

THE RE-EMERGENCE OF CHARACTER EDUCATION IN BRITISH EDUCATION POLICY

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ABSTRACT: Character education is a specific approach to morals or values education, which is consistently linked with citizenship education. But how is it possible for a heterogeneous society that disagrees about basic values to reach a consensus on what constitutes character education? This article explores how character education has returned to the agenda of British education policy, having been largely neglected since the 1960s in response to unsatisfactory attempts at character education going back to the nineteenth century. Between 1979 and 1997 Conservative governments attempted to reverse a perceived decline in moral standards, established State control of the schools curriculum, imposed on State schools the duty to provide for moral and other development, and established a National Forum which attempted to articulate a set of consensus values in education. Labour has extended these developments in the curriculum, introduced compulsory citizenship education, and its White Paper of September 2001 speaks of 'education with character'. The character and virtues Labour seeks to promote through schools are pragmatic and instrumental in intention, linked to raising pupil school performance, meeting the needs of the new economy, and promoting democratic participation. Otherwise the vision is pluralistic and evades explicit directives, and there is no explanation or analysis of its theoretical basis.

The question of how agreement can be reached on what counts as character education may benefit from Sunstein's analysis of how law is possible in a heterogeneous society – 'incompletely theorized agreements on particular cases' allow for common laws without agreement on fundamental principles. Many schools in fact operate in this way, but such a consensus is not entirely stable and runs the danger of teaching character education as a series of behaviour outcomes taught in a behaviourist fashion.

Keywords: character, citizenship, virtues, values, schools

It could be said that the aim of all general education throughout history has been to form character and produce good citizens. Frequently these are aims that are assumed to exist, rather than being explicitly formulated. In Britain today, the Government is advocating the teaching of virtue in schools in order to form citizens with character, but this citizenship and character education appears to be fragmentary. It is essentially a pluralistic vision of character and citizenship education that evades explicit directives for practice and lacks, for many, the forcefulness that would make it compelling. It is also executed without explanation or analysis of its theoretical basis, within an education system where there is no consensus as to what constitutes virtue or how it should be taught. Nevertheless, this does not prevent a vague articulation of goals in official educational documents, which are ostensibly designed to encourage participation in British democracy and to avoid any arising of conflict. The question this article is concerned with is whether it is possible in a heterogeneous society, composed of people who disagree sharply about basic values, to achieve a consensus about what constitutes character education for citizens in a democracy.

We should note at the outset that in Britain the common language used in educational discourse for the main elements of 'character education' has been 'moral education' and, in more recent times, 'values education'. Character education remains closely linked to the concepts of moral and values education; the latter two concepts are generally broader in scope, while much less specific about what constitutes character education. Consequently, character education can be understood to be a specific approach to moral or values education and is consistently linked to citizenship education. Character is ultimately about who we are and who we become, good or bad. It is constituted by an interlocking set of personal values, which normally guide our conduct, but these values are not a fixed set easily measured or incapable of modification. Can we therefore agree on what constitutes character education, on what its content should be, and how it should be taught?

Character education is back on the agenda in British education policy. However, there is much uncertainty as to how it should be implemented in schools and there is no one definition of what it means. This is not surprising, since there has clearly been a long history since the Victorian period of ill-conceived, ineffective and failed efforts at character education in Britain and elsewhere. The kinds of character goals that teachers and educational thinkers espoused, and the teaching methods they used, varied enormously. The progressives at the beginning of the twentieth century were

reacting against educational practices such as rote learning and the enforcement in schools of patterns of traditional formal behaviour. However, they did not provide many viable alternatives to the various pedagogical methods used for teaching character education at the time. Moral education, the new preferred term which incorporated some of the goals of character education, continued to be taught in schools in a fairly didactic teaching style with behavioural codes still enforced. The 1960s saw new and progressive teaching methods introduced into the classroom, and an emphasis on 'values education' that seemed to play down the need for a substantive content for character development. The 1990s have seen a gradual re-emergence of character education as a theme in schools, but despite government encouragement it could not be said to be a widely adopted policy in British schools.

The reasons for the omission of 'character education' or 'character building' in government education policy documents from the 1950s onwards are bound up with changes in society. By the 1950s and 1960s cognitive psychology gave increasing emphasis to the theories of Lawrence Kohlberg, Jean Piaget, and Erik Erikson. The popular success of these theories was due to their human themes of development through prescribed stages, which appeared to promise progress. These themes satisfied the demands of British culture at the time and influenced government policy on education. British culture and society had become more pluralistic and schooling therefore became more sensitive to the increasing heterogeneity of children in many schools. These cognitive approaches to character education were also more compatible with the liberal traditions of critical thinking. Child-centred learning, together with the promotion of stage theories of development, appeared to remove some degree of responsibility from teachers for the character education of their pupils. The 1960s and 1970s were also increasingly concerned with so-called 'values clarification' and procedural-neutrality approaches in the classroom, and there was a widespread presumption in favour of moral relativism. The even broader term of 'values education' increasingly displaced 'moral education' as the phrase of choice by educationalists, but once again it could be and was used by some to include character education goals.

The British philosopher, Richard Peters (1962), kept the idea of explicit 'character education' alive in a lecture on character development at Harvard University, where he argued that 'moral education is a matter of initiating others into traditions and into procedures for revising and applying them; these come to be gradually taken in as habits of mind'. He also explained that moral education must 'bite

on behaviour'. He relates the tension in much character education, namely that children will not understand rules for behaviour in the early years and will therefore need to have their impulses regulated. In other words, the induction into habits has to come before their rational appraisal by the child. Peters largely offered character education as a supplement to Lawrence Kohlberg's approach to moral education. Peters (1973, pp. 140–153) later wrote of a 'provisional morality', by which he meant that while teachers ought to initiate children into such beliefs or broad principles, guiding conduct in a non-behaviourist way, this initiation should not be fixed or incapable of change. As children reach adulthood they should be able to recognise that they have the freedom and responsibility to reevaluate the beliefs and practices they learnt as children. Then by the 1980s and 1990s we see a growing political and academic interest in character education. For example, John White (1990) called for the return of character education in schools, and in the recent Green and White Papers in education (2001) there are striking similarities with government policy on character education in 1949.

The main principle behind the Conservative Party's education policy while in government had been the enhancement of individualism and freedom of choice, conceived of primarily as occurring through the operation of the free market economy. Between 1979 and 1997 successive Conservative Governments sought to reverse what they perceived to be a decline in moral standards, encouraging more traditional 'family-orientated values'. The Conservative Party also initiated the National Curriculum in 1988 that effectively established state control of what children should know, how they should learn it and how it should be assessed. Section 1 of the Education Reform Act 1988 imposes a basic duty in respect of all State schools to promote the 'spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society' and prepare such pupils 'for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life'. These are very wide aspirations and clearly have a relationship to the development of character.

In 1996 the Conservative Government allowed the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) to enter the public debate about morality by establishing a National Forum for Values in Education and the Community, which sought to discover whether there were any values on which there was common agreement in society. It has been argued that this was intended not to increase children's knowledge of morality, but to improve their behaviour (Marenbon, 1996). While this endeavour began under a Conservative Government, it was continued under the Labour Government. The National

Forum sought, in describing the core values that it believed society would agree upon, some kind of agreement on the principles for developing virtuous conduct. The Forum, which was made up of a group of 150 people from diverse backgrounds, agreed that it was false to assert that there were no shared values in a pluralist society. The Forum produced a set of core values which, it claimed, were applicable to all, irrespective of class, sex, gender, race or religion. The values included: friendship, justice, truth, self-respect, freedom and respect for the environment. A poll of 1,500 adults commissioned by the National Forum found that 95 per cent agreed with these core values. These were ‘consensus ideals’ – values presented as ideals.

Other societies have tried exactly the same process of identifying commonly held positions. McClelland (1992, p. 80) describes how the Educational Policies Commission of the National Educational Association and the American Association of School Administrators also identified ‘a generally accepted body of values’ in 1951, which included many that were subsequently identified by the National Forum – truth, respect for persons, commitment to brotherhood, acceptance of individual moral responsibility etc. These ‘essential’ values, the Commission said, should be transmitted in the nation’s schools, the school having the right and responsibility to teach them. Like the National Forum, the Commission claimed no universal or transcendent source of meaning for its values; its basis for validity was the consensus among those who were consulted in their production. It seems that the search for inclusiveness in moral matters results in removing or reducing potential conflict to the minimum. As William Glasser (1969) said, ‘certain moral values can be taught in school if the teaching is restricted to principles about which there is essentially no disagreement in our society’. It is useful therefore to examine some of the issues in school curriculum policy.

The Labour Government, in preparing the new National Curriculum 2000 for England, sought to ‘recognise a broad set of common values and purposes that underpin the school curriculum and the work of schools’ (DfEE, 1999, p. 10). The Government has accordingly been more forthright and explicit about the kinds of goals primary and secondary schools should follow, by moving from guidance and discussion of school curriculum goals to a mandatory and ‘official’ rationale contained in the new National Curriculum. In Scotland, the school curriculum is not prescribed by law, but the same New Labour language is used in curriculum guidance to schools. The Government has added to the National Curriculum in England by articulating new aims for schooling. In its *Statement of Values, Aims*

and *Purposes of the National Curriculum for England* (1999, pp. 10–11), the following is included: the development of children's social responsibility, community involvement, the development of effective relationships, knowledge and understanding of society, participation in the affairs of society, respect for others, and the child's contribution to the building up of the common good. More specifically, the values that underpin the school curriculum are that education should reaffirm 'our commitment to the virtues of truth, justice, honesty, trust and a sense of duty'. The school curriculum should aim to 'develop principles for distinguishing between right and wrong' and pass on 'enduring values'. Whilst the document also encourages the promotion of 'self-esteem' and 'emotional well-being', the main thrust is the promotion of 'responsibility and rights'. The extent to which these statements have their origins in party political sources is negligible because they have largely been compiled by committees of teachers and civil servants, though they have been endorsed as official government policy.

The Crick Report on Citizenship Education (DfEE/QCA, 1998) was commissioned by the new Labour Government and recommended compulsory citizenship education, which the Government has accepted. All secondary State schools in England are obliged by law to provide their pupils with citizenship education, which should include a moral dimension. The report (1999, p. 44) provides an overview of the 'essential elements to be reached by the end of compulsory schooling' for every child in England. There is an ambitious list of character traits and virtues: 'pupils should develop the proclivity to act responsibly', they should have 'premeditation and calculation' about the effect actions have on others, and 'acceptance of responsibility for unforeseen or unfortunate consequences'. Pupils are not only to understand 'tolerance', but they should be able to practise it, and they should 'act by a moral code', although no code is specified in the report. Pupils are expected to act with 'courage', be committed to voluntary service, show a 'determination to act justly', and have a 'disposition to work with and for others'. The report lists the skills, understanding, attitudes, values and dispositions that pupils should develop. The Citizenship Order (1999) lists similar virtues and demands. In the Labour Government's first White Paper on education, *Excellence in Schools* (1997, p. 10), it was also stated that schools and families should take responsibility so that children 'appreciate and understand a moral code on which civilised society is based ...'. It added that these children 'need to develop the strength of character and attitudes to life and work ...'. Once again, no explicit

definition or suggestion was given of what this moral code might or should be. Two observations can be made at this stage: first, the content of character education is being derived from *ad hoc* agreement on particular values rather than from a particular philosophy of education or society; second, this raises the question of whether the values that have been agreed have any mutually-agreed content or are they little more than feel-good words devoid of real substance?

'Character education' is currently a growing movement, but there is no unity of understanding among members of this movement. In the USA there has been a proliferation of organisations, courses, literature and curriculum materials seeking to promote character education. The White House has even sponsored a series of Character Building Conferences at which those on both the right and left of the political spectrum have contributed ideas on how to improve the general character of American children. The 'New Labour' Government in Britain, with its heavily moralistic ethos, has followed the American emphasis on character education. The Labour Party has been influenced by communitarianism, which has been reflected in many public policies, including character building in schools (Arthur, 2001). The establishment of citizenship education as a compulsory subject in English schools was followed by two government policy papers: the Green Paper, *Schools: Building on Success* (February, 2001) and the White Paper, *Schools: Achieving Success* (September, 2001). The latter speaks at length of 'education with character'. The goal of this 'education with character' appears to be the development of certain virtues so that they become internal principles guiding both the students' behaviour and decision-making for operation within a democracy. These Papers make the first references to character education in government documents for nearly 50 years and they also make clear that character is intimately connected with citizenship education.

The character education policies that the Labour Government is seeking to promote in schools are an integral element of the current political culture, part of which it has inherited from Conservative policies and part of which it has created. It is a political rather than an educational response. The Prime Minister, in an interview with *The Observer* on 5 September 1999, made explicit 'New Labour's' ethical agenda when he said, 'We need to find a new national moral purpose for the new generation'. Many newspapers interpreted this to be a call for a moral crusade against vice or a return to the failed 'Back to Basics' campaign of the previous Conservative Government. In contrast to the USA, Britain is an extremely secular society and in the absence of any strong religious moral authority in society, the

Government finds itself in the position that there is no higher moral authority than government regulation, which has increasingly exerted moral influence on schools. Some would argue that this is no less than an attempt by 'New Labour' to socially engineer society in its own image. This might be true if the Labour Party truly understood its 'own image'. It is more likely that the virtues the Government says should be developed in schools are pragmatic and instrumental in intention. Nevertheless, the Labour Government is seeking to implement a state-sponsored character education initiative within a pluralistic society, which raises certain questions: Whose character traits are they promoting? What sort of good life do they have in mind? The Government, in particular, is setting an ethical agenda in education, since governments are not neutral about conceptions of the good life, and character education is not wholly a matter of private choice. The Labour Government wants citizens of a particular type with certain capacities, habits and virtues, which allow them to contribute to community, economic and institutional life in society. It has identified the school as the main institution in society with the role to foster these virtues of character. There is an increasing supposition that moral education is the sole responsibility of schools rather than parents. This inevitably focuses our attention on the role and professional values of teachers and teaching (Arthur, Davison and Lewis, 2005).

Few in Britain would consider the school the most important location for character education, even if it remains the main public institution for the formal moral education of children. The mass media, religious communities, youth culture, peer groups, voluntary organisations, and above all parents and siblings, account for significant influences on character formation. It cannot be easily assumed that the school makes more of a difference than any of these. However, it would be reasonable to assume that certain positive features of the school will contribute to character development. It is against this contemporary background that the British Government has effectively rediscovered the rhetoric of character education. There seems to be a growing awareness in the Labour Government that effective policies for the many problems in education and in society can best be developed through a knowledge of the defects in character formation in families and schools. Recognising that there is a broad-based and growing public support for 'moral education' in schools, the Government aims to heighten national awareness of the importance of character education and encourage its development. The 'moral education' that parents want is not concerned with theories about the way thinking motivates or underlies moral behaviour, but is

concerned with encouraging the young to develop positive thinking and patterns of behaviour that will persist through time. In this sense it is more directly a call for character education and is clearly why the Government uses the term 'character'. Schools and teachers are identified as having a crucial role to play in helping shape and reinforce basic character traits. This represents a *new* and radical government education policy and is a notion of character education that is explicitly linked to both raising pupil school performance and meeting the needs of the emerging new economy or information age.

Teachers are perceived to be moral authorities by their pupils, whatever the teachers themselves think about their teaching. Indeed, it is in questions about pedagogy that the moral dimension is often most clearly seen. Professor A. H. Halsey (1994, p. 11f.) argues that the teaching profession should be re-shaped to achieve a greater 'parenting' role for schools. He means by this that the parental function implicit within and constitutive of the teacher *in loco parentis* has been neglected and ought to be restored. Teaching, according to Halsey, has been turned into a cognitive relation between older and younger people with someone else responsible for the really difficult part – the development of a child's character. He believes that teachers need to take the 'parenting' role more seriously, seeing education as a process of teaching someone how to live.

Bill Puka (1999, p. 131), in reviewing the history of character education programmes, identifies six teaching methods. These are: 1) instruction in basic values and virtues; 2) behavioural codes established and enforced; 3) telling stories with moral lessons; 4) modelling desirable traits and values; 5) holding up moral exemplars in history, literature, religion, and extolling their traits; 6) providing in school and community outreach opportunities (service projects) through which students can exercise good traits and pursue good values. There is a wide variety of character development strategies, which include those listed by Puka. Some character educators, especially in the USA, have been narrowly concerned with certain virtues and have combined this with a restricted focus on traditional teaching methods. There are also certain assumptions of character educators implicitly or explicitly contained in these strategies. Whilst some subscribed to the psychological idea of moral development as developmental progression through stages, others preferred to substitute the word 'formation' for 'development'. The role of teachers and the choice of teaching methods will together influence the effectiveness of character education in schools.

There is a debate in Britain between those who agree that the Government should promote the 'character' of its citizens, and those

who say that the term is too pejorative to be used in a pluralistic democratic society. Even so, in modern British liberal society the development of a person's character is not seen as entirely a private matter for individuals or their families. It is recognised that character is intimately linked to the ethos of society itself and shaped by public forces. Public values have an influence on private life, albeit indirectly, because everything a democratic government does is founded on the notion of it being of some benefit or value to the people it represents. Character is connected to the political system through the medium of schooling, which modern government oversees. It is also a major component of the making of a citizen. The decisions taken by government have a significant impact on the whole community and on individual citizens, including children. Therefore, the quality of political life in a democracy is largely determined by the quality and character of its people and so any erosion of the moral consensus has implications for the political order. Governments are thus concerned with citizens and whether the quality of their citizens' characters is improving or getting worse, and that is why they have legislated in this area. Governments are less interested in the kinds of virtues that are worthwhile for pupils to possess for their own sake regardless of the consequences for the quality of political and social life.

Those politicians who have advocated character education in Britain often present it as a response to a list of ills facing society, which originate in the behaviour of juveniles. They point to social statistics indicating that school children and young people in the age range 14–24 commit the greatest number of crimes in Britain. This category has the highest abortion rate, together with being the largest user of illegal drugs. It is also the category (from age 18) that has the lowest participation rate in local, general and European elections. Some of the statistics for this group exceed the rates for abortion, teenage pregnancy and crime in most countries in Europe, as well as in the USA. However, there are often complex issues that underlie many of these social statistics that are not always sufficiently examined by various promoters of character education programmes. Timothy Rusnak (1998, p. 1) believes that fear is the justification for many character education programmes in the USA. 'Fear' is also used as justification in Britain, as can be seen in the Social Affairs Unit's publication in 1992 of *Loss of Virtue: moral confusion and social disorder in Britain and America* (Anderson, 1992). Describing a long litany of alarm can often express itself in society-wide moral panic. Character education promoters also generally seek a stronger emphasis on a positive school ethos, increased academic work, viewing the

teacher as moral authority and strengthening the role of parents in partnership with schools and teachers.

In Britain, as in much of the world, we live in a pluralistic society in which our values appear to be constantly changing and in which children are presented with and exposed to all kinds of opinions about right and wrong. Assumptions about right and wrong are undergoing a profound change and our culture is moving away from its Judeo-Christian foundations to such an extent that there seem to be no agreed moral criteria left for judging right and wrong. For some, this appears to necessitate a return to a content-based moral education curriculum that others have rejected as too problematic and even suspicious. Many character educators refuse to accept that moral values are relative – they generally insist that moral values can and ought to be objectively grounded in human nature and experience (see Arthur, 2003). Many of these also claim that moral action is not simply rational, but involves the affective qualities of a human being. They consequently reject many models of character education as inadequate, as not comprehensive enough to capture the full complexity of human character. They also advocate a holistic approach to character education, which provides, they claim, an integrative view of human nature. Some also advocate that religion ought to provide a support structure for moral development.

Dennis Doyle (1997, p. 440) would not accept such views – for him, the real crux of the problem is that ‘the issue of ... character education ... is really no more and no less than the issue of pedagogy. It is process rather than content, form rather than substance. It is “critical thinking skills” as opposed to thinking critically about content, it is “learning to learn” rather than learning something substantial.’ He therefore rejects a content-based character education in favour of child-centred learning, learning through experience and co-operative learning. Progressive educationalists have long advocated that individual development should not be hindered by ‘controversial’ moral content and they have cast suspicion on the motives of others who propose such explicit content. It is not surprising, therefore, that most academic discussions of character and citizenship education have been rife with controversy, with constant disputes about definitions and methods. Consequently, many teachers and academics have sought to construct an implicit character education rationale without subscribing to any particular set of values or content-based moral education. They have found subscribing to any set of values deeply problematic in a pluralistic society, and so they often commit themselves to nothing in particular – or to a sort of undefined humanism where the only question is one of personal feeling. The

lack of any substance to moral education leaves schools with little choice but to identify with specific areas of state regulation. In other words, the kind of character education that is often accepted is one that has an instrumental value for the State.

James Hunter (2000, p. 225) makes the observation that: 'The problem is that character cannot develop out of values "nominated" for promotion, "consciously chosen" by a committee, negotiated by a group of diverse professionals, or enacted into law by legislators. Such values have, by their very nature, lost the quality of sacredness, their commanding character, and thus their power to inspire and to shame.' His general argument is clear: the DFES is incapable of setting moral standards which will be 'inwardly compelling' for schools, pupils or teachers. Hunter does not say it is impossible for character to be developed, but doubts whether the State can achieve this; rather, he suggests it is better promoted by small and particular communities, or religious schools and other schools which attempt to embody a moral vision. The effect of Hunter's work is to challenge the view that there is a core of beliefs and values to which we can agree and all subscribe.

However, there is still the question of how we secure agreement on what counts as character education. Cass Sunstein is Professor of Jurisprudence in the University of Chicago, and in his Tanner Lecture on Human Values he asked how law is possible in a heterogeneous society composed of people who sharply disagree about basic human values (Sunstein, 1994). This question can of course be asked of character education in schools and it is insightful to use Sunstein's analysis of the question in relation to the law by applying it to character education. Sunstein believes that while people disagree on fundamental issues, they can achieve what he calls 'incompletely theorized agreements on particular cases'. In relation to school education, teachers, parents and pupils will disagree about what counts as good or as right. They will even disagree about what is admissible as good or as right. The education community can be sharply divided and even confused about various moral issues that arise in the context of schools, and some of these disagreements are explicitly religious in nature. How educationalists define equality, freedom, honesty and the other virtues listed by the British government will ultimately depend on their worldview. Therefore, can we produce agreements on the aims and content of the National Curriculum amidst this pluralism of worldviews? Can school-based education resolve these disagreements? First, it would seem that pluralism is not possible without agreement on some kind of 'shared' values in society and within education communities. Consequently, the prescribed list of

virtues provided in the National Curriculum would appear to represent the minimal order required for pluralism to function in British democracy.

Sunstein argues that we must live together and show respect for one another and that this alone represents an 'overlapping consensus' among reasonable people. Consequently, this should allow agreements between people of different faiths and none and provide the ground rule of mutual respect, by which is meant that we do not attack one another's most basic or defining commitments. He argues that we can agree on particular outcomes, together with a narrow or low-level expectation of these outcomes. This process avoids the difficulty of having to agree on fundamental principles. It also clearly has potential in education, for we can agree on particular results, such as requiring certain behaviour or actions on the part of pupils, rather than producing abstractions to justify such behaviour or action. Thus, we can agree on a rule forbidding discrimination on the basis of sex, without agreeing the foundations for that belief. This is the way many schools actually operate in practice. Teachers and pupils will have divergent rationales for guiding their actions, but these are deliberately left unexplained, as in Sunstein's proposals for 'incomplete agreements'. The process of not specifying the rationale for actions allows a community to live together and for its members to show each other mutual respect. It avoids simple co-existence within groups of people and encourages a dialogue within pluralism, but a rather limited one. Limited in the sense that it is only practical in some contexts and there is also the unresolved question of whether this Sunstein principle is morally right.

This analysis raises a number of questions for character education. Teachers have not been party to the rationale for the National Curriculum and citizenship education, but they are nevertheless expected and required to deliver these moral aims in the classroom. Interestingly, the task of specifying these moral aims of the curriculum is left largely to teachers themselves. However, in reflecting on these ethical aims for the curriculum, teachers often avoid any account of the underlying theory or principles which justify these aims. In the absence of any large-scale theory, teachers employ a strategy of seeking some less general or less abstract proposition upon which more concrete agreement can be reached. Therefore, a teacher may agree that schools should not discriminate on the basis of race without having a large-scale theory of equality. It becomes a process of agreeing rules without having a theory to justify such rules. It allows for practical outcomes without teachers, parents and pupils having to reach anything like an accord on general principles. Nevertheless,

there are some cases, whilst rare, when any community will be seriously challenged to produce a practical result that is in any way 'shared'. For example, we will readily agree that murder is wrong, but then disagree about abortion.

Sunstein's case is that the lower the level of generality, the greater the degree of particularism and the less abstraction involved. We can thus, for example, agree a list of virtues for teaching in schools, without agreeing with the philosophical assumptions of the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, does this mean that we have simply reinvented a modern equivalent of the Judeo-Christian moral tradition? It seems that we are attempting to teach a list of virtues that are not based on personal preferences but on agreement in the community, in order to reach a common public morality, the reasons for which are clearly based on vastly different religious and private convictions. In this way we produce a list of shared values to which most members of society or a school community will be committed, albeit not necessarily to the same extent. However, real 'shared values' are profoundly different from 'agreements' which are the result of some procedure reached on practical grounds. Agreements are really an accommodation of individuals who have different values with the purpose of producing a set of rules that are used to guide moral conduct and are upheld by teachers and inspectors on behalf of the larger society. A communitarian view (Etzioni, 1996) would give emphasis to the 'shared' nature of values that in turn help enhance the ability of a school to formulate specific policies on character education. For communitarians these shared values provide criteria for settling differences. However, a thin layer of shared values in a school based on a consensus reached without commitment to a set of core shared values is not entirely stable, for as soon as the pragmatic need to agree values is removed then the commitment to agreement is also often removed.

Any review of government curriculum policy documents would indicate that there is no consistent definition of what is meant by character education. In the White Paper (2001), the Government associated character building with the needs of the economy, whilst in the Citizenship Order emphasis is placed on the moral virtues of character. The cumulative picture is perhaps more comprehensive, but it largely avoids any fundamental agreement on the justification and content of this character education. Current versions of character education in Britain are therefore essentially an unsatisfactory amalgam of liberal, values-clarification, and cognitive-development strategies that are used to fulfil neo-liberal and conservative projects in the classroom. Unfortunately, these wide differences might well

prevent the emergence of any working consensus on character education for schools. Perhaps more importantly, these wide differences and lack of consensus allow critics to seriously question the intentions of some character educators and to even accuse them of being anti-intellectual, authoritarian in approach and aligned to reactionary politics. Sunstein appears to provide a potentially practical solution to the many disagreements in moral education but one that avoids any deep reflection on the reasons for these outcomes and one that may not be morally right as a guiding principle in education. The danger facing teachers is that character education may be reduced to a series of behaviour outcomes taught in a behaviourist way – exactly what Peters sought to avoid. Explicitly, there is a clear relationship between the disappearance of a single broad consensus as to what is ‘the good life’ and the increasing tendency for education to be understood as creating ‘products’ for consumption by society, a utilitarian process that dehumanises the child.

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