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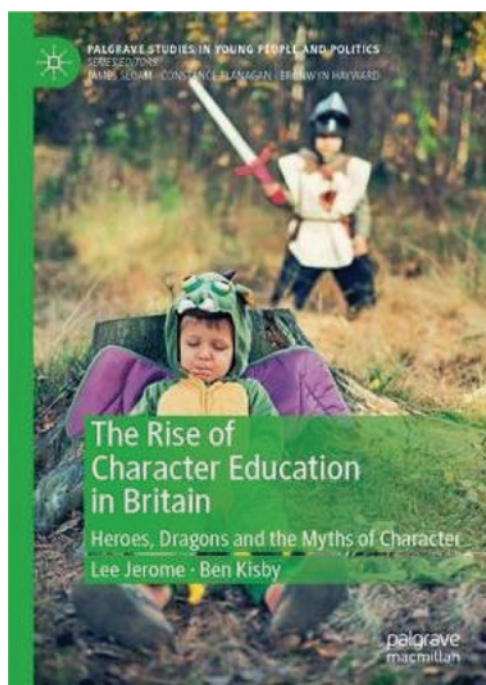
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Book review

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The Rise of Character Education in Britain: Heroes, dragons and the myths of character, by Lee Jerome and Ben Kisby

London: Palgrave Macmillan; 2019; 144 pp.; ISBNs: 978-3-03027-760-4 (hbk); 978-3-03027-761-1 (ebk)



It would not be very hard to be taken in by the current drive behind character education if you had not read this book. As Lee Jerome and Ben Kisby demonstrate, character education on its own is not problematic; the challenge is the current focus on virtue ethics, individualism and the moral, political and educational consequences of that focus (Chapter 2). The book adds to the critical discussion about the subject, and can be enjoyed by policymakers, academics and educators, the former to develop and change policy, the latter two to learn to avoid it and to rely on the clear and established alternative: citizenship education.

Those behind character education say among other things that they want young people to be more resilient and to build a strong Britain (Chapter 3). I cannot think of many who would not want to help students and young people develop in these ways, especially in politically fragmented and divisive times. Indeed, many of those that have worked within character education, and gained support to do so, probably have done this with good intentions.

As Jerome and Kisby indicate in the conclusion of this book, titled 'The devil in the detail' (130–2), what we really need to do is to delve deeper. The book explores the roots and detail of the current perspectives on character education to demonstrate its 'deep flaws' (3). The structure of the book is detailed in the introduction to Chapter 1 to ensure that the reader is clear about the direction, as with character education 'it can be quite difficult to maintain clarity about what exactly is being defended, and the debate can become rather diffuse' (3). Chapter 2 deals with virtue ethics and the problems with these, including the debate around Aristotelian ethics, before examining the nature of character education and individualistic self-centredness. It begins to set the scene for advocating citizenship education as the alternative. Chapter 3 looks at the historical context, at where character education is now and at government approval for it, documenting successive Conservative government ministers and policymakers who support it. This chapter also introduces us to the Jubilee Centre and considers the role of the highly controversial USA-based John Templeton Foundation. Chapter 4 considers the Jubilee Centre's teaching resources, with particular emphasis on the centre's own work on debunking myths around character education and how the resources respond (or, as we find out, do not respond) to these myths. Chapter 5 develops this consideration of practice further by examining three case studies of programmes (Military Ethos, Rugby Values and Narnian Virtues) linking character education to the Victorian era and the dangers associated with this. Chapter 6 brings us back to the established national curriculum alternative – citizenship education – and 'why there might be advantages to adopting a form of education more focused on collective political action than on individual reflection' (115), with evidence from literature to support this. The conclusion in Chapter 7 draws together these elements and begins to consider why character education has been so popular in recent years.

Jerome and Kisby indicate that the problem with character education is that it should focus on more than just the individual; society is not individualistic, as the problems in our society cannot be solved with just an individualistic approach. An active citizen is more than a citizen of 'good' character taking part in volunteering and service, and despite our desire to promote this, we need to think deeper (21). How would socio-economically disadvantaged people feel if we summed up their problems by means of their good or not so good character? Surely we as educators should not be developing individuals to cope with economic hardship through character education, but engaging active citizenship to ensure that social justice prevails and that the economy is appropriately and democratically managed.

The critical case studies give a full explanation of the Narnian Virtues project (Chapter 5), and give consideration to the right-wing, religious, neo-liberal, market-paternalistic machismo, mixed with jingoistic perspectives on moral and character education, as well as the analysis of projects funded by the Department for Education, by the think tank Demos, and by the Jubilee Centre with its own funding – as Jerome and Kisby point out – by the morally complicated tax practices of the John Templeton Foundation (41).

A subsequent edition of the book, or further research in the field, would do well to examine two key areas: (1) Why does character education remain so popular? Chapters 3–5 discuss this, but they could go further, to additionally consider (2) Where is the evidence of experience in the field, from educators themselves as well as from students? Empirical evidence and case studies considering the impact of character education would provide weight to the arguments and would respond to Peterson's (2020) article suggesting that character education and citizenship education should work together.

There is exceptional value in exploring this book by Jerome and Kisby, to learn about character education over time, and its current inception and political agenda in Britain, and to explore some of the potential consequences of delivering lessons based on this model, while being reminded of the ongoing value and strength of citizenship education. Yes, the title and subject matter relate to character education, and character education is certainly not citizenship education, as the authors discuss, but it is evident that the purpose of this work is to demonstrate the value and importance of citizenship education.

Character education seeks to put the responsibility for society on the individual young person. Citizenship education is clearly the inclusive option for all to develop active citizens for justice and equality. As educators, we want young people to develop their knowledge and skills; so as to lift the 'veil of ignorance' (Rawls, 1971) about character education, all should read this book.

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