Tests of life or life of tests?

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Tests of life or life of tests?: Similarities and differences in parents' and teachers' prioritisation of character, academic attainment, the virtues and moral theories.

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Although the area of parental involvement in education is well researched, much less is known about how parents and teachers might work together to cultivate desirable character virtues in their children/pupils. This article considers three potential barriers to parents/teachers forming such partnerships: i) differing views on the importance of character compared to academic attainment; ii) their prioritisation of moral, performance, civic and intellectual virtues; and iii) their prioritisation of different moral theories in ethical decision making. The article describes the findings from a quantitative study conducted with 376 parents and 137 teachers. The study found that both parents and teachers prioritise character over academic attainment but perceive the opposite to be true of their counterpart. Further, both parents and teachers rank moral virtues, such as honesty, as the most important, followed by performance virtues, such as resilience. The findings are significant as they illuminate a possible gap between parents and teachers in England, which, if addressed, will ensure children and young people are more likely to develop character qualities that contribute to individual and societal flourishing. Given that several countries are (re)introducing character education into the curriculum, the results of the study also have international significance.

Keywords: parents, teachers, character, academic attainment, virtue, moral theory

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Introduction

In a democracy children's character education is a collaborative endeavour (Jubilee Centre, 2017a). Whilst parents should be the primary educators of their children's character and values, schools also have an important role to play. Despite evidence that character has been somewhat neglected in schooling (Arthur et al, 2015), research in the UK shows that most parents want teachers to contribute to the education of their children's character (Jubilee Centre, 2013). Previous research in the UK and internationally has also consistently emphasised the role of parents as the primary character educators of their children (Berkowitz & Bier, 2017; Jubilee Centre, 2017a). Given that the possession of 'good' character and values is viewed as important for both individual and societal flourishing (see, for example, Seligman, 2011; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2015), the present study seeks to address the following lacuna: while parental involvement is typically accepted as an important part of successful character education programmes (Arthur, 2003; Lickona, 1992; Berkowitz, 2011; Harrison, 2016: 153–154), there exist few studies into how parents and teachers might form collaborations (Berkowitz & Bier, 2017). Although the area of parental involvement in education more broadly is well researched internationally (for example, Hattie, 2009), much less is known about how parents and teachers might work together to cultivate desirable character and values in children and young people.

This article seeks to address this gap, by building on prior research on home/school partnerships in education and by recognising the synergic importance of parents and teachers working together on the cultivation of character in young people. The article contains the findings from a research project designed to explore potential barriers and/or enablers to teachers and parents collaborating as character educators. A survey was constructed to consider the following three areas: i) how parents and teachers prioritise character and academic attainment; ii) how parents and teachers prioritise moral, performance, intellectual and civic virtues; and iii) how parents and teachers prioritise different moral theories when responding to ethical dilemmas involving their children/pupils. This paper draws on the quantitative findings from a larger, mixed-methods study (Harrison et al, 2019), where the barriers and enablers to parent/teacher partnership on character education are explored.

Identifying, the relative weight that different school stakeholders place on academic achievement and character development helps us understand the conflicts, priorities and pressures in school goals, policies and practices. Furthermore, understanding the ways that different stakeholder groups

perceive or misperceive each other's priorities helps nuance possible tensions, particularly between parents and teachers.

Character and Character Education

In recent years, character education has been central to education policy making both in the UK and internationally. After decades of relative neglect, character education in England currently enjoys sustained political support. In her book *Taught not Caught,* Nicky Morgan, former Secretary of State for Education, argues that good character education is good education and vice versa (2017: 122), while former Secretary of State for Education Damian Hinds (2019) has stated that character is as important as attainment for a child to succeed. Recently, the school's inspectorate body, Ofsted, has included character education as a key indicator of personal development in its revised framework. To a varying degree, character and moral education have been a feature of educational thinking around the world from Aristotle to present times and has recently witnessed a revival in countries including Singapore, Japan, America, Australia amongst other countries (Arthur, 2020).

Despite these policy developments, the terms character and character education remain widely contested on the global stage. The language, definitional and conceptual implications of character and character education are routinely debated by academics, policy-makers, parents, teachers and others. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the academic literature in the field, both in the UK and US, might be best described as a semantic minefield (Berkowitz & Bier, 2014). One issue is that the concept of character is studied across multiple disciplines; most notably in philosophy, psychology and education. There is no space here to rehearse these debates in detail. Instead, this article conceptualises character as the set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct (Jubilee Centre, 2017a) which is an increasingly accepted definition in the UK (for example, Ofsted, 2019). Character education is defined as educational efforts to cultivate human qualities or virtues in individuals in the interests of human flourishing (Jubilee Centre, 2017a; Kristjánsson, 2015). These definitions draw on Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethical philosophy, which views character and the virtues as constitutive of the good life (Kristjánsson, 2013: 14).

Character, on this reading, is morally evaluable and educable (Arthur, Kristjánsson, Sanderse & Jones, 2015: 35). The virtues are considered the building blocks of character and are acquired through upbringing, developed through habituation and later honed through the agent's own critical thinking (Kristjánsson, 2015). It is a widely held view that the cultivation of desirable character virtues, such as compassion, honesty, respect and resilience in children and young people is primarily the responsibility

of parents. However, parents (for example, Jubilee Centre, 2013), policy makers (for example, Morgan, 2017) and academics researching the field (for example, Arthur, 2020) all make the case that schools and teachers also have a role in developing desirable character virtues that contribute to human flourishing.

Parents and Teachers as Partners in Character Education

The current study builds on a long tradition of research that compares the relative impact of the home and the school on the education of children (see, for example, Rutter, 1975; Rutter, 1979; Plowden, 1967). Research over many years has explored home/school partnerships from different angles, such as its effect on children from disadvantaged backgrounds and partnerships forged through faith-based approaches. For example, there is often a supportive connection between Catholic families and Catholic teachers when the catchment area of a school corresponds with the boundaries of a parish.

It is widely perceived that parent involvement in student learning has a significant impact on academic achievement, as demonstrated in meta-analytic studies (Hattie, 2009; Barger et al, 2019). Among many other indicators, parental engagement has also been shown to have a positive impact on attitudes to science (George & Kaplan, 1998), social and emotional learning (Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry & Childs, 2004; Niehaus & Adelson, 2014) as well as absenteeism and truancy (Epstein & Sheldon, 2000; Smerillo, Reynolds, Temple & Ou, 2018). This along with other research makes a compelling case for parental involvement in education (broadly construed). It also provides a basis for those who have made theoretical arguments about the importance of parental involvement in character education (Arthur et al., 2015; Berkowitz & Bier, 2017).

A case has to be made as to why parents and teachers should be considered partners in character education or indeed any form of education. Schools are often left to undertake the more formal aspects of education focussing on teaching the curriculum and instruct parents on their role through homework tasks. In this sense, parents are often not viewed as 'partners' in the learning process and are instead informed through communications home and meetings about the academic progress of their child. However, this article rests on a belief that character education should be treated differently from curriculum subjects such as maths, English and science because character development should be viewed as a primary concern for both parents and teachers and one in which they both have a considerable stake.

Despite this, some parents might ask why character development should be the concern of teachers, and others might worry that teachers have different values from themselves thus preferring character education to be exclusively undertaken in the home. These positions have limited merit as they fail to

understand the nature of character education. Schools, like family homes, are formative spaces where children and young people cultivate character qualities simply through being part of them – they *catch* virtues through the ethos and the values prioritised by the school. Many schools might adopt an implicit approach to character education, and, in such places, parents might be rightly concerned that the character education is not being undertaken with due concern. Others might adopt an explicit approach, which emphasises certain values. This, again, might concern parents if they believe these values to be different from their own. It is therefore much better that schools adopt intentional, planned and reflective approaches to character education that have been developed in partnership with parents and ultimately seek to cultivate practical wisdom through critical thinking (Harrison, 2016).

Research has shown that parents are generally in agreement that teachers should act as character educators. One survey, conducted in 2013 in the UK, found that 84% of the 2,000 parents questioned felt that teachers should encourage good morals and values in students (Jubilee Centre, 2013) and that 95% of parents felt that it is possible to teach a child values and shape their character in a positive sense, through lessons and dedicated projects or exercises at school (ibid). So, whilst parents might rightly be viewed as the *"primary educators of their children's character"* (Jubilee Centre, 2017a: 1) teachers do and should have a role to play. Of course, in practice, the way parents and teachers work together on character education should be context specific. For example, parents who send their children to a particular school due to its religious affiliation will hope the teachers share some of their core values. Parents who choose to send their children to private schools often choose the school according to how closely their own values are aligned to that of the school's. It is for this reason that many schools promote their core values when they reach out to parents of perspective pupils.

Although a case can be made for why teachers and parents should collaborate on character education, there are potential barriers to this theoretical position being actualised in practice. According to Adams and Christenson (2000: 478), the ideal parent-teacher relationship would be based not only on two-way communication, cooperation and coordination, but also on collaboration. Shared understanding and goal setting are at the forefront of this collaboration between parents and teachers (Vosler-Hunter, 1989: 15). However, there is evidence to suggest that when it comes to character education, this shared understanding of priorities may be problematic. The Making Caring Common project team (Weissbourd, Jones, Anderson, Kahn & Russell, 2014) diagnosed a rhetoric/reality gap between what parents and teachers report as their priorities and the message they convey to children. The study found that although parents and teachers stated they prioritised caring over attainment, their children/pupils thought they were prioritising attainment. Beyond this study, it is hard to find evidence about other

potential barriers to parents and teachers forming partnerships on character education. In education in general, reported barriers to parent-teacher partnerships include time constraints, cultural differences and other communication difficulties (NSPRA, 2006; Ozmen, Akuzum, Zincirli, & Selcuk, 2016). Such barriers may be the results of parents' own negative experiences of school (Hartman & Chesley, 1998), their disillusionment and distrust of teachers (Westergård, 2013) but also the teachers' own insecurity about how to involve the parents and resulting reluctance in doing so (Eldridge, 2001; Denessen, Bakker, Kloppenburg & Kerhof, 2010). The present study investigates three possible barriers to teachers and parents working in partnership on character education which will be discussed now.

Three Potential Barriers to Partnership on Character Education

i) Prioritisation of Character and Attainment

The first potential barrier the present research investigates is whether there is an difference between how parents and teachers prioritise academic attainment over character. Academic attainment might be defined in a number of ways, including the development of intellectual character qualities such as critical reasoning. In this study, to ensure academic attainment is conceptualised differently to character (as detailed above) it is defined as the enhancement in the knowledge and understanding of academic subjects (primarily Maths and English) linked to teaching and learning. Academic attainment, as we have defined it here, is measured through school testing including GCSEs and A-levels.

It is important to state from the outset that character and academic attainment are intrinsically related and although we seek to make a clear distinction between the terms for the purposes of the present research, our choice of definition does not seek to hide this complexity. Character and attainment have been described as two sides of the same coin (Morgan, 2017), and there is evidence to support this view. A positive, direct relationship is consistently evidenced between character and academic success, albeit sometimes this effect is small in size (Earl & Arthur, 2018). Jeynes (2017), in a meta-analysis of 52 studies of character education (predominately based in the US), found there was a positive association between character education and academic achievement, particularly in reading and maths. Furthermore, these effects were found regardless of differences in students' ethnicity and socio-economic status. Similar results are seen in other studies (Diggs & Akos, 2016; Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2006), although these studies have mostly taken place in schools where character education has been prioritised.

Given that the relationship between character and academic attainment is complex, it might be argued it is unfair to ask parents and teachers to prioritise one over the other. What we were keen to reveal in

the study is any tension between the two, based on a belief that recently in the UK character education has been squeezed out by a persistent focus on attainment, standards, testing and metrics. There is a real-life tension between what is generally perceived to be a focus on a life of tests (attainment) over preparing children for the tests of life (character) that has been discussed in recent popular (for example, Schneider, 2017; Muller, 2018) and academic (for example, Jubilee Centre, 2017a) literature. The same point was made by Barack Obama when he was US President, when he argued that students should take fewer standardised tests and that school performance should be measured in other ways (Associate Press, 2011).

A perceived over-focus on high stakes testing and exams by Ofsted and other authorities has meant that in some schools, character and attainment are seen to be competing concerns. One research project found that 'teachers reported that they are not always given the time in the workplace to reflect on the best way to practice moral virtues, largely due to increasing workloads, a very prescriptive education system and a narrow focus on academic success' (Arthur et al., 2015: 5). Perhaps more troubling is that high-stakes testing has been found to contribute directly to negative character development such as cheating in tests (Morgan, 2016). This concern is borne out by policy makers (such as the OECD who run the PISA assessments), who have sought to reduce the focus on testing a narrow curriculum in favour of initiatives that move the focus towards character for human flourishing. Previous research has shown that parents and teachers state that developing caring children is a top priority and rank it as more important than children's academic achievements (Bowman, 2012; Suizzo, 2007). The present research looks closely at this issue through asking a series of questions about how parents and teachers prioritise character and academic attainment.

ii) Prioritisation of the Virtues

Virtues might be described as the building blocks of character (Harrison, 2016). They can be viewed as dispositions or, more accurately, 'dispositional clusters' concerned with praiseworthy socio-moral reactions and behaviour. It is common to find the virtues classified into a three-part (for example, Seider, 2012) or four-part typology (for example, Shields, 2011; Jubilee Centre, 2017a). Such classifications, although contested, help researchers identify broad types of virtues that people might emphasise and is useful for comparative research.

In this article, a four-part classification of the virtues; (moral, civic, performance and intellectual) is utilised, and these virtues are moderated by an over-arching meta-virtue of practical wisdom (Jubilee Centre, 2017a). This classification is utilised as it is a practical way to explore how parents and teachers

understand the importance of moral virtues such as honesty and compassion, intellectual virtues such as curiosity and good judgment, performance virtues such as resilience and confidence, and civic virtues such as service and civility. Underpinning this four-part typology, according to a standard Aristotelian conception of virtue ethics, is the meta-virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which, developed though experience and critical reflection, enables us to perceive, know, desire and act with good judgment. As such, the virtues and *phronesis* are understood as states of character, concerned with good or praiseworthy individuals and collective human functioning. The definitions and examples of the four types of virtues and practical wisdom can be seen in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

This article seeks to discover whether parents and teachers in England agree or disagree on which of the four types of virtues are the most important to cultivate in their children/pupils.

iii) Prioritisation of Moral Theories in Moral Reasoning

The present study seeks to find out whether parents and teachers, when presented with a dilemma, prioritise similar moral theory when advocating for a particular course of action. Although decision-making can happen intuitively via the unconscious system, and also emotionally and intuitively (Drumwright *et al.* 2015), the reasons given for a decision can be classified against three prominent moral theories. The three most widely accepted and prominent moral theories are deontology, utilitarianism (consequentialism) and virtue ethics. Virtue ethics emphasises the character virtues of individuals as the basis for making good and wise decisions and doing the *right* thing. In contrast, deontology emphasises rules and duties as a guide for doing the *right* thing, and utilitarianism requires a calculated assessment of consequences to work out what the *right* thing to do is.

Little is known in England about how parents and teachers prioritise moral theory when responding to the ethical dilemmas that their children might face. This is despite the fact that moral reasoning is a topic that has been studied in some depth by philosophers and psychologists; most notably by Lawrence Kohlberg and those who followed him. Research has shown that teachers take into account deontological, utilitarian and virtue ethical theory in decision making (Arthur et al, 2015). Research also shows that an over-reliance on rule-based thinking in teaching, which is not perhaps surprising given that the ethical management of teaching practice has become immersed in a tradition and is dominated by codes of conduct (Harrison et al, 2018). Teachers qualify if they are deemed to meet pre-determined standards that are predominantly skills and competencies based and during their training, they learn about expected codes of conduct. In a well-known study by Nucci (1984), children (grades

1-3) expected their teachers to uphold moral behaviour and thought the teacher's explanation more appropriate when it was explained through rules rather than through intrinsic motivation. Although we were unable to find research that looked at parents' ethical decision-making related to moral theory, there are links to the wider literature on parenting styles. For example, authoritative parenting is deemed to be more effective than styles that either over or under prioritise rules (Baumrind 1966). Explaining why an action is wrong and emphasising its negative consequence to others is associated with both authoritative parenting and positive outcomes for children and adolescents (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Authoritative parenting should not be confused with authoritarian parenting, where communication is one way (from adult to child) and the style is deemed to be much stricter and involve harsher punishments if rules are not followed. A recent education working paper from the OECD (Ulferts, 2020: 4) that summarises evidence about effective parenting styles and dimensions finds that '*warm parenting that provides children with age-appropriate autonomy and structure is key for a healthy and prosperous development of children and adolescents across various domains*'. This was found to be true across different contextual factors such as culture and socio-economic status. The study suggests that successful parenting requires an appropriate mixture of deontological (rules) and virtue ethical (character) based approaches.

Methodology

A survey, in the form of a questionnaire, was designed to answer the following questions: RQ1) Do teachers and parents value character or academic attainment more highly? What do they think is the preference of the other group? RQ2) What type of virtues do teachers and parents value the most? What do they think are the preferences of the other group? RQ3) What moral theory do teachers and parents prioritise in ethical decision making?

To evaluate the level of agreement between parents and teachers, the study utilised a self-report questionnaire (in online and hard copy format). The aim of the questionnaire was to assess each group perception on three dimensions, one for each research question: 1) Their preference on a scale that contrasted character against academic attainment, 2) Their preference on a list of different virtues; and 3) Their answers and reasons once faced with a moral dilemma. Finally, and to establish a contrast between the teachers/parent groups, respondents were asked what the preference of the other group would be in the first two dimensions.

Participants

Parents and teachers were recruited through contact with secondary schools in England in the counties of Northampton, Hertfordshire, Derbyshire and Warwickshire. Due to the project time and resource

limitations, the sample was purposeful and non-probabilistic. Seven schools were included in the study. A designated lead at each of the participating schools recruited parents with pupils in the school aged 11–14 to complete the questionnaire. They also sent the questionnaire to all teachers and teaching assistants in the school to complete. For convenience, the survey was offered to parents and teachers in two formats: online via SurveyGizmo and in hard copy. As expected, there were more parents than teachers in the final sample, and a majority of the respondents were female (77% of the parents and 64% of the teachers). Regarding age, more than half of the parents were in the 40-50 age range, whereas 60% of the teachers were 40 years or less. In terms of ethnicity, 64% of parents and 78% of teachers were white. To avoid possible bias, age and gender were used as control variables during analyses. Table 1 provides details of the participants in the research.

[Insert table 1 here: Participants in the Research]

The instrument

Before designing the questionnaire, similar surveys were identified in the literature (Bowman, 2012; Jubilee Centre, 2017b) and expert opinion from established academics in the field was sought on how to construct particular questions. Once designed, draft questionnaires were circulated to a selection of experts, and comments were integrated in the final survey. The questionnaires were administered and completed by teachers and parents over a period of three months.

One set of questions examined how parents and teachers prioritise character relative to academic attainment and how they perceive the other group's responses. As has been explained above, the relationship between character and attainment is complex. In constructing the measure, we defined character as a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct. We defined attainment as the enhancement in the knowledge and understanding of academic subjects which is measured through tests such as GCSEs and A-levels. Participants were asked to make a scaled binary choice in response to the following question: how important is it to you that your child develops a good character, as opposed to academic attainment? The aim of the question was to provide an indicative illustration of how the participants viewed the relative merits of character and academic attainment.

To reveal their opinion, respondents had to draw a line on a purposefully designed scale where character and academic attainment were located at opposite ends (Figure 2).

[Insert figure 2 here: Attainment Versus Character Scale]

It was decided to use a 10-point scale to increase the range of variability. Academic attainment was on the left side of the scale with a maximum score of -5, and character education was on the right side with

a maximum of score of 5. The centre of the scale represented a neutral response and was translated as a 0. The online survey coded and translated the responses into numbers automatically, whereas for the paper surveys the research team used a key to measure the distances of the marks relative to the centre to then transform them into numbers.

To correlate any findings that might emerge from the scale, a binary question was also used, which asked participants to choose between a proxy for attainment (results of GCSEs, which all 16-year-olds in England must take) and character. To aid the participants understanding of what was meant by attainment, the question was worded as follows: What do you think is most important? That your child/pupil obtain good exams results at GCSE or That your child/pupil develop good character? As with the previous scale, respondents were requested to answer how they perceive the other group will respond to this question. In using a scale and a binary question, the intention was to gain evidence that might examine if patterns exist and strengthen the findings. While the scale allowed for granularity (the respondents could pinpoint where their priorities lay, and as such could pinpoint if they thought character and attainment were of equal importance or to what extent they thought one had priority over the other), the binary question allowed parents to contrast character against attainment. Although both questions ask parents and teachers to make a somewhat false choice, both questions were used to expose differences in attitudes. In the limitations outlined below, we acknowledge the oversimplification of the relationship between attainment and character, and given this, our belief that the findings from these questions should be viewed as indicative.

The second set of questions was composed of two questions. The first asked parents and teachers to choose and rank the three virtues that they thought were most important to cultivate in their child/pupil from the following list of eight:

Moral: Compassion and Honesty
Civic: Service and Civility
Performance: Confidence and resilience
Intellectual: Good judgment and curiosity

Again, this question was followed by a corresponding question, which asked parents and teachers to choose and rank the three virtues they believed the other group thought most important to cultivate in their child/pupil. Two virtues from each type (moral, civic, intellectual and performance) were chosen. These were chosen because they were seen as a priority by the Department of Education (DfE, 2017) or

they feature as a high priority for parents and or teachers as evidenced in previous polls (Harrison et al, 2017; Jubilee Centre, 2013).

Finally, a dilemma question, focussing on the virtue of honesty, was used in order to investigate if parents and teachers shared reasoning patterns when approaching moral decision-making. The dilemma asked participants what they would advise their child/pupil to do given an opportunity to make a dishonest line call in tennis. It also asked them to choose an option which represents how they would reason in this scenario. The options mapped onto deontological, utilitarian and virtue ethical moral theories. The dilemma was deemed to be realistic in the pilot, and advice on how to relate it was drawn from various sources (see, for example, Walker, Thoma & Kristjánsson., 2017).

Data Analysis

Once collected and transcribed, the questionnaires were cleaned and filtered on an Excel spreadsheet. Subsequently, the data was exported to SPSS version 24 to run the statistical analyses. A one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was carried out to compare the means between parents' and teachers' personal perception on the character-attainment scale whilst controlling by age and gender. Then, the same analysis was repeated but this time comparing the means between teachers and parents on what they think the other group would hypothetically choose on the scale. When character strengths were ranked, a score was given to each virtue selected depending on its order, so the first selection had a score of 8, the second selection a score of 7, and so on until the last selection who had a score of 1. Then, a total score was calculated adding all selections. Finally, a percentage was calculated for each virtue as a proportion of the previously summed overall score. So, aggregately, higher scores are the reflection of higher rankings. As in the previous question, respondents were then asked to rank the strengths a second time, but this time thinking about what the other group would hypothetically choose. To assess how close the perception of the other group was, a mismatch index was calculated as the difference between the hypothetical ranking minus the other group ranking. Finally, in the dilemma question, the percentages represent the total selection per cohort.

Results

The results are presented below against the three research questions.

RQ1) Do teachers and parents value character or attainment more highly? What do they think about the preference of the other group?

Participants were asked how important they believed character was, as opposed to attainment, on a 10-point scale. Parents and teachers personally prioritise character over attainment in a similar magnitude (parent mean: pm=1.595, *sd* = 1.91; teacher mean: tm=1.587, *sd* = 1.86). The ANCOVA evidenced that the covariates included in the model age ($p = < 0.01$) and gender ($p = < 0.01$) were statistically significant but the difference between groups was not [F (60, 321) =.994, p=.493]. Once asked about the hypothetical prioritization of the other group both considered that the other prioritise attainment over character (parent mean: pm= -1.040, *sd* = 2.26; teacher mean: tm= -1.044, *sd* = 2.06). Similar to the previous ANCOVA, covariates of the model were statistically significant (age: p= < 0.01; gender: p= < 0.01) but the difference between groups was not [F (71, 225) = 1.29, p=.072].

[Insert figure 3 here: Parents' and Teachers' Prioritisation of Character and Attainment]

To strengthen the measurement, a further question requiring a binary choice between attainment and character was also asked. The majority of parents (69%) and teachers (72%), if they had to make a choice, prioritised good character over good GCSE results. Yet they both believed their counterpart would prioritise good GCSE results over good character (parents 80%; teachers 74%), thus replicating the finding above.

RQ2) What type of virtues do teachers and parents value the most? What do they think about the preference of the other group?

Respondents were asked to rank eight different virtues based on their personal order of importance, then, they were asked to rank them again thinking on what their counterparts would choose. Each virtue corresponded to one of the four building blocks of character (Jubilee Centre, 2017a).

The percentages below represent a proportion of the preferences made by both groups of respondents. As seen in Figure 5, the top three virtues that parents wished to develop in their children were honesty (22%), compassion (18%) and confidence (16%), whilst the top three virtues that teachers wanted to develop in their pupils were resilience (23%), honesty (21%) and compassion (20%) (see Figure 6). Again, differences emerged when parents and teachers were asked for their perceptions of the virtue priorities of their counterparts. Parents reported that compassion was important to them, yet teachers did not perceive parents to be prioritising compassion (pr = 18%; tr = 9%) to the same degree. Teachers perceived parents to be prioritising confidence to a larger degree than parents' self-reported (pr = 16%; tr = 23%).

[Insert Figure 5 here: How Parents Prioritise Eight Virtues]

[Insert Figure 6 here: How Teachers Prioritise Eight Virtues]

To measure the distance between their own and their counterparts' perception, a difference between the ranked priorities was calculated. The differences among rank virtues were subtracted to create what was called a mismatch index. A higher mismatch can be translated into a wider difference between the priorities of the two parties. Parents believe that teachers ranked civic and intellectual virtues higher, but their own selection was more moral and performance-guided. Compassion, despite being ranked third overall by teachers (20%), was the last selection made by parents (8%) with a mismatch of 12%. This is repeated to a lesser degree with the virtue of honesty, ranked second by teachers (21%) but fifth for parents (11%).

When grouped by building blocks of character (Table 2), parents ranked moral virtues as their top priority and civic as bottom. Conversely, parents believe that their counterparts (teachers) have the exact opposite prioritisation with moral virtues at the bottom and civic at the top. Teachers have a more accurate idea of parents' priorities, but there is still a difference between the top two types. Teachers rank moral virtues as their top (42%) priority and performance virtues as their second (29%). They believe that parents rank performance virtues as their top priority (30%) and moral virtues as their second (27%).

[Insert Table 2 here: Parents and Teachers' Priorities Grouped According to the Building Blocks of Character]

RQ3) What moral theory do teachers and parents prioritise in ethical decision making?

Parents and teachers were both asked to respond to an ethical dilemma (if they would advise their child/pupils to make a dishonest line call in a high-stakes tennis match). Almost all the respondents (93% parents and 97% of teachers) said that they would advise their child/pupils to make an honest call (Figure 7). A further question asked them to give a justification for this advice to enable a better understanding about the type of reasoning underlying the guidance they would give their child/pupil. The most popular reason for parents and teachers was that it is unsportsmanlike (pr = 59.7%; tr = 76.1%), followed by it being against the rules (pr =37%; tr =22.4%) or they might get caught (pr =.3%; tr =.7%). This showed that both parents and teachers are both more likely to give virtue reasons rather than rule or consequence reasons if faced with this dilemma.

[Insert Figure 7 here: Moral Reasoning Choices of Parents and Teachers in Response to Dilemma]

Discussion

The findings reported above identify two potential 'gaps' that might be preventing fruitful teacher/parent partnerships on character education in England. These findings seek to deepen previous research about how parents and teachers might work in partnership on character education (Lickona, 1992, 1996; Berkowitz, 2011; Harrison, 2016: 153–154). Although the findings in this report should be treated with a degree of caution due to limitations of the research, they do point to a potential misunderstanding between teachers and parents in England about the importance of character virtues and character education. Perhaps the most notable misunderstanding is that, whilst parents and teachers both report to prioritising character over academic attainment, they perceive the opposite to be true of their counterparts. A similar gap has also been found in previous similar studies, most notably in the Making Caring Common (Weissbourd et al., 2014) project, which diagnosed a rhetoric/reality gap between what parents and teachers report as their priorities (between caring and attainment) and the messages they convey to children. The present research departs from the Making Caring Common study insofar as children were not involved in the questionnaire. It also extends the findings in a number of ways. First, the research shows that parents and teachers share similar priorities – both prioritise character over attainment and rank the moral virtues of compassion and honesty highly. Second, misperceptions operate in both directions; parents misperceive the priorities of teachers (ascribing them a preference for attainment over character) and teachers misperceive the priorities of parents (once again ascribing them a preference for attainment over character). Third, this gives reason to suppose that what the Making Caring Common project team conjecture is a rhetoric/reality gap may be, in the case of this research, an ascription/actuality gap. While parents and teachers ascribe pro-attainment priorities to each other, the actuality of parents' and teachers' priorities shows these ascriptions as erroneous. (In fact, both parents and teachers report character as more important to them than academic attainment). An alternative interpretation (which is supported by the Making Caring Common data) is that both groups see each other accurately but misunderstand themselves. This fallacy is common in psychological research (particularly studies involving self-reporting), where due to social desirability or demand characteristics, the parents and teachers in the study do not provide accurate data about their 'true' attitudes. It should also be noted that given the focus on attainment metrics by Ofsted, the Department of Education and other agencies, it is perhaps not surprising that many parents think that teachers prioritise academic attainment and vice versa. The education system places measurable attainment as the priority goal which will likely influence how teachers and parents imagine the purpose of schooling. Time will tell if the inclusion of character and increased focus on personal development in the Ofsted framework (2019) affects this. It should also be understood that a perceived gap between parents and teachers on character education might not necessary be an issue. There is no research that we could find that suggests that such a gap is problematic. Further research

addressing this question would be required to make a stronger case that the indicative gap that we found is problematic for children's character development. Further, it might be the case that some parents believe they are best left to educate for character whilst teachers prioritise academic attainment in core subjects. For example, a survey of 2,000 parents in the UK undertaken in 2013 showed that despite 87% believing that schools should have a role to developing their students' characters, a not insignificant 13% felt schools should focus on delivering academically.

The character/attainment discord is somewhat replicated in the mismatch in parents' and teachers' understanding of each other's prioritisation of different types of virtues. Although individual groups, such as pupils and teachers, have been asked to rank the virtues they think most important, we have not found previous research that compares teachers and parents with 11 to 14-year-olds' responses to this question. The closest study we found was in a kindergarten setting, where teachers and parents were in agreement about the expectations from kindergarten curriculum, with both groups rating listening and confidence as two (out of ten) of the most important skills/areas of development (Knudsen-Lindauer & Harris, 1989). In regard to differences, parents in this study placed more emphasis on academic skills such as counting and writing, while teachers emphasised curiosity more than parents. Studies have shown that children /pupils themselves tend to self-report that they think the moral/performance virtues are most important (Harrison et al, 2019). Knafo & Schwartz (2001) found that parents rated self-transcendence values most important for themselves, followed by conservation, openness and self-enhancement values. In a parent-teacher-student study, Veugelers & de Kat (2003) found that communicating about values was considered important by parents, teachers and also (although less so) by students, although the study did not consider the specific values/virtues that should be discussed. There is a resurgent interest in parenting, teaching and the virtues (see, for example, Charles, 2019) and we think the present study could provide the basis for further research triangulating teachers, parents and students' perspectives on the importance of different types of virtues for human flourishing. Inspiration for further studies of this nature might come from Willems, Denessen, Hermans and Vermeer (2012) who found that that was a lack of correlation between how students perceived their teachers' solidarity and tolerance and how the teachers self-reported it. Correlations were only found for teachers being perceived as just/fair.

These findings present both an opportunity and a potential barrier for those interested in building better teacher/parent partnerships on character education. The common ground evidenced by parents' and teachers' beliefs about the purpose of education, the virtues they think are most important and in their response to an ethical dilemma, provides a solid ground to work from.

The apparent communication gap between the parties is more worrying and might require an intervention to overcome. One explanation for the discrepancies between the parents and teachers is that teachers and parents either do not try or are unsuccessful in their attempts to communicate their educational priorities to each other. A similar situation has been found in other studies related to parent-teacher partnerships. For example, research into autism showed that although parents and teachers agree on their concerns, they are not able to articulate these concerns (Azad et al., 2016). Providing parents and teachers of early adolescent children with a platform to talk about character education could counteract the 'ambivalence' of their partnerships by proving a rich and positive and potentially transformative topic of conversation. Insights from the present study are a good indicator of how parents and teachers currently view the purpose of education and in particular the prioritisation of character and academic attainment. As such, they are useful in informing new interventions designed to enhance collaboration between parents and teachers on character education.

Limitations

There are several principal limitations with the research; these are concerned with the sample and the research instruments. The study utilised convenience sampling, and therefore the data is likely to contain some bias; the findings cannot be generalised to the population. Furthermore, schools were recruited on a voluntary basis, and therefore it is likely that these schools already had an interest in this research area. The relatively small size of the population sampled in this questionnaire poses a further limitation to the research as this may affect the reliability of a survey's results because it leads to a higher variability, which may lead to bias.

There are well known challenges in measuring character and virtue (Kristjánsson, 2015) and the instruments used in this study are likely to contain limitations that affect their validity. Self-reporting measures were used, which carry the risk of bias owing to the possibility of self-delusion. Similarly, many of the questions may stimulate responses more in line with social desirability than a person's real-life moral responses. It may be the case that parents and teachers answer in line with how they believe they ought to be perceived rather than answering honestly. A further potential problem lies in so-called 'demand characteristics', whereby participants try to work out the aims of the study and answer in ways to either support those aims or undermine them (Weber & Cook, 1972). Perhaps the most pressing limitation is that the study replied on an oversimplified conception of character and academic attainment. In the study, parents and teachers are asked to state if they would prioritise character or academic attainment; a distinction made in order to provide a picture of how they understand the purpose of schools. Given the complexity of the relationship between character and academic attainment and the oversimplified conceptualisations included in the questionnaire, it is

likely that some participants did not understand these terms in the way the researchers intended. Given this limitation, we can only claim that the findings provide an indication of how parents and teachers might view the relative importance of cultivating character qualities over academic attainment.

Ethical considerations

This study received full ethical approval from the University of Birmingham's Ethics Committee. All participants were fully informed, in writing, about the purpose of the research and given the opportunity to withdraw at any point during completion of the online questionnaires in line with BERA (2018) guidelines. Voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants[1].

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