

Introduction

Character education has been popular in current educational policies and practices in many countries (Kristjánsson, 2002, p. 136; McLaughlin & Halstead, 1999, p. 133), Taiwan included. However, “what is character education?” is itself a perplexing question. As well expressed by an American school principal, “Everybody’s talking about it, but nobody really knows what it is” (Lickona, 1998, p. xv). A major reason for this is that there are a great variety of approaches developed and gathered under the fashionable generic term of “character education”. No wonder, Arthur puts it that “to enter a discussion about character and even more about character education is to enter a minefield of conflicting definition and ideology” (2003, p. 1). Also, it is claimed that “‘character education’ is clearly no single thing, and is capable of being interpreted in a number of different ways” (McLaughlin & Halstead, 1999, p. 133). As a result, the researcher has to specify the particular version of character education under consideration.

Related to this, in his critical review of literature on character education, Carr (2007) claims that “it is not enough to assert the moral primacy of character in the absence of some specification of what counts as moral character”; “for example, is the approved form of character Aristotelian, or Kantian, or utilitarian (and if so, under which interpretation of Aristotle, or Kant, or utilitarianism)” (2007, p. 395)? In his view, character education as a distinct approach to moral education which is generally characterised by its core purpose of the formation of moral character in general and the inculcation of virtues in particular is theoretically underdeveloped and ethically undetermined. For this reason, Carr (2007, p. 395) takes it to be a category mistake to contrast character education with some substantial moral educational views, such as Kohlbergian cognitive developmentalism and care ethics.

In my view, Carr is right to point out that, unlike the latter two established distinct approaches to moral education, it can be easily detected that character education is

not unified by any definite, unitary substantial ethical perspective. The various ethical systems can propose their different versions of character education as long as such key concepts as character and moral character have a role to play in them. For instance, Lickona (1992) claims that there are three distinct theoretical approaches to character education, namely, traditional, cognitive-developmental, and caring communities, and Bajovic, Rizzo and Engemann's paper (2009) is a good example of the second approach. That is, character education is not a privilege reserved for any specific ethical theories. Quite the contrary, character education can take various forms. As far as that is concerned, it is understandable why Carr objects to putting character education on a par with Kohlbergian cognitive developmentalism and care ethics, and accuses it of committing a category mistake.

Nevertheless, it has to be stressed that Carr's criticism is directed at character education in general which is not sufficiently profound in its theoretical sophistication, but contemporary character education in practice is mostly in its specific, non-expansive sense,¹ which is relatively well-defined by its intellectual root in Aristotle's ethics and the contemporary Aristotelian virtue ethical perspective.² This version of character education is generally characterised in terms of the inculcation of transcultural virtues.³ For that matter, there is no good reason to doubt that character education, thus specified, can qualify as a substantial moral educational view, and hence, can safely escape Carr's critique.

¹ For a ready-made framework of classification of character education, please see McLaughlin and Halstead (1999) and Kristjánsson (2002). Both schemas classify the various factions of character education into two categories, namely, non-expansive and expansive.

² The close connection between character education and Aristotelian virtue ethics is widely recognised, if not always explicitly articulated. Basically, they converge on stressing the primacy of character in the enterprise of moral education. Kristjánsson's remark (2006, p. 39) is a case in point.

³ It is widely agreed that the contemporary character education movement is concerned with the notion in a non-expansive sense (Kristjánsson, 2002, p. 137; McLaughlin & Halstead, 1999, p. 139).