the years that followed:

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 (Paterson, Taylor and Lexmond, 2014, 15).

Drawing on the evidence from the fields of positive psychology and behavioural economics, The Character and Resilience Manifesto argues that investing in character traits, or so-called non-cognitive skills (see for example, Kautz et al. 2014) will boost individual and nation states’ human capital and, hence, productivity. It has been argued that these wider influences on character education are part of a neo-liberal and neo-conservative agenda promoted by organisations, such as the Templeton Foundation in the USA2, evident in the tendency to render structural issues such as poverty and individual moral responsibility; and by privileging human capacities of self-management, enterprise, and competitiveness (Allen and Bull 2018; Jerome and Kisby 2020). Other authors have further nuanced the argument and suggested that character education can be seen as part of a new biopolitical mode of governance which promotes new types of interventions targeting the very inner make-up of individuals (Spohrer and Bailey 2020; McGimspey, Bradbury and Santori 2017).

While this international agenda is clearly discernible in discourses on character education in the UK, there is a UK-specific dimension to it: Character education is here also entangled with the fundamental British values agenda and social policies devised in the aftermath of the 2011 riots in cities across the UK. Indeed, the Character and Resilience Manifesto suggests that the interest in character education is also a reaction to moral panics relating to ‘family breakdown’ and ‘poor parenting’ prevalent in the most economically disadvantaged communities in the UK. As such, character education is also entangled with classed, gendered and racialised portrayals of young people (Burman 2018; Spohrer and Bailey 2020).

Taylor (2018) argues that we can observe echoes from the 19th century when character education was closely linked to ‘hopes and fears about the British Empire’ (404), portraying people from working-class communities and non-White groups as lacking in attributes such as future-directedness, self-mastery and a competitive attitude (then themed ‘vigour’) – modelled on a White, male and middle-class ideal. Today, while these racialised and classed connotations are no longer as explicit, they still resonate in the fears around ‘moral and social degeneration’ in particular in portrayals of working-class families and communities as lacking traits such as grit and aspiration (Spohrer and Bailey 2020; Burman 2018). In addition, character education as the teaching of fundamental British values aims to preserve a particular vision of Britishness and the ability to ward off threats emanating from extremism – anxieties amplified by the realities of a multi-cultural composition of the population and movements for recognition by groups both within Britain and the Global South (Winter and Mills 2020).

The convergence between teaching character and teaching fundamental British values can be seen in a range of policy documents which character attributes, such as ‘resilience’, are portrayed as essential to building defensive capacities against perceived threats, such as ‘home-grown’ extremism and radicalisation (Panjwani 2016; Vincent 2019):

Schools and other education providers have an important role to play in promoting the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual tolerance and respect of those with different faiths and beliefs, while developing the knowledge, critical thinking and character traits that enable pupils to identify and challenge extremist views (Department for Education 2016, 97).

The above discussion has examined how the recent articulation of character education in the UK is an amalgam of ideas and discourses, which emphasise individual psychological characteristics as a solution to social, economic and political ‘problems’ while also aiming to teach a particular version of Britishness. Character education appears to appeal to policy makers due to its ‘malleability’ (Taylor 2018) which allows for various forms of enactment in schools.

The next section sets out the analytic framework and methodology adopted in the research study. This is followed by the three findings sections which show how different semantics of character education were drawn upon by the interviewees in the three schools. The final two sections trace the wider discursive influences on the local enactments of character and offer concluding thoughts on the dangers and opportunities of the emphasis of an intensified focus on the inner capacities of the individual.

# Analytic framework and methodology

The methodological approach underpinning the research reported in this paper drew on conceptual work developed in the field of ‘policy sociology’, starting from the assumption that education policy can be understood as ‘discourse’ in ‘the way in which policy ensembles, collections of related policies, exercise power through a production of “truth” and “knowledge”’ (Ball 1994, 21). As much as policies are assemblages, they are subject to further translation, interpretation and refraction (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012; Taylor et al. 1997), an idea that has been captured under the notion of policy enactment. As Vincent (2019) shows in relation to fundamental British values policy top-down demands are often absorbed by schools in different ways: either existing activities are ‘repackaged’ under a new label or ‘relocated’ in the broader school values.

This suggests that schools and teachers need to be seen as active interpreters rather than mere receivers of policy (Braun and Maguire 2018). The freedom to creatively enact a policy may be particularly true for character education, which can be defined as an ‘enabling’ policy (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012) that leaves room for a range of practice responses. At the same time, the constraints on teachers’ work need to be acknowledged: it has been pointed out how in the English context, teachers are expected to enact multiple policy demands, often in the absence of clear guidelines (ibid.; Vincent 2019). In addition to these constraints, it can be assumed that policy enactments are not uniform even within schools as they are influenced by individual teacher’s expert knowledges, personal experiences, and value commitments (Maguire, Braun, and Ball 2015; McDonnell 2020).

While character education in the UK is not codified within one singular policy, it has been encouraged in schools in England through political initiatives, both by government and by other parliamentary bodies (e.g., through the ‘character awards’ initiative between 2015 and 2017) and is influenced by a range of intersecting discourses circulated by policy actors and their networks (see Allen and Bull 2018). It is recognised here that character education is not always explicitly adopted in schools and sits alongside or overlaps with other curriculum areas, such as personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE), citizenship education and the promotion of fundamental British values, a directive which was first published in 2013 and was restated in 2014 (Department for Education 2014b).

Drawing on interviews with teachers and school leaders, this paper aims to trace how discourses were drawn upon, negotiated, and assembled in the teachers’ accounts. This methodological move was informed by the idea that educational practice takes place in the form of ‘bricolage’, that is, a piecing-together of ‘inventions and borrowings from diverse sources’ (Ball, et al. 2011, 615).

## The study

The analysis in this paper is based on nine semi-structured individual interviews, which were conducted with school managers and teachers in three secondary schools3 in the North of England in 2017, serving smaller to medium sized towns and conurbations. School 1, an academy free school4, places an explicit focus on character education and gained a national award for teaching character. Its pupils are predominantly White British and the proportion of pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds is below average5. School 2 and 3 are both faith-based schools, who describe themselves as guided by Christian values. The majority of the pupils at school 2, a sponsor-led academy, have a White British ethnic background, and the proportion of pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium is above average. At school 3, a voluntary aided school6, the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals is lower than the national average; in contrast with the other schools, it has a larger proportion of pupils for who English is not their first language.

In each school, the teachers who had a responsibility for designing and taking a lead on character education initiatives were invited to take part in a semi-structured individual interview. The interviewed teachers include one head teacher, two deputy head/assistant head teachers, two chaplains, and teachers responsible for ‘character education’, ‘pastoral care’, ‘social, emotional and mental health’ and ‘personal development’, respectively. The study was conducted according to the ethical principles set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and gained institutional ethical approval.

The approach to the interviews and their analysis draws on Bacchi’ and Goodwin’s (2016) post-structuralist approach to interview analysis. According to Bonham and Bacchi (2017, 690), interviews can be seen as ‘sites within discursive practices, sites of complex strategic relations located within a network of such relations.’ As such, interviews point out to a range of other discursive sites and, as part of these, ‘participate in the continual formation of ‘objects’, ‘subjects’, concepts and strategies’ (ibid., 691). From this post-structuralist approach, the interview analyst is less concerned with finding out what people ‘really’ think or feel, but with *what* they say. This includes examining ‘*how* it is possible for such a thing to be said – including the interview procedures and the genealogy of that which is said – and, second, how such a thing is or can be taken into other sites.’ (ibid., 693).

The interview accounts were analysed firstly in a thematic way, drawing on the following sensitising questions: Who do the participants see as the target of character education? Why is character education seen as important? According to the participants, how is character education best to be put in practice? For the purposes of this paper, the analysis concentrated on how the ways in which character education seeks to produce particular kinds of subjects. Subsequently, the themes identified were traced back to wider character education discourses and interpreted in the light of Maccarini’s (2016) categorisations of character education as following either a psycho-economic or ethical-culturalist semantic, which will be explained in the following section.

## Character education as psycho-economic or ethical-culturalist semantics

Bates (2017) argues that educational practice in England has been increasingly influenced by the ‘corporate imagination’ fostering the management of emotions in the form of character education or social-emotional skills programmes. Drawing on Illouz (2007, 69) she identifies a ‘psycho-economic’ discourse that aims at producing a ‘resilient workforce’. The notion of ‘psycho-economic’ rationality is further developed by Maccarini (2016) who identifies it as one of semantics of character education, next to an ethical-culturalist semantic. According to Maccarini (2016, 45), the concepts of character and social and emotional skills (SES) have traditionally been distinct: while character education has been concerned with teaching values, underpinned by a normative idea of the ‘good’, SES has been concerned with developing skills that led to positive (social and economic) outcomes for the individual. The two strands can be further distinguished by their view of the person: Character education can be seen as underpinned by an ‘ethical-culturalist’ semantic and grounded in a neo-humanistic view of the person, whereas SES programmes are underpinned by ‘psycho-economic’ semantic and based on a functionalist view of the person.

Key to Maccarini’s (2016, 44) argument is his diagnosis that the recent ‘re-emergence’ of character in educational discourse (influenced significantly by new definition of human capital) is associated with an ‘extended’ notion of skill, which encompasses a range of diverse individual attributes ranging from endurance to trust or care for others. Thus, recent versions of character education tend to encompass both functionalist and normative dimensions in a blended or blurred fashion. Maccarini (2016) sees an increasing ‘convergence’ between a psycho-economic and ethical culturalist semantics as indicative of the ‘morphogenetic society’ (Archer 1995) which requires individuals to navigate complex and high-speed environments. Maccarini suggests that teaching character ought to be seen as a response against social and moral ‘drift’ and the resulting ‘multidimensional pressures on the human’ (ibid., 36) to adapt flexibility and reflexively to social change.

Both the ethical-culturalist and the psycho-economic semantic are further operationalised by Maccarini, each containing a ‘reactive’ dimension, referring to the ways in which an individual relates to challenges in the social environment, a ‘pro-active’ dimension, relating to characteristics an individual develops to engaging with the environment, and an ‘integrative’ dimension, describing the individual’s ways of becoming part of their social environment (ibid., 45) Applying this distinction, Maccarini suggests that the ethical-culturalist semantic privileges reactive qualities, such as the ‘resistance of negative drives’, proactive characteristics, such as attachment to the good, and the integrative quality of an ‘autonomous commitment to values within a community’. The psycho-economic logic, by contrast, lacks the normative dimensions and promotes traits, such as resilience (reactive), effort and perseverance (pro-active) and being able to work with others (integrative) (ibid.).

For the purposes of this article, Maccarini’s two semantics, as well as their three dimensions, were considered a useful way to structure the presentation of the findings. Hence the three sections will be focussing on the reactive, proactive, and integrative dimension of character education as discussed by the participants. At the same time, the analysis pays attention to what might not be captured by this framework.

# The semantics of character education in educational practice: Developing the self-steering individual

The following three findings sections show how the participants interpreted character education by drawing on a psycho-economic and ethical-culturalist semantic in its reactive, proactive, and integrative dimensions, emphasising the development of resilience, (self-)discipline, and the ‘good person’. It is argued firstly, that depending on the school context, one of the semantics was more prominent and secondly, that the semantics were often blended in the construction of the strong, self-steering individual who is both performance-oriented and makes morally right choices.

## Storm-proofing young people: building resilience and resisting negative drives

When discussing the relevance of character education, several of the interviewed teachers referred to the idea of instilling traits which allow young people to deal with current societal challenges, including a changing labour market, globalisation, new technologies, pressure to achieve educationally and the ubiquity of negative role models. Analysing the participants’ constructions through Maccarini’s (2016) ‘reactive dimension’ of character education, a tendency towards developing ‘strong’ subjects can be identified. This idea was expressed both in the sense of resisting ‘negative drives’ in the normative sense and in the sense reacting to challenges through self-control and mental strength.

In School 1, the emphasis was on developing pupils’ self-control, to cope with academic challenges and wider economic and social adversity. Both the terms ‘resilience’ and ‘bouncebackability’ (see Gill and Orgad 2018), were mentioned several times by participants when emphasising the importance of the ability to stick to a task and to deal with and learn from failure, in particular in relation to academic performance:

We use the analogy, ‘If you fail, fail forwards. So see failure as a good thing because, if you don’t fail, you don’t learn.’ (Associate principle, School 1)

We did a piece of research with our very bright children and they are … averse to risk taking, getting a question wrong, putting their hand up if they’ve got a doubt that their answer is correct. They want perfection and we’re saying the world isn’t perfect, let’s have a look at the world in a different way, and our own capabilities, let’s fail to sail. (Head teacher, School 3)

The slogans used by the participants (‘fail to sail’, fail forwards’) suggest that failure is encouraged, but only insofar it contributes to future development towards academic success. This resonates with wider discourse by drawing on the buzzwords and psychological depictions of the individual, underpinned by the logic that strengthening the individual from the inside will result in academic and later life success:

If we sort the character out, the target grades should come. (Vice-principal, School 2)

… so then it’s the cycle again. Right, let’s put more into their character and their resilience, and their determination and their respect, their self-respect, their endeavour, and see if that then helps them with their academic progress again. (Associate principal, School 1)

According to these statements, academic progress can be achieved through an ‘injection’ of virtues – a notion that has been popular in recent policy rhetoric around character as a new key element that can break the ‘chain’ between pupils’ backgrounds and their academic attainment (Spohrer and Bailey 2020). In the interviews, references to the connection between character education and social mobility were not as prominent as in the wider policy literature; however, some participants argued that developing traits such as resilience, were of particular importance for those young people who did not have supportive home environments:

[character education] helps them all to stride forwards. You know, no glass ceiling. Knowing their own lives.’ (Character education lead, School1).

The statement resonates with wider discursive demands on young people to be mobile and active (‘stride forward, ‘glass ceiling’) to overcome disadvantage; at the same time, it also emphasises self-knowledge, arguably a more inward-looking quality. While resilience and related attributes were portrayed as means to achieve academic (or later life) success, participants also saw them as key to thriving in a world that is characterised by adversity and uncertainty. When talking about the importance of strengthening young people, the participants also evoked a more ethical-culturalist semantic in the sense of ‘resisting negative drives’ and ‘attachment to a good’ (Maccarini 2016, 45) and perseverance:

So, I think it [character education] [is] even more important, for all teenagers now, just to help protect them really, and just to empower them to make the right choices at the right times. It’s not to say they won’t make mistakes. All human beings do, don’t they? It’s about not making those really poor severe mistakes, I suppose, as a person.

The quotations suggest that the notion of resilience was evoked in a manner that went beyond a mere psycho-economic logic of building resilience for academic and later life success. The above discussion indicates that traits, such as perseverance and resilience were variably framed in a psycho-economic mode, that is as reacting to challenges, and in an ethical culturalist manner as ‘resisting negative drives’. This resonates with Maccarini’s (2016) observation that character education is increasingly influenced by a more general psycho-semantic with a view to developing the individual’s capacity to cope with complexity and uncertainty. It is also notable that the importance of self-control was combined with the demand for self-knowledge, pointing towards an ‘intensification of reflexivity upon the human being’ (ibid., 32).

Furthermore, it is notable that the emphasis on resilience with a view to developing strong individuals (in both the ethical and performance-oriented sense) was particularly audible in School 1 – the non-denominational school with a dedicated character education programme. This suggests perhaps that in the absence of a strong normative orientation towards the ‘good’, an extended conception of skill and its ‘reactive dimension’ is emphasised.

## Developing (self-)discipline, and the ‘inner compass’

The research participants frequently associated character with traits relating to what has been variably themed ‘performance virtues’ (Arthur et al. 2015), or ‘goal orientation’ (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2015). When read through Maccarini’s (2016) ‘proactive’ dimension of character, the aim of developing disciplined subjects working towards educational and occupational success, could be identified. At the same time, interview participants – in particular those from school 2 and 3 – highlighted values that signalled an ‘attachment to the good’ (Maccarini 2016, 45) that went beyond instrumental notions of success.

Participants from all three schools referred to (self-)discipline and goal-orientation as desirable traits. This was evident for example in their mission statements, which, in school 1 included ‘aspiration and achievement’ as well as ‘endeavour’. School one included ‘ambition’ as one of its three core values, while school 3’s mission statement mentions the aim of ‘achieving excellence’ and states that the school works ‘to challenge and support every young person to be ambitious for themselves’.

In all schools, behavioural discipline was regarded as a means of teaching character traits and values. In School 1 with its explicit character education programme, the associate principal of the school, likened character and the way it should be taught to ‘habit formation’:

So, going back to what I think character is, I also think character’s a collection of good habits and, kind of, going back to what Aristotle was talking about. ‘Excellence is a habit.’ I think if you make children understand that you can do these things automatically through constant repetition and habit formation, that is character. … So yes, for us, character is to learn habits, great habits. (Associate principal, School 1).

The idea that inculcating traits produces positive action resonates with the recent revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics that defines character as attributes that are ‘well entrenched’ in a person (Arthur et al. 2015, 9). In school 1, this notion was combined with the idea that character traits would be internalised through repeated routines (see also Taylor 2018). The vice-principal of the school elaborated that the pupils were expected to greet teachers with a handshake, line up in the schoolyard and walk through the corridors in silence. While this form of behavioural regulation was more pronounced in school 1, participants from the other schools also stressed that character was best taught when modelled and practised repeatedly in everyday school life.

In all schools, character education through a display of behavioural discipline was enforced through monitoring systems which, according to the interview participants, increasingly focused on personal characteristics in addition to or instead of academic outcomes:

So, they get achievement points through showing respect, courage, or ambition, which are our core values… it’s all about effort. Celebrating effort, rather than celebrating achievement. Behaviour. So, again, we have the behaviour point, so that’s when students are not engaging with the core values. Our ethos, so whether they continuously uphold the core values and the uniform. (Vice principal, School 2)

The statement suggests that pupils’ ability to comply with standards of behaviour needs to be tightly controlled, but there also emerges a tension between outer and inner discipline, between the need to monitor pupils to encourage self-monitoring:

So, we’ve decided we’re not going to monitor them. We’re going to develop them. … The drive now is Lesson Monitor. The title’s going to be called Steps to Success. … No longer is it going to be ‘outstanding’, it’s going to be about developing their character to become determined to succeed. Number two was ‘good’, now, ‘are you accepting the challenge? (Assistant head, School 3)

The quotations suggest the influence of techniques and concepts from cognitive and positive psychology, such as the notion of ‘growth mindset’ (Dweck 2008), which highlight the importance of rewarding effort and perseverance over outcomes. These concepts were occasionally referred to by the interviewees, while, at other times, there were no direct references and character education resources seemed to have been assembled in a pragmatic fashion (see, Hogan et al. 2018).

More generally, the focus on self-regulation could be seen as indicative of a shift from discipline to self-discipline (although both are still visible) which has been characterised as part of a neo-liberal (govern-)mentality in schools aimed at shaping entrepreneurial, self-managing citizens (Bradbury 2019; see also Foucault 2008; Rose 1996). However, there were also instances in which self-regulation was evoked in a way that went beyond a psycho-economic semantic. In the words of one interviewee, character education meant pupils having an inner ‘compass’ that allows them to take control of their lives in a more conscious manner:

I think self-awareness is the most important value. … If you don’t know what you don’t know, you don’t know what to do. I think so many children go through life or school not knowing the right thing to do in the right moment. So, we try and use character education as a vehicle to give children the right tools to make the right decisions at the right time in the right way. (Associate Principal, School 1)

While the influence of a psychological repertoire of emotional awareness is clearly discernible, it is not evoked in purely economic-performative mode – that is in a ‘hard’, ‘masculine’ coding of emotions (Burman 2018) – but as a skill that enables young people to live a better life more generally. This more normative demand on pupils to be and do ‘good’ was also evident in School 1’s efforts to develop a ‘character passport’ that asked students to reflect on how they demonstrated good character in and out of school, although the demand of documenting character achievements still harbours a performative-instrumental dimension.

In school 2 and 3 the ‘normative dimension was even more pronounced. Interviewees in school 3 referred to the school’s values of ‘wisdom, community, hope, and dignity’ which were seen as important with a view to developing ‘good citizens’, defined as shaping an individual who are independent and ‘able to deal with the wider world’ as well as ‘a more rounded person with experiences beyond academic grades’. The participants explained that these values were to some extent influenced by their Christian mission and to some extent by broader ‘human values’.

The above discussion identifies the influence of a psychological skills-related register – prevalent in wider policy and scientific discourse – in the participants’ accounts. However, the analysis also suggests that whether the schools emphasised the disciplined, goal-oriented person in a functionalist sense, or a more normative attachment to the good depended on the school context and its broader mission. School 1’s enactment of character education points towards a convergence of a psycho-economic and an ethical-culturalist semantic as suggested by Maccarini (2016). In the other two schools, the psycho-economic logics seemed to sit alongside wider notion of the ‘good person’, characterised through a range of self-related and other-oriented attributes. The latter will be the focus of the next section.

## Shaping the ‘good person’: Kindness, compassion and respect

All participants saw ‘other-related’ characteristics (Humphrey 2013) as important aspects of character education. Analysed through Maccarini’s ‘integrative dimension’ – traits relating to an individual’s relationship with others – it was found that participants from school 1 drew more strongly on a psycho-economic semantic, whereas participants from school 2 and 3 mainly employed an ethical-culturalist semantic. Overall, the aim of shaping a person who is kind, compassionate and giving was most prominent in the accounts.

All participants, but mostly those from school 1, mentioned other-oriented traits with the aim of equipping young people with the skills necessary for future success, referring to ‘integrity’, ‘teamwork’ or ‘interpersonal skills’. These traits were seen as important in relation to academic attainment, but also in order to meet the demand of a changing labour market which requires ‘transferrable skills’. However, more often the participants referred to attributes which suggested consideration of others, emphasising traits such as generosity, compassion, and empathy. In some instances, these attributes were treated as psychological traits as suggested by a participant from school 2 who referred to a programme with the aim of developing a ‘mind to be kind’ (Vice principal, school 2). Suggesting that kindness is a matter of brain training resonates with the wider scientific and policy discourses influenced by ideas from neuroscience.

Prominent in all schools, was the aim of developing ‘good’ individuals through charitable activities. This participant highlighted how these events were not just about raising money but also developing skills and creating potentially transforming experiences for pupils:

… it’s not just money raising, it’s not just bake sales, it’s opportunities for them to volunteer with those charities, opportunity to, you know, physically go and work with and support people that have need or that have less than they have and to see that in action, and that is humbling, sometimes. To be given an opportunity to go and see some things that you haven’t seen, and it opens your eyes (Chaplain, School 2)

Emphasising that pupils have opportunities to ‘physically go and work’ with charities suggests this participant’s awareness of the criticisms of charitable activities as ‘feel-good’ actions that ultimately affirm the status-quo. Nevertheless, the ways in which schools talked about charity to develop students’ character mainly remained at the level of a ‘good deeds’ approach (Walsh 2017) rather than one that critiqued social injustices more fundamentally.

When asked for the origin of the values underpinning the school’s mission and practice, school 2 and 3’s mission statements directly refer to Christian values. In the interviews, the participants’ answers suggest a tendency to portray these as more general ‘human’ values:

… a big part of it [participant’s role] is building ethos and culture and the religious life of the school, but then, also, the gospel values of the school which are just life values. So, I think many of them are values that you see all schools adopt, but particularly important to us as a church school, you know, to see those gospel values in action. (Chaplain, School 2)

We just do our values, our values are of humanists, people who believe in good things, and those are our values, and nobody would argue with the values we hold dear. Yes, they could be British, yes, they could be French, they could also be Spanish, in fact, they’re international values. (Head teacher, School 3)

The references to the teaching of (fundamental) British values and the attempts to portray them as ‘international’ values indicate unease with relaying a governmental agenda that has been criticised as nationalistic (McGhee and Zhang 2017). A similar attempt to reconcile the school’s teaching of character traits (habits) with the wider policy agenda is made by this participant:

It is right to instil habits as long as they are ethical, that is they are British or universal values (Associate Principal, School1)

The promotion of [fundamental] British values were also alluded to implicitly by references to the importance of treating others with ‘respect’ which was listed as one of the core values in two of the schools. This resonates with one of the four British values – Respect & Tolerance – and the government’s aim of creating more ‘cohesive’ communities (see Department for Education 2014b; see also Curren 2017). While the policy discourses on British values shone through in these accounts, the attributes highlighted by the participants referred to a more generic disposition of being good to others, grounded in the school’s mission and conveyed to the pupils via school values. Although there were occasional references to fundamental British values and biblical values, these were not conveyed explicitly to the students. Thinking with Maccarini’s (2016) integrative dimension, the participants drew strongly on an ethical-culturalist semantic which aimed to foster an ‘autonomous commitment to values’ (45), however, with the reference point being the school community rather than larger entities, such as the nation or religion.

As shown above, when speaking about the moral dimension of character education the participants expressed this largely in the language of other-mindedness and individual ‘good’ actions. This suggests that the discourse on (British) values education in schools was largely interpreted in a way that avoids controversial and potentially divisive issues, using the idea of ‘good deeds’ as a common denominator. In doing so, it could be argued that British values teaching misses the ‘civic’ component that some commentators see as integral to a ‘comprehensive’ approach to character education (see Curren 2017). More generally, the emphasis on promoting values that appear unproblematic and universal, points to a largely a-political interpretation of character education (see also Kisby 2017; Suissa 2015) which allows schools to negotiate their own ethos – for example as a school with a faith foundation – with other policy agendas and demands (Vincent 2019).

# Discussion: Tracing the influences on character education

As observed in previous analyses of character and social and emotional skills education, a psychological understanding of the individual was evident in the participants’ accounts in this research. When discussing the aim of fostering young people’s resilience, the participants seemed to evoke both the figure of the ‘vulnerable subject’ (Ecclestone and Brunila 2015) in need of therapeutic intervention and the neo-liberal subject, who is active or in need to be ‘activated’ (Spohrer and Bailey 2020). Considering the influence of wider policy discourse, both the concern with vulnerability – more audible in New Labour’s SEAL7 strategy – and the recent Conservative imperative of ‘toughening’ up children in the face of adversity were discernible (Burman 2018). The emphasis the participants in the study placed on developing attributes of inner strength, resonates with wider policy discourses, and suggests the influence of a ‘fusion’ (Bates, 2017) of psychological, economic and behavioural knowledge (Allen and Bull, 2018; Williamson 2019).

While the local enactments of character education observed in this study have resonances with wider discourses promoting a strong and self-disciplined subject, these traits were evoked beyond a mere instrumentalist aim of shaping a productive workforce. Traits, such as resilience, self-awareness and ambition seen were variably referred to in an ethical-culturalist and psycho-economic mode as key to achieving goals and to leading a good life while resisting bad choices. Moreover, there was a strong emphasis on shaping the ‘good person’ with characteristics, including kindness and compassion.

The local enactments and interpretation of character education varied between three schools, depending on their mission, but also within schools, depending on the individual interviewee and their role in the school (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012; Vincent 2019). Broadly speaking, the three schools could be placed on a continuum between a more humanist/ethical culturalist and more functionalist/psycho-economic pole. The specific enactments of character education in the three schools – here also referred to as particular ‘blends’ – and their influences will be sketched in the following.

In School 1, a psycho-economic rationale to character education dominated in the aim to develop goal-oriented, (economically) successful subjects able to cope with challenges and work with others. If an ethical-culturalist semantic was evoked, it was in the form to a broad notion of making the right choices and resisting negative influences. The discursive influences on the school’s version of character education can be described as a blend of psychological knowledge, Aristotelian thought, and military discipline. This mirrors pedagogical practices in other English Academies and US-American Charter schools, in particular the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Programme)8, which was cited as an inspiration by the school leaders interviewed. KIPP character schools are heavily influenced by the ‘positive education’9 movement, stemming from positive psychology which combines elements of Aristotelian thought and cognitive psychology (Williamson 2017).

This notable enactment of character education suggests on the one hand the re-entry of the ‘docile subject’ (Foucault, 1995). On the other hand, the expectation of ‘good behaviour’ is based on new psychological techniques and is coupled with the aim of (eventually) shaping self-managing individuals. Thus, as suggested by Ball (2017, 28), the return of character education and the ‘intertwining of discipline with governmentality, a shift from docility to productivity, from discipline to enterprise, is not then an absolute shift but one of emphasis’. Following Vincent (2018), I argue that school 1’s approach, specifically, may be described as ‘post-secular’, both in the sense that its values are implicitly influenced by Christian values and in the sense that performative display and embodiment of a values agenda resembles the religious ritualistic practices.

School 2 and, even more so, school 3, enacted a more humanistic version of character (education), drawing predominantly on an ethical-culturalist semantic. This was evident in an emphasis of characteristics which did not fit with the psycho-economic logic and included proactive attributes, such as wisdom, courage, hope and dignity, or integrative traits, including compassion, kindness, and generosity. The schools’ activities aimed at developing pupils’ ethical sensibility mainly through encouraging the doing of ‘good deeds’ in the form of charity.

While these were influenced by Christian values, the schools conveyed them in a more general fashion to the pupils, presenting them as human’ values. In these schools, character education seemed to be employed as an umbrella term which allowed the school to negotiate their Christian foundation with a number of external demands, such as the directive to teach fundamental British values, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC), and personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) (see also McGhee and Zhang 2017).

While school 2 and 3’s enactment of character education appeared to be more strongly influenced by ethical-culturalist semantic (Maccarini 2016), a psychological register of resilience and self-management was nevertheless prominent. This raises the question whether we are observing a subtle shift towards a new iteration of the neo-liberal citizen-subject whose core characteristic it is to be resilient and self- steering. As observed in this study, resilience was not merely associated with a psycho-economic logic, but also evoked in an ethical-moral mode of resisting harmful social influences and making ‘the right choices’. The tendency to fuse ethical and instrumental concerns resonates with Maccarini’s (2016, 36) diagnosis of an increasing conversion of the psycho-economic and ethical-culturalist semantics as a response to an intensified demand on individuals ‘to rely on their reflexivity, as the capacity to evaluate one’s life plans in relation to a changing world’. It is suggested here that the increased emphasis on an individual’s inner steering capacities is a response to the vanishing of clear external norms for behaviour (see also Sennett, 1998; Simons and Masschelein 2008). In this context, character education fills the void by developing the individual’s inner ‘moral compass’.

# Concluding thoughts

The small-scale study drawn upon in this article has highlighted the complexity of character education on the ground, offering some insights into the ways in which wider discourses of character education play out in practice and how we might interpret the significance of these developments. The findings in this research showed some of the ways in which a range of discursive fragments, influenced by both national policy agendas, transnational trends, and local conditions were negotiated and assembled. In the schools which participated in this research, the construction of character education was to different extents influenced by the schools’ (Christian) foundation, and wider policy agendas such as fundamental British values, ideologies promoted through the Charter School movement in the USA, ideas and practices from positive psychology and behavioural economics.

The traits emphasised in the three schools point towards the construction of ‘an intensified reflexive focus on the human subject’ (Maccarini 2016, 45) emphasising the strong individual with the capacity to navigate an increasingly volatile world. Maccarini’s diagnosis of an increasing convergence between a psycho-economic and ethical-culturalist semantics was to some extent echoed in the research reported in this paper, evident in the dominance of a psychological conception of the subject, encompassing attributes which aim at capacitating young people to become emotionally strong, self-managing and self-aware individuals. These characteristics are mobilised not merely in an instrumentalist-performative manner – with a view equipping their pupils for educational and economic success – but also in a more normative fashion, aimed at developing young people with the ability to live a good life and ethical sensibilities.

At the same time, a distinct emphasis on developing persons with other-oriented attributes, such as kindness and compassion, clearly influenced by religious values, could be identified. This suggests that these enactments of character must be seen in their distinct (local and national) contexts. The schools which participated in this research clearly negotiated their own missions not only with transnational, scientific discourse, but also national policy directives, in particular the British values agenda. Therefore, it is argued that Maccarini’s (2016) observation of character education being shaped by a ‘generic psycho-semantics’ needs to be further evaluated by researching character education ‘in situ’.

Further research is also needed on whether we can observe a move towards developing increasingly self-reflexive individuals as a response to seismic societal shifts and if so, whether this capacity is sufficient to thrive in these circumstances. While there might be opportunities in strengthening the capacity for self-examination and self-reflection, both as a capacity to withstand various pressures and in the sense of a Foucauldian ‘care for the self’ (Ball 2017), this would require a broader definition of these qualities. Current discourses of character education tend to focus on the self-managing capacities of the individual, putting pressure on humans to re-invent themselves in order to prepare for future opportunities for employment and/or self-realisation (see Feher 2009; Rose 1996). It could be argued that this imperative isolates the individual from wider social and communal context and does not develop capacities for democratic participation (Suissa 2015).

Furthermore, this research has demonstrated that character education enactments are clearly influenced both by neo-liberal and neo-conservative restructuring of education, promoting technologies of control within a context of corporatisation of schooling against the backdrop of austerity politics (see also Bates 2017; Saltman 2014). While this trend seems particularly pronounced in the US context, it has been argued that the academy movement in the UK has popularised similar practices which promote conformity and docility rather than criticality and self-awareness. This study suggests that self-awareness can be deployed in school discourses alongside demands of strict behavioural control. It is therefore a danger that character education draws on seemingly liberatory ideas when reinforcing conformity with a view to preparing future workers for the lower ranks of the labour market (Kulz 2017; Saltman 2014).

Therefore, it is argued here that character education remains reductive and potentially oppressive if focussed on inculcating motivational attributes and encouraging charitable action. In the face of crises such as global warming and a pandemic, the teaching of ‘resilience’ may be a crucial attribute10 but needs to be imagined in a collective and progressive form, rather than individualistic, responsibilising and defensive manner. As Sayer (2020) pointed out in a recent intervention, character as a concept could be an avenue to consider unsolved questions about the responsibility of individuals who are shaped by and embedded in a range of human relationships. Character education policy and practice, in turn, would benefit from being reimagined as fostering both an existential and truly democratic disposition.

# Notes

Between 2014 and 2016 over £10million was made available to support character education projects in schools and other organisations with a substantial proportion of funding earmarked for projects with a ‘military ethos’ (see Department for Education 2014a; Department for Education and Timpson 2016). The scheme was replaced by £22 million initiative to develop ‘essential life skills’ in 12 ‘opportunity areas’ across England.

Allen and Bull (2018) highlight the influence of the Christian, neo-conservative John Templeton foundation, which funds a large number of character education projects, including the majority of research undertaken by Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues.

In England, pupils between the ages of 11 - 18 typically attend secondary schools.

Academies are schools that are funded directly by the government with some academies having sponsors, such as faith groups, universities or business. Academies do not have to follow the national curriculum but do need to follow some government-specified rules. They are inspected by the national school inspectorate OFSTED (Gov.uk 2018).

The percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils refers to the share of pupils in each school who are eligible for the Pupil Premium grant. The Pupil Premium is a grant paid to primary and secondary schools in England with the aim of raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils as well as supporting children whose parents serve in the armed forces. The grant is calculated depending on the number of pupils who have ever received Free School Meals; those who are in care and those who are children of members of the armed forces (Gov.uk 2021).

The term ‘voluntary-aided school’ refers to a state-funded school that is maintained by the local authority, but is supported by a trust or foundation (often of religious nature) which contributes to the building costs and has influence on the running of the school (Gov.uk 2019).

The Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning programme (SEAL) was rolled out in schools from 2008 to 2010 (see: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-and-emotional-aspects-of-learning-seal-programme-in-secondary-schools-national-evaluation).

See: <https://www.kipp.org/approach/character/>.

The ‘positive education’ movement is spearheaded by positive psychologist Martin Seligman and promotes 24 ‘character strengths’, including grit, zest, self-control, ‘gratitude’, ‘social intelligence’ (see Peterson and Seligman 2004).

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