WHAT IS CHARACTER EDUCATION?
Development of a Prototype

Robert E. McGrath
Fairleigh Dickinson University

Character education specialists seem to know it when they see it, but what it means to call something a character education program remains unclear. One possible source for this uncertainty is the manner in which character education has been defined. By identifying certain features as necessary, existing definitions fail to encompass the universe of programs that can reasonably be considered instances of character education. Using recent literature on definition via prototype as a starting point, this article suggests evaluating programs as character education based on consistency with a model for such programs comprised of 7 features. Two strategies for evaluating whether and to what extent a program can be considered an example of character education are discussed, called polythetic classification and prototype matching. The goal is to help researchers and practitioners more effectively distinguish character education from other sorts of programs intended for personal growth.

DEVELOPMENT OF A PROTOTYPE

What is character education, and can it be differentiated from other types of educational programs that attempt to encourage what could be called "growth as a person?" This is clearly an important and fundamental question in the field of character education, but it is rarely directly addressed in the literature. However, most literature on the topic discusses character education without being clear about what that means.

Lapsley and Narvaez (2006) effectively discussed why this lack of definitional clarity is problematic. The effectiveness of character education programs is typically evaluated via improvements in youth behavior. Without a good definition of what constitutes a character education program, though, any program intended to increase prosocial behaviors or resistance to negative behaviors could be treated as an example of character education. Lapsley and Narvaez provided examples of cases where reviews of the effectiveness of character education programs were overly inclusive of programs with little or no focus on the concept of character. It is therefore impossible to gauge the value of character education.
programs accurately without a clear understanding of what makes a program focusing on personal growth a character education program. At a more practical level, I have found that educators and others interested in developing character education programs are often unclear about what that actually means.

A review of the literature on character education and of existing character education programs reveals substantial variability in what is meant by that term. For example, some of the major figures in the field of character education have identified intentional moral development as the essential element. Berkowitz, Althof, and Bier (2012, p. 72) defined character education as "the intentional attempt in schools to foster the development of students' psychological characteristics that motivate and enable them to act in ethical, democratic, and socially effective and productive ways." Berkowitz and Bier (2005) provided examples of others who have shared this emphasis on the moral and prosocial (see also Nucci & Navaez, 2008).

Other theorists, as well as developers of programs widely considered examples of character education, have rejected, minimized, or expanded on this perspective (Rivers, 2004). For example, the character education program implemented by the KIPP network of charter schools focuses on seven character strengths—zest, grit, self-control, social intelligence, gratitude, optimism, and curiosity (Tough, 2011)—none of which is primarily moral or communal in nature with the possible exception of gratitude. Lickona and Davidson (2005; see also Character.org, 2014) suggested character education programs focus on the enhancement of both moral and performance functioning, while Berkowitz, Bier, and McCauley (in press) identified four key targets: moral, performance, intellectual, and civic character. Still others have argued that character education programs should allow each participating youth to decide what elements of character to focus on for themselves (Bates-Krakoff, McGrath, Graves, & Ochs, 2017; Linkins, Niemiec, Gillham, & Mayerson, 2014).

This diversity of perspectives raises concerns about whether a comprehensive definition of character education is even possible. This article explores one approach to resolving the problem, by locating the problem in how we conceptualize what it means to define something rather than in how we conceptualize character education. The next section will outline the concept of a prototype, and describe how this concept provides an approach to definition that will prove helpful in the context of character education.

THE CONCEPT OF PROTOTYPES

Beginning with Plato, philosophers and scientists assumed that defining a lexical category meant identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for inclusion in that category. This approach to defining concepts assumes the existence of natural kinds, or objective dividing lines in nature. Applying this approach to the definition of character education provided by Berkowitz et al. (2012) would suggest a character education program is marked by (1) location in a school; (2) intentions of fostering certain psychological characteristics; and (3) a focus on characteristics that enhance ethical and social functioning. Programs that do not demonstrate all these features presumably would fall outside the domain of character education, though the necessity of all three conditions is left implicit in their definition.

Wittgenstein (1953/1958) is credited with first making the case that categories can be formed based on family resemblances among members of the category rather than on essential features. Research in cognitive psychology has more recently suggested that humans naturally create categories based on family resemblances rather than necessary and sufficient conditions. This process involves the development of a prototype, an ideal for the category, and then allocation of objects to the category based on consistency with that ideal (Rosch,
What Is Character Education?

1973; also see Vygotsky, 1962, chap. 5). Our reliance on prototypes to understand categories explains why we see a cat as more mammalian than a whale or platypus, for example.

Traditional definition and definition by prototype can be contrasted in several ways. The former is formal and logical, clearly distinguishes members from nonmembers of the category, and sets firm boundary conditions for category membership. Definition based on a prototype is heuristic and practical, encourages the perception of degrees of membership in the category, and sets fuzzy boundary conditions that can leave it ambiguous whether certain objects belong in the category.

Rosch’s (1973) work has inspired a substantial literature that attempts to define the prototype underlying various common language terms. For example, Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou (2015) conducted a series of studies intended to understand what we mean when we call someone a hero. The concept of the prototype has also been used in taxonomic efforts when necessary and sufficient conditions for classification are unclear, debatable, or nonexistent. A good illustration of this practice is the current diagnostic system for mental disorders. For example, the diagnosis of major depressive disorder is based on nine symptoms characteristic of depression, no one of which is necessary for the diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In contrast to studies on natural language prototypes, this prototype had to be developed rather than discovered, and was created by a study group that derived their nine central features from technical literature on the nature of depression.

The diagnostic system for mental disorders offers a useful example of how the concept of prototypes can be applied to the definition of character education. The development of a prototype for character education would involve the identification of central features for character education programs based on research about character education, with no implication that any are necessary or sufficient for such a program. The remainder of this article is devoted to the development of a proposal for such a prototype based on a review of programs that ostensibly provide training in character, and of literature on character education as well as the related concepts of virtue and moral education. The goal is to provide a starting point for dialog among experts about what would constitute an optimal prototype for character education.

**THE PROPOSED CHARACTER EDUCATION PROTOTYPE**

Table 1 introduces seven central features for a prototype of a character education program. These were identified through a review of prior literature that provides definitions for character education, and review of the curricula for several character education programs. The first two features are structural, while the last five focus on content. None of the features focuses on program process, because at present there is no literature consistently suggesting any didactic practices are uniquely featured in character education programs. However, as will be discussed, certain program contents can suggest specific educational strategies.

**The Program Is School Based**

As noted earlier, formal definitions of character education sometimes restrict the domain to school settings. This may simply be an artifact of the reference to education, but a more substantive possible explanation for associating character education with schools over out-of-school time programs will be discussed below in the section on identity. However, there are notable instances in which out-of-school programs treat character as a goal for intervention. One example is the positive youth development program implemented by 4-H among others, a program that specifically includes character as one of “5 Cs” targeted for intervention: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring/compassion (Bowers et al., 2015; see Jones, Dunn,
TABLE 1

Central Features of the Proposed Character Education Prototype

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The program:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• is school-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• is structured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• addresses specific positive psychological attributes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• addresses identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• addresses moral growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• addresses holistic growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• addresses the development of practical wisdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Holt, Sullivan, & Bloom, 2011, for another example).

The focus on school-based programs provides a good basis for comparing definition by prototype with definition based on natural kinds. Traditional definitions that locate character education in schools imply out-of-school programs fall outside the umbrella of character education. Definition by prototype allows for a more flexible perspective. A program that demonstrates many of the other features of a character education program could still be treated as falling within the category even if it takes place outside of school. If two programs are equivalent on all other features, but one is school-based while the other is extramural, definition by prototype would suggest that both are likely to be perceived as examples of character education programs, though the former may be perceived as a truer exemplar of the class than the latter.

The Program Is Structured

Something that is to be thought of as a program should demonstrate some level of structure. Many teachers and out-of-school programs incorporate informal or ad hoc elements into their activities that could contribute to the development character, but these are not exemplars of a character education program. A true character education program is built around shared expectations about what is being transmitted or presented to the participants, and how that transmission takes place in that program, though the degree to which those expectations are explicitly spelled out may vary across programs. Ideally, a formal curriculum would be available for review to ensure consistency in implementation, allow for replication, enhance fidelity, and ultimately guide research on program effectiveness.

The Program Addresses Positive Psychological Attributes

The term attributes is used here to refer to any characteristic of the program participants that is relatively enduring but also considered malleable. Both qualities are important to identifying attributes that deserve to be considered targets for intervention. Without malleability, intervention would be senseless; without enduring outcomes, the value of intervention would be ephemeral.

Psychological attributes are relatively enduring qualities of the individual that describe the individual’s characteristic approach to interpreting and interacting with the larger environment, particularly other people. At this point in the process of developing the prototype, the reference to positive psychological attributes is broadly conceived, to incorporate any quality of the individual that contributes to social good, or that contributes to personal good and does not typically result in harm to others. That is, positive psychological attributes include any attributes of the indi-
The focus on positive psychological attributes represents the most central feature of any program intended to achieve personal growth, though the prototype approach to definition allows for the possibility of developing a personal growth program that does not target positive psychological attributes.

The Program Addresses Identity

The preceding feature does not distinguish among different types of programs intended to enhance personal growth. A review of such programs suggests an important distinction in the terminology they use to describe the positive psychological attributes that they target. Where many programs are purposely intended to address character strengths or virtues, in other cases the intended targets are referred to or conceptualized as skills. Perhaps the best-known example of the latter is programs that focus on social and emotional learning (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Conceptual discussions of skills (Fischer, 1980) and character (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) suggest substantial overlap between the two classes of positive psychological attributes. Both can be conceptualized as the products of gradual change in the individual’s characteristic style of responding to environmental events because of person-context interactions, a developmental framework that has more recently come to be called relational developmental systems (Overton, 2015). Both are also conceptualized in terms of evolving cognitive structures that shape behavior. There is no reason a skill-centric program could not influence character and vice versa. In fact, the categories of skills and character are themselves inclusive of elements that are best understood as related based on family resemblance rather than necessity, so the boundary between the two is permeable. For example, both McGrath (2015) and Park, Tsukayama, Goodwin, Patrick, and Duckworth (2016) have recently identified three broad classes of positive psychological attributes, one having to do with interpersonal issues, one having to do with issues of self-control, and the third having to do with intellectual functioning. However, where Park et al. focused on these specifically as academically relevant areas of skill, McGrath referred to them as general virtues, a concept closely connected to that of character. There is also the possibility of hybrid programs, such as the “5 Cs” of positive youth development described above (Bowers et al., 2015), or social-emotional and character development (Elias, Parker, Kash, & Dunkelblau, 2007).

Given the similarities, what distinguishes the two concepts? Based on several sources (review of curricula, literature on virtue theory, and certain sources in character education, e.g., Berkowitz, 2012), it can be hypothesized that character education differs from skills training primarily in terms of the extent to which it focuses on narrative identity. Narrative identity is a term used to refer to an internalized autobiographical perspective that ties together past, present, and future into a cohesive story about the person (McAdams & Manezak, 2015; McAdams & McLean, 2013). The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are broad in scope: they represent thematically coherent statements about our relationship with our life situation, our values and goals, our understanding of ourselves as individuals, the role of suffering in our lives, our cultural context, and many other pieces of who we are. From this perspective, a central goal of character education is to help us see ourselves as individuals defined in important ways by our positive psychological attributes.

This focus on identity in character education allows it to be compared with skills training in a variety of ways, though in cases where differences exist they differ in terms of degree. Both types of programs are committed to the development of positive behavioral habits. In the case of character education, this associa-
ion with habit may be traced as far back as Aristotle’s discussion of habit in relation to virtue (Bartlett & Collins, 2007), while the conception of habit in skills-based programs is a more recent product of psychological learning theory. However, where skills training emphasizes the participant achieving behavioral effectiveness, character education is more about the participant developing a greater sense of who he or she is or may become. Where skills training tends to be about current functioning, character education can have more of a focus on a trajectory for future change. Though both are the product of individual-context interplay, skills training focuses more on how to respond in specific situations, character on the stable attributes underlying those responses. Put overly simply, skills training is about “what will I do?” Character education is about “who will I be?”

This difference in emphasis offers one hypothesis for why out-of-school time programs might prefer to target skills rather than character. While many out-of-school time programs aspire to contribute to the personal growth of involved youth, the development of character can seem too ambitious a target for programs with limited resources, goals, and youth access.

One of the reasons the distinction between a program that focuses on skills and one that focuses on character is important, even if difficult to make, is that it has some implications for the types of interventions that are likely to be used. Skills training suggests a greater emphasis on behavioral shaping and reinforcement, though gradual change can be an important component in both types of programs. Modeling and storytelling can also be important tools across both, though how they are used may differ. In skills training, modeling and storytelling may be used primarily to demonstrate specific responses to specific environmental events. In character education, the leader may be more important as a global role model for participants (Kristjansson, 2015), and storytelling as a means of sharing values with participants (Tappan & Brown, 1989).

One technique that particularly highlights the differences between character education and skills training has been called strengths spotting (Linkins et al., 2014). This term refers to various strategies intended to help participants define one or more positive psychological attributes, and identify examples of the expression of that attribute in themselves and/or others. This strategy makes relatively little sense in the context of skills building, where the assumption is that the participant needs to enhance the skill. Strengths spotting assumes the positive attribute is already present to some degree, and it is through the process of integrating that strength into one’s sense of identity that the attribute is enhanced.

Developmental factors play an important role in how identity is likely be addressed in character education program. There is reason to believe that preadolescent children generally do not demonstrate the cognitive capacity to generate a life story that weaves together personal history, current context, and aspirations for the future (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Instead, self-statements tend to be associated with specific incidents rather than comprehensive statements about self. For younger children, then, the focus on identity may involve little more than an emphasis on strengths spotting, with the goal of enhancing the child’s labeling of various positive attributes as they are currently constituted.

One further area of overlap between skills-building and character education programs is that they are often implemented for similar purposes, such as, to reduce bullying or enhance resilience. Whether the two types of programs differ in their effectiveness for achieving objective outcomes of this type remains an open question, in part because of the difficulties already discussed distinguishing between the two camps.

In summary, the distinction between skills training and character education is the most subtle discussed so far. At the same time, it may well be the most important for distinguishing between character education and other kinds of personal growth programs.
**The Program Addresses Moral Growth**

The concept of character has historically been closely associated with concepts of morality and virtue. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1884, para. 5) referred to character as "moral order seen through the medium of an individual nature." Baumrind and Thompson (2002, p. 12) captured a common perspective among psychologists about the nature of character when they referred to it as "personality evaluated." We have already seen that some leaders in the field of character education identify the moral component as central (Berkowitz, 2014; Berkowitz et al., 2012), though programs exist that emphasize the flourishing of individual participants more than the flourishing of the community (e.g., Tough, 2011). The number of essays on character education that have emphasized the moral component of such programs indicates that moral content deserves to be included among the central features of character education. However, it should be noted that many skills-oriented programs include a focus on prosocial skills. It is currently unclear whether character education programs as a set tend to deal with issues of moral development in a different manner than skills-based programs tend to teach prosocial skills (e.g., through a greater emphasis on deontological or universal principles of morality). In the absence of evidence for such a difference, a moral emphasis in itself may not be a good basis for distinguishing between character education and skills-based programs. Research examining how issues of prosociality tend to be addressed in the two types of programs could provide important clarification on this issue.

**The Program Addresses Holistic Growth**

The final two central features are suggested as prototypical of character education even though they do not seem particularly common foci for existing character education programs. Since prototype definition can be about defining the ideal for a category, they merit inclusion as aspirational goals for character education programs. For this reason, the rationale for their inclusion rests more on philosophical speculations than examples from the character education literature.

Aristotle’s discussion of the nature of virtue has led some commentators to talk about the reciprocity of the virtues, the proposition that a person cannot be considered virtuous unless he or she has achieved proficiency in all the virtues (Irwin, 1988). Reciprocal development among elements of character represents a potential goal for the prototypical character education program, one that fits particularly well with the emphasis on identity and life stories. That is, character education programs ideally should aim to enhance character as a whole, or multiple elements of character. This focus on holistic growth of character is another way in which true character education programs can be differentiated from skills-based programs. Skills tend to be perceived as distinct behavioral tendencies, while the development of character has associated with it a whole-person approach. Programs that focus on specific elements of character to the exclusion of others can be considered less prototypical than a more multidimensional character education program.

Efforts at an integrated character education program can be enhanced by theory about the essential elements of character. It was mentioned previously that McGrath (2015) identified three core elements of character called caring, inquisitiveness, and self-control. Similarly, Berkowitz et al. (in press) suggest four elements for a comprehensive view on character: moral, civic, performance, and intellectual. Programs that highlight only one or even two of these elements may be incapable of ensuring individuals of good general character. The ideal character education program would instead convey to its participants the importance of growth across all the key dimensions of character. Whether there are additional key elements to be targeted by holistic character education programs is a question to be
deferred for future research on the essential nature of character.

**The Program Addresses Practical Wisdom**

Another important concept to emerge from Aristotle’s philosophy of virtue is the importance of practical wisdom or *phronesis*, that is, the deliberate and thoughtful application of elements of character to specific situations (Bartlett & Collins, 2007). According to Aristotle, the truly virtuous person deliberates about which virtues should be applied to what extent based on the situation. The prototypical character education program would not only nurture the essential elements of character, but also the deliberative process of deciding how to act as a person of character in specific contexts (Krisjansson, 2015). An important element of this practical wisdom according to Aristotle involves avoiding the overuse or underuse of one’s strengths, a topic that has recently received attention in the literature on character (e.g., Freidlin, Litman-Ovadia, & Niemiec, 2017; Peterson, 2006).

**THE PRACTICAL VALUE OF THE PROTOTYPE**

The prototype that has been introduced here is not intended as a purely intellectual exercise; the ultimate goal is to provide a basis for evaluating personal growth programs as examples of character education. There are two complementary approaches to making these kinds of judgments. The first is called polythetic classification, the second prototype matching.

**Polythetic Classification**

Comparing mental disorders with more traditional medical illnesses illustrates one practical problem with using prototypes. In medicine, most diagnoses have an essential biological basis that makes them natural kinds, such as, influenza involves infection by a specific family of virus. Classification based on essential conditions is called *monothetic classification*.

The absence of a clear dividing line in a prototype for a mental disorder can render diagnosis unreliable. To address this problem, category minima were developed for each of the mental disorders. For example, the minima for a diagnosis of major depression include: (1) The person must demonstrate at least five of the nine central symptoms; (2) At least one of the symptoms must involve depressed mood or loss of interest or pleasure; (3) The person must experience clinically significant distress or impairment resulting from the disorder; and (4) The disorder cannot be attributed to physiological factors or to certain other mental disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Diagnosis of mental disorders is an example of *polythetic classification*, classification based on shared features, none of which is essential. In polythetic classification, the category minima for the prototype are recognized as arbitrary, since no natural dividing line exists for the category.

As a starting point for the polythetic classification of programs as character education programs, the following features are suggested as reasonable category minima:

1. The program is structured.
2. The program addresses specific positive psychological attributes.
3. The program addresses identity.

Acceptance of these minima would indicate that a program demonstrating these three conditions can for practical purposes be considered an example of character education, while a personal growth program that does not demonstrate all three would be excluded. The other four central features play no role in deciding whether the program should be considered character education, unless others (researchers, practitioners, or the field as a whole) settle on category minima that include them.
It is inherent to polythetic classification that the minima are heuristic, to some extent arbitrary, and open to reasoned debate. The definition of character education provided earlier from Berkowitz et al. (2012) indicates reasonable objections to the exclusion of an academic setting and a moral focus from the basic requirements, for example. It might even be reasonable for different researchers to set different category minima depending on their goals, though those minima should always be explicitly stated.

**Prototype Matching**

Polythetic classification results in a binary decision about a program: do we consider it character education or not? Prototype matching offers a complementary approach based on a review of all seven central features, one that results in a dimensional evaluation of consistency with the prototype.

Two empirical strategies are available that can be considered forms of prototype matching. One provides raters the list of seven central features for the prototype, and asks the raters to evaluate a program's overall consistency with the prototype on a 1–5 scale (Westen, 2012). The second asks raters to evaluate the program on the presence or absence of each of the seven features. The simplest way to aggregate this information would award one point for each feature that is present. The result would be a 0–7 scale reflecting degree of consistency with the prototype. It is also possible for the features to be differentially weighted. Cooper and Balsis (2009) suggested the use of item response theory for this purpose, which would weigh the less common features more highly; another option would put more weight on the features that comprise the category minima. Whatever weighting system is chosen, and the best weighting system should be based on empirical evidence suggesting a value to one over others, the result would be a dimensional scale where higher scores indicate better match to the prototype.

**Applications**

Polythetic classification and prototype matching serve complementary ends. Polythetic classification is more appropriate if the researcher or practitioner wants to decide if a program is or is not an example of character education. This is useful if the goal is to compare character education to other forms of personal growth programming, for example. Prototype matching is more helpful if the goal is to evaluate how closely the program matches the "ideal" of a character education program. This can be particularly useful, for example, when the goal is to identify exemplary character education programs, or to compare across character education programs.

The first step in either polythetic classification or prototype matching requires educating raters about the program. Ideally, the raters would extensively observe the program in action. Less desirable options would include limited observation; interviews with program stakeholders; review of the program curriculum; or a written description of the program. To maximize the reliability and validity of the ratings, multiple raters knowledgeable about character education but external to the program are preferable over single raters, raters naive to character education, or raters who are associated with the program.

If the goal is polythetic classification, the raters only have to consider those features that comprise the category minima set by the researchers. Prototype matching in contrast requires rating all seven features or, if the raters are just providing a 1–5 rating of prototype match, a description of the features. Rating of the features could take place on a dichotomous (present-absent) or dimensional scale, though the latter would require setting a minimum rating needed to treat the feature as present in the case of polythetic classification. A sample rating form using a dimensional scale may be found in Table 2.

For example, School A has implemented a program with a formal curriculum that focuses on the development of prosocial skills. There
### Table 2
Sample Rating Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Based</th>
<th>Absent</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
<th>Probably Present</th>
<th>Definitely Present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Takes place on school premises</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In-school time used</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Compulsory for all students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A formal curriculum is available</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The curriculum lists lesson plans and activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Attributes Are Targeted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attach a list of target attributes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strengths spotting in self and others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encourages self-statements about strengths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Discusses character</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In programs for adolescents and adults, addresses the future person</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focus on ideal self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Growth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Discusses moral role models</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Discusses moral decision-making</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Discusses moral dilemmas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focus on moral issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic Growth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Addresses strengths or virtues in combination</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Addresses conflicts among strengths or virtues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical Wisdom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Addresses practical problems in using strengths or virtues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Discusses overuse and underuse of strengths or virtues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Each of the features is followed by examples of indicators for that feature. If the goal is polythetic classification using the category minima suggested in the article, only the structured, positive attributes, and identity features need to be rated, and a rating of *Probably or Definitely Present* on each could serve as the indicator of meeting minimum criteria.

---

is no discussion of how prosocial skills operate in tandem with other skills, or when they should not be used. The program is school-based and structured, targets positive attributes, and is concerned with moral growth. Using the category minima proposed for a character education program, this would not meet criteria for a character education program. There is clear evidence for four of the seven features, so equal weighting of the features would generate a prototype match score of 4.

School B has also implemented a program with a formal curriculum. It focuses on self-determination as a personal attribute, and on the importance of seeing ourselves as self-determined people. Because the program is school-based, structured, focuses on positive psychological attributes, and addresses issues of identity, it meets the proposed category minima for a character education program. However, in terms of prototype matching, it would still receive a score of 4 on the 0–7 scale, because the moral focus has been replaced by a focus on identity.

Whether a score of 4 is a good match to the prototype relative to other character education programs is a question that cannot be answered until a variety of programs have been evaluated to determine what is normative. What we
What Is Character Education?

can say is that they are both moderately similar to the ideal for a character education program. It may well be that the School A program will even have lasting effects on character. However, since identity is not a target of the intervention in School A, only the School B program would represent a true example of a character education programs, at least according to the proposed category minima.

There are practical issues inherent to the application of polythetic classification and prototype matching in character education. Reasonable observers can differ in terms of their judgment about whether or not a program is structured, or whether it is truly holistic. As aspirational features, the last two features may be particularly susceptible to disagreement. With concerns about the reliability of measurement in mind, polythetic classification and prototype matching offer an empirical basis for the identification of character education programs. In this way, the proposed prototype provides a starting point for discussing issues in character education with greater clarity than has been possible in the past.

As multiple editions of the diagnostic manual for mental disorders, and literature critical of each of those editions, attest, the development of a technical prototype is an evolving process that is open to debate. The purpose of this article has been to begin that process. Future literature and discussion may well result in substantial changes to the prototype and category minima offered here. There are some conclusions to be drawn from this article that may be of enduring value, though. First, greater clarity in what is meant by character education can only advance the field for both researchers and practitioners. Second, definition by prototype rather than necessary and/or sufficient conditions provides a framework for definition that can accommodate reasonable differences across character education programs and perspectives on the nature of character education. Finally, the general adoption of a prototype for character education would allow for the formal evaluation of programs via polythetic classification or prototype matching. Such a development would have substantial potential for clarifying discussions and research on character education.

Acknowledgment: I am grateful to Marvin Berkowitz for his comments on earlier versions of this article.

NOTE

1. It is no coincidence that Hurschke (1999, Chap. 1) used almost exactly the same questions to distinguish between virtue ethics and other ethical systems.

REFERENCES


What Is Character Education?


CLARIFYING CHARACTER EDUCATION
Commentary on McGrath

Angela L. Duckworth and Peter Meindl
Character Lab and the University of Pennsylvania

Robert McGrath (this issue) has proposed a useful way of bringing the field closer to a consensus definition of character education. We support much of his proposal. Like McGrath, we believe the goal of character education should be to increase the expression of qualities that benefit one’s self and others. We also agree that character education entails more than just skill building. That said, we have a few reservations about McGrath’s proposal. In this commentary, we describe what we consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of McGrath’s article. We also offer alternatives to the positions on which we disagree.

Character education is a divisive topic.

When we speak of character education as polarizing, we do not just refer to the fact that some are for it and some are against it. We also refer to infighting among those who enthusiastically champion the idea of teaching character in schools. Whenever thoughtful and well-meaning people disagree, there’s a good chance that their disagreement derives from differences in assumptions. For instance, what does the term “character” mean, essentially, and what is meant by its companion term “education”?

R. E. McGrath (this issue) proposes a way forward. He suggests that character education can be distinguished from other types of education aimed at encouraging “growth as a person” (p. 23). Why is this clarification important? Why not, for example, proceed on the assumption that most of us mainly agree on the essential features of character education, even if we cannot easily articulate them?

In McGrath’s view, the chief risk of the status quo is that “any program intended to increase prosocial behaviors or resistance to negative behaviors could be treated as an example of character education” (p. 23). McGrath argues that we should instead draw a tighter circle around the scope of character education. Responsible people may disagree with that point, but it’s a plain fact that clarifying terms is a prerequisite for evaluating the efficacy of education programs or developing clear policies for funding and research. This
seems especially true of character education, given the abundance of distinct definitions of “character” (Fleeson, Furr, Jayawickreme, Meindl, & Helzer, 2014).

McGrath usefully contrasts two ways to define character education or, indeed, any categorical concept. One way is to identify essential elements; an alternative is to base judgments on family resemblances (i.e., similarity to an ideal prototype).

Much of McGrath’s essay is devoted to seven proposed features of an ideal prototype for character education. For us, these are most easily understood when contrasted with their respective obverses: (1) school based (versus extracurricular or family based), (2) structured (versus unstructured), (3) addressing positive psychological attributes (versus neutral or detrimental attributes), (4) concerned with identity (versus skills), (5) addressing moral development (as opposed to attributes without moral valence), (6) holistic (versus focused on a single strength), and (7) including practical wisdom (versus remaining silent about when and in what measure to deploy strengths).

We support including several of these features in a definition of character education. For example, we also think the goal of character education is to improve the subset of psychological attributes in young people that are stable yet malleable and, importantly, which benefit the individual and their community without doing harm to either.

We also concur that an exclusive focus on skill building in character education is limited. In our view, there is a skill component to any character strength, but the motivation to act, feel, and think in particular ways is equally essential. For instance, gratitude is demonstrated by the student who writes their teacher a thank you note in order to express their appreciation, but the same gesture is empty if enacted to curry favor. In other words, character is not just about how you act, think, and feel, but also, crucially, about why you do so.

While we agree with much of McGrath’s reasoning, we differ on a few issues. First, though McGrath’s criterion of holistic (versus targeted) development of character strengths feels right to us, we also consider it important to acknowledge this approach’s natural limitations. For instance, it seems impractical to work on improving many different character strengths all at once (e.g., 13 in the case of Benjamin Franklin [1791/1921], or 24 as argued by Peterson and Seligman [2004]).

We think it could be more tractable to target, sequentially, individual character strengths. Importantly, it seems that certain strengths are better targets than others, insofar as they have demonstrated influence on other strengths. For instance, a child who develops self-control is not just more self-disciplined, but is probably also in a better position to develop a suite of moral strengths (Baumeister & Exline, 1999). Focusing on “master virtues” like self-control should make character education more efficient (Meindl, Quirk, & Graham, 2017).

Higher order taxonomies of character offer another way of developing character holistically without getting overwhelmed. McGrath’s earlier (2015) work supports three core dimensions of character: caring, inquisitiveness, and self-control. These dimensions resonate with Berkowitz, Bier, and McCauley’s (2016) four aspects of character (moral, performance, intellectual, and civic; see also Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017). Our own view differs only slightly: we divide character into interpersonal, intellectual, and intrapersonal dimensions (as identified by Park, Tsukayama, Goodwin, Patrick, & Duckworth, 2017). The interpersonal dimension includes Berkowitz et al.’s (2016) moral and civic strengths, both of which share a focus on other people that is lacking for intellectual and intrapersonal strengths.

Second, we are not convinced that character education need be structured and school-based. Much of character education, it seems, can and does happen in what is often called the “hidden curriculum”—without a formal syllabus and often outside the classroom, as in the Boy and Girl Scouts, Outward Bound, and after school sports teams. In the

CONCLUSION

McGrath used his theory as a propostive tool to define character education. In our view, there is a skill component to any character strength, but the motivation to act, feel, and think in particular ways is equally essential. For instance, gratitude is demonstrated by the student who writes their teacher a thank you note in order to express their appreciation, but the same gesture is empty if enacted to curry favor. In other words, character is not just about how you act, think, and feel, but also, crucially, about why you do so.

While we agree with much of McGrath’s reasoning, we differ on a few issues. First, though McGrath’s criterion of holistic development of character strengths feels right to us, we also consider it important to acknowledge this approach’s natural limitations. For instance, it seems impractical to work on improving many different character strengths all at once (e.g., 13 in the case of Benjamin Franklin [1791/1921], or 24 as argued by Peterson and Seligman [2004]).

We think it could be more tractable to target, sequentially, individual character strengths. Importantly, it seems that certain strengths are better targets than others, insofar as they have demonstrated influence on other strengths. For instance, a child who develops self-control is not just more self-disciplined, but is probably also in a better position to develop a suite of moral strengths (Baumeister & Exline, 1999). Focusing on “master virtues” like self-control should make character education more efficient (Meindl, Quirk, & Graham, 2017).

Higher order taxonomies of character offer another way of developing character holistically without getting overwhelmed. McGrath’s earlier (2015) work supports three core dimensions of character: caring, inquisitiveness, and self-control. These dimensions resonate with Berkowitz, Bier, and McCauley’s (2016) four aspects of character (moral, performance, intellectual, and civic; see also Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017). Our own view differs only slightly: we divide character into interpersonal, intellectual, and intrapersonal dimensions (as identified by Park, Tsukayama, Goodwin, Patrick, & Duckworth, 2017). The interpersonal dimension includes Berkowitz et al.’s (2016) moral and civic strengths, both of which share a focus on other people that is lacking for intellectual and intrapersonal strengths.

Second, we are not convinced that character education need be structured and school-based. Much of character education, it seems, can and does happen in what is often called the “hidden curriculum”—without a formal syllabus and often outside the classroom, as in the Boy and Girl Scouts, Outward Bound, and after school sports teams. In the
same breath, let us add that an intentional and deliberate focus on character education is surely better than a laissez-faire and unreflective approach. Likewise, schools, where many young people spend the majority of their waking hours, are an excellent locus for character development.

Third, we view character education as different from skill-formation programs not just in its emphasis on identity, but on values as well (see March & Olsen, 2008). Identity is about self-assigned membership to a categorical group. While much of human behavior is motivated by identity (e.g., “I’m the sort of person who considers other people’s feelings”), it also reflects values that are more loosely bound to such categorical beliefs (e.g., “Considering other people’s feelings is important”).

CONCLUSION

McGrath finishes his essay by suggesting how to use his criteria in order to advance both the theory and practice of character education. He proposes that the contribution of his perspective is threefold: clarification of muddled terminology, a tractable approach to defining character education, and a suggested path forward for evaluating character education programs. While we might quibble with some of the specific details of his argument, we are convinced that McGrath’s contribution is moving the field in the right direction.

REFERENCES


THE PROMISE AND PERILS OF PROTOTYPING
Can We (and Should We)
Define Character Education?

Blaine J. Fowers
University of Miami

McGrath presents a prototyping proposal to better classify character education programs. He proposes 7 key elements that can facilitate identifying more and less typical programs. This proposal appears to be a very good start for improving the organization of the character education field and facilitating research. This commentary highlights 4 areas of attention for how this proposal can be carried out. First, it seems important to broaden the degree of participation in a prototyping endeavor so as to include important stakeholders and foster buy-in to support the effort. Second, a prototyping effort is field defining, so the content validity of a prototyping model must be thoroughly vetted by a panel of experts in character education. The best procedure would be an iterative one with attention to how many and which elements should be included. Third, the work of prototyping is quintessentially theoretical in that the definitions of core concepts, their relations, and their application are theoretical questions. The commentary explores key areas for deeper theoretical attention, particularly related to the question of identity development. Finally, empirical testing prior to implementation is necessary to develop confidence in the construct validity of the prototype model.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to offer some commentary on Robert McGrath’s ambitious and forward-looking project of defining a prototyping approach to character education. I believe he has embarked on a useful project because this very important domain can benefit by clarifying what is central and what is peripheral to it. My purpose in this commentary is to highlight a set of concerns and issues that emerge for me in considering McGrath’s proposal. In doing so, I do not intend to impede or impugn the project, but rather to suggest that some unavoidable decisions and operations must be undertaken prior to its becoming a practical enterprise. I also want to make clear that my suggestions are not remonstrances for what McGrath “should” have already included in the article. Rather, they are ideas about how we might build out the proposal presented in his article, if others in the character education community agree that it is a useful project.

* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Blaine J. Fowers, bflowers@miami.edu

Copyright © 2018 Information Age Publishing, Inc.
ISSN 1543-1223
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.
The rationale that McGrath proposes for the development of a prototype for character education programs (CEPs) is the lack of consensus on which programs qualify as character education, and the difficulties that ensue from the absence of boundary clarity. This rings true, particularly for researchers who want to evaluate CEPs and for those who wish to create a new program or revise an existing program. A prototyping process could clarify the central features that constitute CEPs. McGrath’s goal is to find a proper definitional balance that will avoid the (1) deficiency of having too few differentiating criteria, which would thereby include programs that are weakly related to character education and (2) an excess of restrictive and exclusionary criteria that would rule out programs that are related to character education. Approaching the identification of properly classified CEPs through some form of prototypical analysis seems to be a useful way to assist the field to productively manage the considerable diversity within it. The variations in CEPs can be accommodated while still distinguishing them from programs that do not focus on character development. I agree with McGrath that domain specification through essentialist or natural kinds approaches would serve this complex conceptual terrain very poorly.

Given this clear and worthwhile aim, McGrath presents a brief conceptual understanding of prototyping and proposes an initial prototype framework for locating programs in the CEP space. His article is clearly written, and he pursues his aims in a systematic and informative manner. This makes McGrath’s proposal a good start, but if it is to be the start of something, it would be wise for us to be clear about what is being started. It seems to me that the attempt to define a prototyping process is to define a prototype, which is to define a field. That is a very ambitious project, and it is a project that can only succeed if it is shared by a large proportion of those who comprise the field. I do not believe that any individual, regardless of intentions or status, can single-handedly define a field of study and education. I am not suggesting that McGrath meant to claim such an exalted role, and he does say that his “goal is to provide a starting point for a dialogue among experts about what would constitute an optimal prototype for character education” (p. 25). I see my task as setting out some of the unspoken steps that seem necessary for this proposal to be successful and useful. The steps that are clear to me now involve participation, consensus, theoretical work, and validity assessment.

**PARTICIPATION**

The general idea of McGrath’s proposal sounds useful to me, but I am a virtue theorist and researcher rather than a character educator or program evaluator. So, the first question that I have regards how widely the concern about domain specification is shared by the people involved in CEPs, including character educators, effectiveness researchers, educational administrators, and policy makers, among others. If domain specification is not a widely held worry, then we can stop and thank McGrath for a well-articulated, but unnecessary proposal. My guess is that many people will see this as an important issue, but this ought to be demonstrated through a survey or a vote or some means of establishing a widespread perception of the need for greater definition of the field. Otherwise this proposal becomes another academic exercise that does not go beyond one person’s assessment, even if that evaluation is entirely correct.

The second form of participation would be for the character education community to endorse a proposal for addressing domain boundary specification. McGrath has given us a good rationale for approaching it through prototyping. Doing so effectively will require buy-in from the relevant stakeholders. Field definition is only worthwhile to the extent that it is shared by those inhabiting the field. Short of that, statements about what does or does not belong in a domain are only pronouncements that will, at best, cultivate camps within a
discipline. In addition, prototyping requires more than general agreement about its potential usefulness. It should also include developing a consensus about its contents.

**CONSENSUS BUILDING**

I used the gerund form in the section title because consensus is more a process than a result, and McGrath did recognize that "the development of a technical prototype is an evolving process that is open to debate" (p. 33). Yet he did not describe how that process could unfold. We can, of course, reach consensus on a question at a given point in time, but consensus at any given point in time needs to be nurtured, revisited, revised, reconsidered, and re-established because domains of effort change, people come and go, and needs evolve. I suggest that, in working toward consensus, it is important to start at the beginning. In this case, that means gathering input on the crucial features of CEPs. McGrath's proposal seems like a reasonable starting point, but it should be vetted by an expert panel. To what degree does a representative sample of the best minds in the character education community agree with his formulation? How might they want to amend it? How many features should this prototyping process have? What should those features be? There are many questions to be answered.

I recognize that this is no simple task, and there is no guarantee that anything like consensus can be reached. Moreover, even with a basic consensus, differences of opinion and priority will inevitably continue. But without a reasonably consensual approach to prototyping, McGrath's proposal cannot rise above being an idiosyncratic suggestion. If, however, a respected group of leaders can agree, in the main, about what defines CEPs as CEPs, then there is hope that a prototyping process may accomplish the aims for which it was designed.

It seems to me that consensus building would take an iterative form, with an initial proposal, such as the one McGrath provides, followed by rounds of feedback and revision until the expert panel can endorse the proposal. A valid prototyping process would continue to be reviewed and revised throughout its useful life to remain relevant and informative as conditions change. It is also important, however, for this review and revision process to be guided by more than opinion and practical concerns. In my view, it is also vital that it be guided by good virtue theory and research (Cokelet & Fowers, 2018; Fowers, Carroll, Leonhardt, & Cokelet, 2018).

**VIRTUE THEORY**

McGrath refers to virtue theory twice in his article, including a differentiation of character and skills development, and a comment about "essential elements of character" (p. 15). He states that theory can enhance CEPs, and, I assume he believes that theory can enhance the development of a prototype model as well. I certainly believe that theory is important for both and that there is far more theoretical work to be done in both programing and prototyping endeavors. It seems to me that prototyping is one of the most important forms of theorizing because the aim of prototyping is to set a conceptual definition on an entire field. If that is true, then the theory guiding the prototype model must be made explicit and it must be vetted by experts.

Virtue theory is a very large topic, with many books and articles devoted to it, so I can only make a few broad recommendations about some salient points here. It seems to me that there is a set of essential concepts that should inform prototyping. McGrath does refer to my top priority of situating discussions of virtue within discussions of human flourishing, as all of the ancient Greek philosophers—the most prominent sources of virtue theory—did. But he mentions flourishing very briefly, and he intimates tension between individual and communal flourishing. The relations between the individual and communal good is a vital theoretical question that requires more
attention. There are some useful resources that provide helpful ways to conceive the relationship between individual and communal goods (e.g., Fowers, 2005, 2012; Mariujo & Neto, 2017), so we need not start from scratch on this issue.

McGrath also incorporates my second theoretical priority by including training in practical wisdom as one of the elements of his prototype, although he was more tentative than I would be on this point. The vital role of practical wisdom is often overlooked by scholars and educators interested in character, but it is widely understood as central among virtue theorists (e.g., Fowers, 2003; Kristjánsson, 2015; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). McGrath also recognizes the important point that practical wisdom is not simply a virtue like any other, avoiding the mistake that Peterson and Seligman (2004) made in seeing wisdom as no more central to character than courage or temperance. Rather, practical wisdom is the capacity to decide which virtues are relevant to a given situation, what actions would constitute those virtues in the specific circumstances, and in prioritizing virtues in one's actions.

Third, character development is seen by most virtue theorists as a process of habituation, to which McGrath refers as the development of habits, and elaborates with the prototypical feature of identity. Although his definition of character development in terms of developing the whole person in a narrative identity is useful, narrative identity is a formal, and therefore, contentless definition. After all, there are many kinds of narrative identity. Contrary to McGrath's belief that narrative identity differentiates character habituation and skills development, there is no reason that a narrative identity could not be formed around an individual's development as a highly skilled person who has progressed from being a novice to an expert through a series of experiences and training and now identifies as a master of a domain (any domain at all). An even more telling example of the lack of content specification of the concept of narrative identities is that they can be formed for the development of vicious persons as well. Indeed, one of the most interesting questions about vicious character is how it develops in a life, McGrath may have been better served by including something more specific, such as the concept of a moral identity, which is defined by a commitment to acting morally (e.g., Blasi, 1994). The important point is that the identity ideal for character development that he or any other character education specialist must be spelled out. To his credit, McGrath indicates that this identity will include "positive psychological attributes" and "moral growth" that will contribute to "social good" or "personal good" without harming others. The trouble is that the meaning of these terms are not obvious and are in need of definition and elaboration. There are many ways to conceptualize each of these terms, and some versions will be easier to endorse and more useful than others. There are and should be many voices in these core definitional questions, which means that there will be variations in identity ideals across CEPS. From a virtue theory perspective, an identity ideal should be recognizable as a vision of a distinctly good human being, with the meaning of goodness spelled out in reasonable detail. There are different ways that this can be done, but we would expect a clear family resemblance among these character ideals.

The concept of habituation raises a fourth theoretical issue on which many versions of character theory and education falter. There is a great deal of interest in the concept of self-control among many scholars and educators (e.g., Baumeister & Exline, 2000; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This is understandable because self-control is often crucial to acting properly for imperfect creatures. Yet self-control is neither a virtue nor a goal in most versions of virtue theory (Fowers, 2008; Woodruff, 2001). The reason for this is that the goal of character habituation is to become the kind of person who wants to act in the best way. Having a virtue means that an individual is characteristically motivated to act according to that virtue when it is appropriate to do so. Self-control is generally unnecessary to the
by theory about the essential elements of character" (p. 15). He then cites his factor analytic results (McGrath, 2015) as a theoretical resource indicating a possible three-virtue structure for CEPS. Clearly, factor analysis can be one source of data to inform theory, but it is not theory. In addition, the three-factor result he cites emerged from self-report responses to the VIA-IS and is therefore only applicable to the extent that one conceptualizes character based on that measure. Few virtue theorists would accept the VIA-IS as a paradigmatic model of virtue, and most virtue lists differ significantly from both the original VIA-IS model and from McGrath's results. Of course, there is no consensus list of virtues (and there never has been a single list). There is not even a consensus view on how such a list is best formulated or on what sort of research could establish agreement about a particular list. This means that those who design, implement, and study character education need to formulate the set of character strengths that foster behaviors in a careful and informed manner, without the assumption that they are working from a canonical list. Rather than debating the contents of a virtue list, most virtue theorists focus more on discussing how and in what contexts a character strength contributes to a good life.

This short and far from exhaustive list of theoretical issues indicates that there are vital theoretical questions attendant to creating a prototype for CEPS. Other topics, such as the skill/character strength distinction McGrath discusses, the place of vice in virtue theory, whether it is possible to "overuse or underuse" virtues, and components of virtues (knowledge, behavior, motivation, and disposition) also merit theoretical exploration on the way to a useful prototype. This discussion indicates that the role of theory in McGrath's prototype proposal has been underplayed. A proposed prototype meant to guide the evaluation of many programs requires a stronger conceptual basis to justify the judgments that are made within it. A prototype that is used to evaluate programs should also have empirical justification.
**PROTOTYPE VALIDITY**

In addition to participation, consensus building, and theory incorporation, the potential importance of a prototype model necessitates a thorough empirical assessment of its validity. The participation of stakeholders and the iterative development of a prototype model would form the initial stages of this validity assessment by assessing its content validity. Once the prototype model is formulated, it should be further evaluated before it is used for any consequential appraisals of CEPs.

The first question is whether individuals using the prototype model can conduct the ratings in a reliable way. What kind of training or documentation is necessary to facilitate reliable ratings? Once there is evidence for the reliability of the ratings, it is necessary to investigate whether the prototype ratings function in the intended manner. At a basic level, can the ratings be used to discriminate between bona fide CEPs and other educational programs designed to increase prosociality? Does the prototype model perform this function better than a categorization scheme based on a reasonable set of essential features? This question would be particularly important in borderline cases, wherein the prototype model should be superior to one based on essential features.

Another way to look at prototype validity is to ask whether the prototyping process is beneficial to people designing, implementing, revising, and studying CEPs. Will a single prototype model serve all these needs or do these users require different versions of it? Can people designing or revising a program use the prototype model as a guideline? Does the prototype model discriminate helpfully as an inclusion criterion for studies of CEPs? What is an appropriate demarcation for discriminating CEPs from other programs that promote prosociality? Although such discriminations would not be absolute because the underlying understanding of prototyping is that there will be resemblances among the full spectrum of prosociality programs, a stated purpose of the prototype model was to be able to make defensible discriminations among programs. McGrath exemplifies this with two hypothetical programs that both obtain a rating of 4/7, but that is just a hypothetical. What is needed is a good rationale and supportive evidence that the number that is used for demarcation has the meaning that is attributed to it. Although interpretation of ratings at the extremes will be simple, users will need to know how to interpret the results of prototype scores in the middle of the range. Clarity on interpreting middling ratings is vital because that is the real point of a prototype model. Discriminating fully prototypical CEPs from programs that do not have anything to do with character education does not require a prototype model.

My intention in these comments has been to outline the steps that I see as necessary for the successful development of a prototype. In my view, McGrath makes a good case for its potential value and he makes an intriguing beginning with his proposal. Yet I believe that a good prototyping model will require considerably more effort to include character education stakeholders and to develop a consensus about a prototype model that is theoretically and empirically defensible. I hope my comments are useful in the development of this potentially useful tool.

**REFERENCES**


REFLECTIONS ON ROBERT MCGRATH’S
“WHAT IS CHARACTER EDUCATION?”

Thomas Lickona
Center for the 4th and 5th Rs, State University of New York at Cortland

Robert McGrath’s article has the great virtue of asking an important question: “What is character education?” He argues that currently “what it means to call something a character education program remains unclear.” Without a clear definition, McGrath says, we cannot differentiate character education from other programs designed to increase prosocial behavior or promote psychological growth. As a solution to this problem he proposes a “character education prototype” that would enable researchers and practitioners to evaluate a character education program by the extent to which it possesses seven “central features” (it is school-based, structured, and aimed at fostering development in five areas—positive psychological characteristics, identity, moral growth, holistic growth, and the development of practical wisdom).

Let us start with the proposed prototype’s first feature: “school based.” Should character education be conceptualized as “school based” (even if exceptions can be made, as McGrath allows)? Suppose we asked a different question: “Should the development of good character be regarded as ‘school based’—that is, as the sole or even mainly the responsibility of schools?” The answer would be obvious: “Certainly not.”

FOSTERING GOOD CHARACTER:
A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Developing good character, virtually everyone would agree, should be seen as the shared responsibility of families, schools, faith communities, youth groups, sports, the workplace, the wider community, universities, government at all levels—indeed, all institutions and spheres of influence that impact the values and character of our children. If that is the idea we want society to embrace, then “character education” is not the best name for our collective enterprise because it sounds like something that takes place in schools (rather than everywhere) and something you study (and have to make time for in a crowded curriculum) rather than a process you experience through human interactions, self-reflection, and so on. In fact, character education, rightly understood, is a
process—one involving that dimension of human development we call character development. That process clearly is not limited to schools.

If we decided to call our collective enterprise “character development” instead of “character education,” and titled a publication like the one you are reading, the Journal of Character Development instead of the Journal of Character Education, three things would be more likely to happen: (1) The field would give heightened attention to defining and assessing the critically important aspects of character development that we should be promoting (McGrath makes a strong case for moral identity, holistic growth, and practical wisdom); (2) We would give greater attention to challenging and supporting powerful and often neglected agents of character development such as the family, the peer culture, sports, and young people themselves (who should be encouraged to consider themselves the chief architects of their personal character); and (3) We would focus more intently on identifying and promoting in all arenas of human activity the particular practices shown by research and practitioner experience to be effective in fostering important aspects of character development.

PRACTICES CENTRAL TO EFFECTIVE CHARACTER EDUCATION

Consider the family. Traditional wisdom and contemporary psychology regard the family as potentially the most powerful formative environmental influence on the character of the young. In their seminal article, “Fostering Goodness,” Berkowitz and Grych (1998) identified 5 core parenting practices consistently found to be effective in fostering significant aspects of social-moral growth:

1. Nurturance: Children learn love and respect when they are treated that way.

2. Modeling and mentoring: We teach best when we practice what we preach, and preach what we practice.

3. Reasoning: Children learn to care about the feelings and welfare of other people when we help them understand the effects of their actions on others.

4. "Demandingness": Children, with support and accountability, tend to rise to meet high expectations.

5. Moral empowerment: Children grow in virtue when they are given a voice in, and responsibility for, the good of the group.

If character development occurs to a great extent in and through relationships, and relationship practices like those just described promote character growth in the family, it would be very surprising if such practices did not facilitate character development in other contexts as well. In fact, most character education theorists (e.g., Berkowitz, 2012; Lickona, 1991; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Urban, 2008) cite such practices as key to successful character education in schools as well as families.

In view of this, it’s surprising that McGrath’s proposed prototype says that “None of the features focuses on program process, because at present there is no literature consistently suggesting any didactic practices are uniquely featured in character education programs.” Well, perhaps not uniquely featured, but character education theory, research, and practitioner experience all point to the above-named practices such as nurturing, modeling, reasoning, and high expectations, as being central to effective character education in different domains.

IS A FORMAL CURRICULUM NECESSARY?

The second feature of McGrath’s proposed character education prototype—“the program is structured”—raises the question, “Struc-
tured in what sense?” He explains: “A true character education program is built around shared expectations about what is being transmitted or presented. Ideally, a formal curriculum would be available for review to ensure consistency in implementation, allow for replication, enhance fidelity, and ultimately guide research on program effectiveness.”

Arguably, schools can benefit by and should consider making thoughtful use of a formal curriculum part of their character education initiatives. Berkowitz and Bier’s What Works in Character Education report (2007) found evidence of positive impact for more than 30 published character education curricula, and a well-designed curriculum for teaching what good character is, why it matters, and how to develop it has all the advantages—especially consistency of implementation—that McGrath names.

But neither the What Works report nor mainstream character education scholarship has ever regarded a formal character education curriculum as an essential component of effective character education in schools. Similarly, guides to good parenting do not typically tell parents they should follow a formal curriculum for fostering character development in family life. Rather, parents are encouraged to use practices (nurturance, modeling, reasoning, etc.) supported by ancient wisdom and modern research.

THE EMERGENCE OF CHARACTER EDUCATION FRAMEWORKS

In a similar fashion, the literature on educating for character in schools has emphasized fidelity to broad principles that guide implementation, rather than prescribing a formal curriculum of teaching character through classroom lessons like those we use to teach academic subjects.

A bit of history: When interest in character education was exploding in the early 1990s, there were no such broad guiding principles. School administrators were flooded with flyers urging them to buy this or that character education “program.” Critics were already dismissing character education as it the latest educational fad—a mile wide and an inch deep.” Schools were looking for guidance.

Fortunately, some schools were already lighting the way to deep and transformative character education by doing it in a systemic fashion that changed the relationships, work ethic, and culture of a school. Serious research was also underway. California’s Child Development Project, using a rigorous experimental design with randomly selected program and control schools, found that elementary school children who experienced a multifaceted character education intervention—combining collaborative learning, democratic class meetings, character-rich children’s literature, schoolwide community-building, and parent involvement—were superior to control-school students on multiple measures of prosocial attitudes and behavior, a superiority still present in middle school after the program was no longer in effect (Schaps, Watson, & Lewis, 1996).

Drawing on what we regarded as the best theory, research, and practice at the time, a group of academics and researchers associated with the Washington, DC-based Character Education Partnership (CEP; recently renamed Character.org) developed the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education, first published in 1993 and available in their latest iteration at www.Character.org. Our first two principles addressed the question, “What is good character?”

- Principle 1. The school community promotes core ethical and performance values as the foundation of good character.
- Principle 2. The school defines “character” comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and behavior.

Principles 3–7 addressed, “How can a school be effective in developing good character?”
• Principle 3. The school uses a comprehensive, intentional, and proactive approach to character development.
• Principle 4. The school creates a caring community.
• Principle 5. The school provides opportunities for moral action.
• Principle 6. The school offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them succeed.
• Principle 7. The school fosters students’ self-motivation.

Principles 8–10 addressed, “Who is responsible for character education?”

• Principle 8. The school staff is an ethical learning community that shares responsibility for character education and adheres to the same core virtues that guide the students.
• Principle 9. The school fosters shared leadership and long-range support of the character education initiative.
• Principle 10. The school engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort.

The last principle addressed, “How should the effectiveness of a character education effort be assessed?”

• Principle 11. The school regularly assesses its culture and climate, the functioning of its staff as character educators, and the extent to which its students manifest good character.

We wanted these principles to be specific enough to give schools meaningful direction but broad enough to let them generate creative applications of the principles that would be developmentally appropriate and capitalize on their distinctive strengths, identity, history, and culture. Two years later, we designed a formative assessment survey, Character Education Quality Standards, that enabled schools to rate, on a 5-point scale, the extent to which they were implementing each of the 11 principles.

Soon thereafter, this instrument was used in CEP’s National Schools of Character program to recognize schools implementing the 11 Principles at a high level of excellence—an awards program still continued today by Character.org. In 2003, CEP published the Eleven Principles Sourcebook (Beland, 2003), an extensive training manual that explained each principle in detail and illustrated it with exemplary practices from elementary, middle, and high schools that had won the National School of Character award.

What the 11 principles provided was a character education “framework” that guided the definition of character, the implementation of character education practices, the training of character educators, and the assessment of character outcomes. At the same time, this broad framework encouraged schools to be creative and design new practices that would advance the art of educating for character.

Other frameworks had existed before the 11 principles, such as the “comprehensive 12-component approach” of Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility (Lickona, 1991) and the “caring school community” model emerging from the Child Development Project (Scharps et al., 1996). New conceptual and implementation frameworks continue to be developed such as “Smart & Good High Schools” (Lickona & Davidson, 2005) and PRIMED: Prioritization of Character Education, Relationships, Intrinsic Motivation, Modeling, Empowerment, and Developmental Pedagogy (Berkowitz, 2009).

McGrath’s article should prompt us to ask: What is the relationship between these previous “frameworks” and the new character education “prototype” he is proposing? Is the distinctive contribution of his seven-feature prototype not so much to get character educators to be more clear about what they mean by “character education” (after all, the various frameworks to date have spelled out what they
mean by that), but rather to force us to ponder more deeply and specify more precisely what we regard as the essential goals of character development that schools, families, and others should be educating for, regardless of the framework they employ.

WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL GOALS OF CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT?

Among the character development goals that McGrath prioritizes are identity, holistic growth of the virtues, and practical wisdom. Let us consider identity first. Whether one’s sense of identity is a trustworthy predictor of actual morality is called into question by people’s response when asked to agree or disagree with the statement, “I am a person of good character.” (Nearly 100% of those surveyed agree.) Despite the abundant evidence that human beings often behave in ways not consistent with good character, nearly all of us appear to think of ourselves as being basically good. In the recent avalanche of allegations of predatory sexual conduct by men in powerful positions, some of the accused did not deny the charges but said things like, “This does not reflect who I am.” Such responses suggest that human beings have a considerable capacity to insulate their idealized self-image (sense of identity) from their real-life behavior.

THE CASE FOR IDENTITY AS THE CORE OF CHARACTER

Although people can maintain a positive self-image in spite of their bad behavior, I think McGrath makes a strong case that character education differs from training in prosocial skills primarily in terms of the extent to which it focuses on “narrative identity.” “The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves,” McGrath points out, “represent coherent statements ... about our values and goals, our understanding of ourselves as individuals, the role of suffering in our lives, our cultural context, and many other pieces of who we are. Where skills training emphasizes the participant achieving behavioral effectiveness, character education is more about the participant developing a greater sense of who he or she is or may become.”

McGrath’s suggestion that the heart of character development, as opposed to mere social skill acquisition, is a process of constructing a life narrative and a moral identity embedded in that narrative, calls to mind Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment (1992), Anne Colby and William Damon’s classic study of 24 character exemplars. Each of these character exemplars—with distinguished contributions in fields as varied as business, science, medical care, the protection of the environment, the fight against poverty, and religious freedom—had at some point in their lives, developed a transformative personal goal that came to define who they were. Fidelity to that goal and the strong sense of identity it created shaped the continuing course of their lives.

New York Times columnist David Brooks, in his best-selling The Road to Character (2015), provides 10 “portraits of character” that raise a related question: Where does a transformative personal goal with the power to define one’s identity come from? Do we choose it, or does it somehow choose us? Today, Brooks points out, commencement speakers tell graduates to “follow their passion,” to ask “What do I want from life?” and then go after it. But, Brooks says, there is another, very different approach to finding one’s purpose in life. In this approach, you don’t ask, “What do I want from life?” but rather, “What does life want from me?”

As one of his examples, Brooks cites Viktor Frankl. His wife, mother, and brother all died in the Nazi concentration camps. Frankl spent most of his time in the concentration camps laying tracks for railway lines. This was not the life he had planned for himself, not his passion or his dream. But, as he later wrote, “It did not really matter what we expected from life, but what life expected from us.”
Frankl concluded that his moral task in the camps was to suffer well and to teach other prisoners to take their lives seriously and struggle to preserve their inner dignity and integrity. He encouraged them to focus their minds upward on the image of an absent wife or child or parent or friend and preserve their love for that person, even in an environment that conspired to destroy love, and even though the loved one might already have died in another camp. Life, he concluded, “ultimately means taking the responsibility to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets before the individual.”

Brooks observes that Viktor Frankl had a vocation—something a person does not choose so much as something that chooses them. It is a calling. People generally feel they have no choice in the matter; their life would be unrecognizable if they did not pursue this line of activity.

Another example from Brooks’ (2015) *The Road to Character*: By 1911, the young Francis Perkins had lobbied for worker rights and on behalf of the poor but in a conventional, genteel way befitting her class. Then on March 25 of that year, she and others helplessly looked on in horror as flames consumed New York City’s Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, where women workers had previously gone on strike to protest the firetrap conditions. One hundred and forty-six persons died in the fire, many leaping to their deaths from the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors because the stairwell doors had been locked by the owners to prevent the possibility of theft by workers.

Perkins, galvanized by this disaster, “indignant that this tear of the moral fabric of the world could be permitted to last,” threw herself into the rough and tumble of politics in order to fight for workers’ rights. She did so for the rest of her life, eventually becoming, under Franklin Roosevelt, the nation’s first female Secretary of Labor.

Brooks is at pains to show us that the men and women he writes about in *The Road to Character* were “not even close to perfect,” but were “moral realists ... acutely aware of their own weaknesses.” They “waged an internal struggle against their sins.” They shared a belief that worthwhile living requires a “confrontation with ourselves.”

Reading the rich and nuanced accounts of the individual lives of character provided by Colby and Damon in their book and by Brooks in his, and contemplating McGrath’s suggestion that the core of our character is a personal identity that we continually construct by “the stories we tell ourselves,” leads one to ask, What are the implications of all this for character education?

In my own work, I have defined character education as the “deliberate effort to develop virtues,” and have defined virtues as objectively good human qualities—such as honesty, justice, caring, and diligence—that benefit the individual person and serve the common good. Such a definition may be a useful start, but defining character in a general way in terms of universal virtues doesn’t begin to capture the diverse lives and distinctive strengths of the character of real people in real circumstances.

To what extent do we engage our students in close study of these individual lives of character, in order to gain insight and inspiration? How might the examination of such lives help young persons as they think about and craft their own character, as they clarify a sense of who they are and discern what their calling in life might be? In the field of character psychology, what do we know about how a sense of identity and a sense of vocation develop? How do we help our students and our children see the development of their character as an inescapably personal responsibility, an “inside job” that no one can do for them and that will last a lifetime?

McGrath is also right to urge us to prioritize holistic character development—the interdependence of the virtues and the pivotal role that certain virtues play. When educators and parents try to foster relational virtues such as respect, fairness, kindness, and honesty, it’s important to realize how much those qualities depend on foundational virtues such as practical wisdom, fortitude, and self-control. In
Character Building: A Guide for Parents and Teachers, David Isaacs (2001) argues that developing practical wisdom and fortitude should be emphasized throughout children’s development because these are necessary for acquiring and acting upon all the other virtues. Practical wisdom, or good judgment, enables children to understand the purpose of each virtue and know how to practice it. Fortitude is needed at every age in order to overcome obstacles and make the effort needed to form a good habit.

WISDOM: THE MISSING VIRTUE IN CHARACTER EDUCATION

I was especially glad to see McGrath’s emphasis on practical wisdom as an essential aim of character development. Schools engaged in character education typically display a list of the virtues they seek to develop in their students, but hardly ever is Aristotle’s “master virtue” of practical wisdom on the list. That constitutes a gaping hole in a character development initiative. What would it take to fill it?

First, a practical understanding of what practical wisdom is. Wisdom is good judgment. Since the ancient Greeks, it’s been regarded as the master virtue because it tells us how to put the other virtues into practice—when to act, how to act, how not to act, and how to balance and integrate different virtues when they conflict. Wisdom means stopping to think—taking the time to make a good decision by considering your choices and what’s at stake. One 12-year-old British boy in the Narnian Virtues program that Mark Pike’s team and our center (Pike, Lickona, & Nesfield, 2015) are currently researching in United Kingdom schools, spoke to this when he said:

My friends don’t really respect people, and it’s like peer pressure—they try to push me into it. Usually, I would just go with it, but when we started learning about the virtues, I knew wisdom meant, like, right or wrong—and now I have to think, “Is this right, or is it wrong?”

Wisdom enables us to choose the best means of reaching a worthwhile goal. In school, students are often asked to set goals for academic improvement. A student in math class might say, “My goal is to get all my math homework in on time this marking period,” but often, students don’t have a realistic strategy for achieving their goal and so they don’t succeed. Figuring out a strategy that might really succeed in doing better at math or at solving an interpersonal conflict requires good judgment—wisdom. Guided class discussions can help to develop wise strategizing.

Wisdom also includes moral reasoning. To act virtuously means to do the right thing for the right reason. We can do a good deed such as returning a lost wallet because we want a reward, because we want to be noticed and praised, or because we want to help the person who lost his wallet. Only the last of these reasons a virtuous one.

Wisdom enables us to discern correctly, to see things as they really are. In this sense, our character includes our beliefs—about ourselves, others, the way life works, and what will make us and others happy. Our beliefs can be accurate—reality-based—or inaccurate. Benjamin Franklin (Rogers, 1996) said that if we want to be happy, we have to form a “right opinion” about “the nature of things” and then live in accordance with that reality. If we think that money, power, popularity, or beauty is the secret of a happy life, we will find out, sooner or later, that deep and lasting happiness does not come from such things. If, on the other hand, we believe that loving relationships, work done well, and doing good for others are a more dependable source of happiness, our belief is more in touch with how things really are. Beliefs based on wisdom about how things truly are will help to set young people on the path to a flourishing and fulfilling life.

Finally, if we wanted to foster the development of practical wisdom in our young, we would help them realize they have a capacity for wisdom that they are not necessarily using. “You’ve got wisdom, but you don’t always use it,” said a high school counselor to a
15-year-old student who had been sent to her because of getting into a fight. "What do you mean?" he said. "Well," the counselor said, "you kept your appointment to see me, right? That showed wise judgment. You could have just blown it off." She had his attention, and continued:

You've made a lot of other decisions today that showed good judgment. You came to school instead of skipping. You've probably followed a dozen or more school rules since you entered the building. All that showed good judgment. Unfortunately, you didn't use your best judgment when you got into a fight.

I'd like to see you again in a week. Between now and then, keep a list of all the good decisions you make—the commitments you keep, the fights you don't get into, the temptations you resist, the work you get done, and the good things you do for other people. All of your good decisions, big and small, in school and out of school—write them down. We'll look at your list together when we meet. You've got wisdom—now go and use it.

WHY SELF-CONTROL SHOULD BE AN ESSENTIAL OUTCOME

McGrath’s character education prototype doesn’t include self-control as an essential outcome, but I think it should. Consider the crucial role played by self-control in the life of character. Self-control is the ability to govern ourselves—to control our temper, regulate our appetites and passions, and pursue even legitimate pleasures in moderation. In their bestselling book *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, social psychologist Roy Baumeister and science writer John Tierney (2011) report the growing recognition that most major problems, personal and societal, are to a considerable extent failures of self-control. Compulsive spending and borrowing, impulsive violence, underachievement in school, procrastination at work, alcohol and drug abuse, unhealthy diet, explosive anger—all reflect shortcomings in self-control.

Baumeister and Tierney cite a global survey which found that when people were asked to rank their failings, a lack of self-control topped the list. As parents and teachers, we’ll have trouble getting our kids to be thoughtful decision-makers and persons who are kind, respectful, and fair in their relationships if they do not have self-control.

CONCLUSION

Let me sum up what I see as the important contributions of Robert McGrath’s reflections on the field of character education and his proposals for future progress. He asks the most basic question one could pose: What is character education? As character education scholars and practitioners, are we talking a common language—or even trying to? How does character education differ from other programs aimed at promoting prosocial behavior and personal growth? In addressing these questions, McGrath shows us the usefulness of a prototype consisting of essential features of character education. Especially helpful, in my judgment, is his inclusion of critically important character development goals that have been neglected by much character education: the development of a personal moral identity, holistic growth in the virtues, and the pivotal role of practical wisdom in the life of character. To that list of essential goals, I would add self-control. Greater attention to these essential goals—to what is most important in developing a person of good character—should produce better theory and better practice in the field.

I think, however, that it is a mistake for a prototype to say, as McGrath’s does, that character education is “school based.” The field is at a point where we need to pay much more attention to other crucial arenas affecting character development, such as the family, the peer group, and community-based activities like youth sports. I also take issue with McGrath’s exclusion from his prototype of effective character education practices, since we have
research that has been able to identify a number of those. Practices such as building positive relationships with students and helping them learn to take the perspective of others need not be unique to character education in order to deserve inclusion in a prototype’s list of essential features.

Moreover, while I think an empirically validated formal character education curriculum can make an important contribution to a school’s character initiative, I do not agree with McGrath that it is essential. Making it seem so draws attention away from what is truly essential, namely, developing a school-wide culture of character where the target virtues are taught, affirmed, modeled, discussed, practiced, and consistently upheld in every phase of school life. Finally, I wish McGrath had given us a bit more historical perspective on the modern renewal of character education—something that began in the mid-1980s, has matured over more than three decades, and in the process has produced a series of widely used “character education frameworks” such as the 11 Principles of Effective Character Education. How does McGrath see the relationship between these existing conceptual frameworks and what he is proposing with his new prototype?

To get good answers in any field, we need good questions. Robert McGrath has given us plenty of those to think about for some time to come. For that, we are all in his debt.

REFERENCES


