

Sharpening Perspectives on Character and Virtue in Theological Education

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ABSTRACT: Championing the cause of virtue literacy in theological education has often been an exercise in frustration. Though instruction in virtue might seem to have fit most comfortably in theological education, attitudes toward the subject of character in seminaries often have included a significant portion of confusion or conflicting perspectives. Thus, those schools that have intentionally educated for the character have been inclined to approach the process nonspecific or subjective. In spite of a growing body of literature in character development in education, there was still a need for the clarification of what education for virtue and character actually was, and how it was necessary, so that it could be implemented in a more straightforward manner. This paper sought to clarify the current state of character education and the most helpful initiative theorized to implement it. The book *Character and Virtue in Theological Education* by Marvin Oxenham was used as a primary supporting reference for this investigation.

KEY WORDS: character, virtue, theological, education, Oxenham, formation

Introduction

Education for character is not a novel topic in theological education, having roots at least from the early 20th century (Eversull 1930, 11-14). Though its presence is not new, it is taking a renewed focus in the realm of Christian theological education. This is likely because the endeavor for character instruction in theological education can often lead to a breakdown in

implementation as this subject can quickly become troublesome for some educators and administrators, or mundane for others. Although usually acknowledged as a necessary objective by seminaries, virtue literacy has inherent impediments that can result in the issue being checked off the list of significant school initiatives without being comprehensively developed. This may partly be due to the labor-intensive nature of the task which does not yield explicitly recognizable results. Attitudes toward the subject among educators often include a significant portion of confusion or conflicting perspectives. Thus, schools which have taken the mantle of responsibility of educating for character may be tempted to approach the process in a subjective or independent fashion. Reasons given for this include the lack of a uniform agreement on the amount of attention a school should give to character development and, more importantly, a set of standard definitions around which curriculum designers can gather. There still remains a need for a disentanglement of character education from the jumble of inconsistency that has limited its implementation in any sort of universal methodological fashion. Consistent, homologous guidelines are needed to be set for instruction in character at the level of higher education if it is to be advanced in the lives of students in a way that impacts communities and ministries.

To meet this need there has more recently been a resurgence of books, research, websites and even online tools which seek to fill the demand for revitalization of character and virtue in theological education. Though encouraging, the resources are still insufficient for the subject to be considered exhausted. However, some resources are more focused than others in their assessment of the situation. For example, Oxenham has explained his vision for a new ordered perspective on character education in his book *Character and Virtue in Theological Education* (CVTE). The driving motivation for CVTE is that “Christian theological education should reclaim character and virtue education” (Oxenham 2019, 607). This statement simply starts the conversation on familiar ground, yet then proceeds to show how educating for Christian character cannot be simply physically included into the latest list of subjects lobbying for place in the requirements of theological students. It is to be a foundation stone that affects all of education. One major hurdle that is addressed by Oxenham’s book is the need for clearing the path of confusion as to what truly constitutes character and virtue, particularly correcting the

conflation of character education with other non-academic subjects such as spiritual formation, spiritual discipleship, or Christian counseling. This paper will use as its foundation the endeavor made by Oxenham to help decipher the perplexity surrounding the development of character education programs. Additional research will add to his analysis.

Approach to Understanding Character Education

The CVTE approach begins with establishing the provenance of education for character as an integrated yet exceptional category of instruction. Oxenham argues that virtue education should not be confused with moral behaviourism, nor entangled in the catch-all theological grouping of spiritual formation. The timing of this call to advance character and virtue in education is important, lest the current tendency to subsume character and virtue under courses in general spirituality takes permanent root in higher education. The muddled state of affairs would then continue to be the pattern of behaviour we now have. CVTE's voice in the subject is certainly a qualified one since the research stems from first-hand experiences of theological schools and leaders from around the world. In seeking to add clarity to the subject, the first step in establishing programs for character in theological school is establishing clear working definitions of the terms at play.

What is Character Education

The study of character traits naturally lends itself to lists of virtues, which have varied throughout time. Aristotle held to 18 main virtues which he believed would enable a well-lived life (Bartlett 2012). The Romans numbered at least twenty-four, while Prudentius in the fifth century matched the main virtues with the church's view of the seven deadly sins (Pelttari 2019). The organized church as early as the 3rd century divided virtues into the four cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice, with three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity (Catechism 2019). These days organizations which have been formed around character and virtue education list the number of virtues from forty to as many as one hundred (McCarthy 2018; Popov 2020). Not all sources for character are tabulation-driven however. Educational initiatives such as the Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues

are hesitant about lists and prefer to concentrate more on the principles and implementation of virtue (Birmingham 2020). Utmost of sources for theological schools, and most logical, are the Christian Scriptures containing various listings of virtues and character traits; the most pronounced pericope listing the traits of goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love [2 Peter 1:5-8]. For education in virtue, none of these can be isolated and imposed out of context, for the danger in relying only on lists is that it can quickly default to prescribed external behavior without a corresponding personal substantive change, resulting in knowledge without character. CVTE even reminds us by way of example of those who have recognized piety yet underdeveloped character (Oxenham 2019, 848). For an egregious example, Nero who had been tutored in character by Seneca himself had knowledge yet without corresponding heart change (Oxenham 2019, 3502). Indeed, character education cannot be merely a matter of higher knowledge, as this would entail a gnostic approach to spirituality. To start the de-gnostification of character education, it is important to know how to define character education. The scope of the CVTE work connects character with virtue for uniformity, but intentionally separates both by what may be labeled as spiritual formation (Oxenham 2019, 720-725). Thus, the scrutiny of the evaluation has been turned to the direction of the distinctiveness of virtue and character, and they have been fashioned as a single cause which advocates being viewed as a necessary component of a four-fold model of theological education (Oxenham 2019, 615). By way of definition, CVTE advocates that character education has a distinct focus which “overlaps with a Christ-centered, discipleship-oriented focus”, imitating Christ, fulfilling our purposes, and authentically responding virtuously with the world (Oxenham 2019, 903-907). Spiritual formation, alternatively, is proposed to be the “theocentric and Spirit-centered activities that are aimed at cultivating a relationship with God” (Oxenham 2019, 903-907) Keeping these categories in complimentary yet differentiated tension gives credence to the suggestion that centers for theological educational should not assume that character development is being addressed in its students simply because a course has been offered in a spiritual discipline or formation, nor because it is part of the ideas which the school may value as good for students.

CVTE presses the issue in that while it promotes the separation of character education from other disciplines, it also warns against the trap of a specialized class becoming so isolated as to be considered a fringe addendum to curriculum as can often happen. CVTE is not alone in this fear that character instruction can be confused with other subjects as well as remain unintegrated into the whole of theological education. Theological educators can have a deep assumption that “character development and spiritual formation are one thing, while academic study is another...and that academic study is not (equal to) spiritual formation” (Smith 2007, 7). Therefore, two injustices are committed, those of joining character development with spiritual formation and of separating them from academics. After differentiating between character and spiritual formation, it is useful to discuss misconceptions about educating for character by explaining what character education does not include. The purpose behind this discourse is not only for purposes of definition, but also because these misconceptions strike at the heart of the confusing landscape of what passes for character and virtue education in theological schools today.

Current Practices in Character Development

CVTE spends a deserving amount of time reviewing current predispositions and practices in schools with regard to character development. Seminaries generally embrace the idea of a plan to inspire and grow character and virtue in theological students. Historically and globally, education has had two great goals: “to help young people become smart and to help them become good” (Shields 2011, 247). Surprisingly there are some detractors to educating for character even amongst theological educators, in part or in whole. Those opposed to virtue formation in schools believe this type of education is hegemonic or abusive, is unnecessary, or even is a promotion of works-based righteousness. The idea of an abusive aspect to character education may indeed have roots with Plato who argued that the “first stages of education should involve deliberate exposure to suffering, on the ground that the first childish sensations of pain and pleasure are the means by which awareness of goodness and badness come to the soul” (Parsons 2015, 5). Those who reject the necessity of institutional character education can base their beliefs

on the rare research suggesting that character traits are established and even cemented in childhood, and therefore unlikely to change with any form of intentional teaching in higher education (Grant 2010, 286, 287). Whether learned in childhood or later, there exists among some a conviction that “the manner in which one’s character is originally acquired is predominantly nonvoluntary”, and therefore a fruitless pursuit for seminaries (Eshleman 2004, 65). The final group of those who repudiate character education fear that it too easily defaults to a legalistic theology, and therefore think that the matter is best left up to the individual lest the school be guilty of teaching a false gospel. All of these attitudes, it must be remembered, are the exception among existing attitudes toward education for character.

Schools are evolving in the implementation of programs to foster the spiritual life of students, usually incorporating elements of chapel, worship, prayer groups, fasting, and mentoring, to name a few of the activities Christian schools utilize (Oxenham 2019, 804-809). This reflects a true desire on the part of the schools for spiritual formation in its students (Oxenham 2019, 813). While encouraging, this may ironically be contributing to a problem. Personal devotional activities may contribute to character development, but they cannot comprise the totality of character development. Instead of actually advancing students’ growth in character, many schools may be simply focusing more heavily on devotional activities and labeling it education for character (Oxenham 2019, 2540). As Oxenham has pointed out in CVTE, the problem in virtue pedagogy is not entirely due to a lack of attention to the subject in theological education. The problem is that the subject is confusing and conflated. It is considered synonymous with almost anything that falls outside of academics or ministerial training. Therefore, actual virtue education is in effect being conducted very little.

Confusion with other disciplines

CVTE contributes a practical contribution to the topic of virtue education by positing several analogies of schools which vocally tout their programs for character yet prove shallow upon inspection. The most common affliction besetting schemes for character development in schools is that of designating all courses that do not belong to the sphere of academics or focused

ministerial training as education for character. The result of this practice can be character education that is generalized and simply considered a part of supplementary subjects that are outside the realm of strict academics, such as spiritual counseling, discipleship, mentoring and spiritual disciplines (Oxenham 2019, 912-920, 1206-1213). The content and goals of these subjects are either too indeterminate or too broad to be properly seen as character development subjects (Oxenham 2019, 920). Usually, however, when describing programs for character, educators will most often return to the language and ideas which more properly fall into the realm of “spiritual formation” (Oxenham 2019, 833-876). In fact, it has been demonstrated in CVTE that the most common way in which character is weakened by imprecise language is by linguistically associating it with spiritual formation (Oxenham 2019, 848).

A foundational problem in relation to the tendency to confuse character with other disciplines occurs when there is no particular language around the idea of what character education actually is (Oxenham 2019, 720). Character and virtue can have different definitions, and if the practice of theological schools is any indicator, these definitions appear to be almost subjective. This subjectivity is the reason why so many can agree on the importance of character education while differing on its implementation. It is somewhat easy to agree about a subject when the contents are not conclusive or self-evident. This leads many schools, when assessing their curriculum for character, to gravitate “back to the same extra-curricular activities that they had just described for spiritual formation, mainly, chapel, prayer and relationships” (Oxenham 2019, 833-837).

The problem of standardizing language and tactics in character education lies in its emotional and subjective aspects. Who can quantify what goodness actually looks like, in low or high amounts? Who can assign a perfect score for patience to a student? Intellect is quantifiable to a degree, and to the same degree cannot be falsified. However, “integrity, devotion to mankind, and other virtues are much less easily measured and are often successfully feigned” (Thorndike 1936, 321).

Responsibility and Planning

In some schools, character development is indeed encouraged, but it may be considered a strictly personal pursuit and left up to the individual Christian's responsibility. It is acknowledged that many character traits are indeed internal and individual traits, as exemplified in 2 Peter 1. Yet, growth in character and virtue can never be developed solely individually by personal and private devotion to God. It is in the community as an outworking of personal faith that character is recognized, and especially, proven. What benefit is brotherly kindness, patience, or love if there is no recipient of those attributes? There is, to be sure, individual responsibility, but personal accountability and actions cannot be the repository of all things related to character and virtue without the corresponding parallel necessity of community (Oxenham 2019, 729-735). The end result of the confusion, misplaced responsibility, and imprecise language with regard to education for character and virtue is the lack of a clear plan of action that is consistent, measurable, and actionable in concrete terms. Schools are left to approach the subject in uncertain and hesitant ways, which can result in initiatives being perfunctory or even superficial. As long as it is addressed at all, educators may feel that they have done due diligence and can therefore move on to more quantifiable, serious academic goals. As in the schools, so in the literature, the time devoted to research in character education reflects the serious reflection given to the topic in faculties. The matter of character education is occasionally focused on in articles or even chapters in books, but usually as a "side motif in support of other subjects" (Oxenham 2019, 2533)

A lack of strategy always means that programs for the development of character in theological institutions will receive short shrift in the design of the curriculum. The cause of virtue in education, without a scheme, tends to be subjugated to the seemingly more urgent task of academics and practical preparation for ministry. However, no more crucial focus exists in the choosing and preparation of someone for ministry than that person's character, for if character is lacking or if it fails, no amount of knowledge or skill will be able to overcome that (Oxenham 2019, 656-2550). An apathetic or careless attitude toward the uniqueness of character education may lead a school to label all things under the descriptor of character. Instead of being

interactive, however, this tends to weaken the initiative, as when everything is character education, then nothing is character education (Oxenham 2019, 848-852).

Application and Recommendations

Most theological educators claim a commitment to character development in students, yet there remains a haze surrounding the implementation of this education in schools. The exasperation that can come when educators grapple with developing programs for character is understandable. The word character itself suffers from a lack of identity, as it has been associated with concepts such as personality traits, leadership styles and learning styles (Oxenham 2019, 723). The burden and duty of educating for character is felt by all educators. The problem faced in virtue education now lies in oversimplification, overgeneralization, or abdication. Merely consigning character and virtue development in students to a three-credit course, as would happen in subjects like Church History or Apologetics, would unduly focus the subject on the cognitive. Overgeneralizing character education to include all non-academic courses would cause it to lose its identity and therefore its impact. Returning the duty of developing virtues back to the private domain of the individual students is a surrender of school responsibility and contributes to future problems in students and ministries. Without a specific, intentional plan for character development, theological schools run the risk of producing pious people without virtue, and leaders without integrity.

To help solve this, CVTE advances a four-fold model of education including academics, ministerial training, spiritual formation, and character education (Oxenham 2019, 615-852). This is a move away from the classic three-category model and is due to the palpable absence of a systematic delivery of character and virtue in theological education (Oxenham 2019, 5674). Most importantly, CVTE insists that character education is more than the promotion of adherence to rules, an idea which should be communicated effectively to both school and staff (Oxenham 2019, 744). In this way, the most crucial aspect of the application of character training in schools is realized, that of the differentiation of character and virtue to all other disciplines

(Oxenham 2019, 903-907, 911, 1198). This differentiation, in the form of “virtue literacy”, should “appear specifically in the aims and outcomes of the academy’s programs, in the course syllabi, in the vision and mission statements and in the publicity materials, on the website and on the application forms” (Oxenham 2019, 4854-4861) Not only for the use of administrators, the teaching faculty should also use the language of virtue “in lectures, mentoring, placements and essay topics” (Oxenham 2019, 4854-4861).

To conclude, research recognizes that measuring a student’s growth in character may be the most challenging and confusing aspect to virtue education, and therefore possibly serve as the largest barrier to implementation. CVTE redistributes a set of five design elements of genuine character growth that can be helpful to remember as a school sets its virtue curriculum. These include the concepts of *attention* (teaching students to notice virtues within situations in life), *emotions* (feelings that can be aroused by virtue as well as vice), *desire* (eliciting a real change in the heart of the student for character growth), *actions* (in the form of experiences), and *expression* (how a student presents themselves to their community) (Arthur 2017, 28). As a practical extension of character implementation, CVTE has also developed a practical online tool to aid theological schools and churches which can be found at virtueeducation.net. Published in five languages, the tool covers topics such as the definition and importance of virtue, the contexts of practice, and how change can look. The main feature of the tool involves the application of four stages or steps of virtue education on an individual or corporate level. The first of these is *understanding*, that is, becoming aware of the definition and importance of virtue or character. The second step focuses on *testing* (or, self-assessment), in which the participant can evaluate themselves on the site against 13 virtues. *Habituation* is the third step and involves a plan to facilitate intentional growth in a chosen virtue. The fourth step is *reflection*, involving a re-taking of the virtue test in step two and evaluation of its results for future strategies. By being purposeful, mindful, systematic and careful about instituting character and virtue development in theological schools, the current and future landscape of helping students become both smart and good can be actualized.

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