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Zest, Character Education, and the Common Good

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Abstract

Cultural change can bring changes in how society defines character. This essay examines one recent example of this change through examining how the trait known as zest may have come to be included in recent character education programs. The essay concludes by examining implications for Christian educators. It outlines an approach to thinking critically about character education, suggests an emphasis on traits that support God's intentions for communal life, and offers examples of teaching practices that may help form hearts not just behaviors.

Keywords

zest; character education

Zest, Character Education, and the Common Good?

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Abstract

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Introduction

What comes to mind when you hear the word zest? In the kitchen, I think of a lemon or orange zest: a flavoring agent adding a citrusy zing to a dish. In the shower, I may think back to the 1980s jingle for Zest soap, "You're not fully clean until you're zestfully clean," a cleanliness that promises to bring a spark of excitement to the day. As a parent, I think about my daughter's zest for life: her unbridled eagerness, enthusiasm, or delight. However, I recently encountered the word zest in a new and unexpected place, in a character education program brought to my daughter's elementary school in conjunction with a school fundraiser. This program advertised a list of five "21st-century character traits that will help [students] strengthen themselves and our world" (Casper, 2018), including citizenship, integrity, teamwork, growth mindset, and zest. I recognized citizenship, integrity, and teamwork as typical of other character education programs I had previously encountered. I recognized growth mindset due to its growing emphasis in both research and popular literature in the fields of

psychology and education. But zest? I had never encountered this trait in research or in practice. This sparked two questions, which I will explore in the first half of this paper: (a) What is zest? (b) How might zest have come to be included in a character education program? I fully anticipated that the answers to these two questions would provide me with an arsenal of arguments against the inclusion of zest in a character education program. Instead, answering these two questions led me to new ways of thinking about character and character education. In the second half of this paper, I will share three new insights, with particular attention to implications for Christian educators.

What is Zest?

Before considering the place of zest in a character education curriculum, it is important to establish a clear definition. The Cambridge Dictionary defined zest as "enthusiasm, eagerness, energy, and interest" (Cambridge University Press, 2019b). Positive psychologists elaborated further on the life characterized by zest:

Zest means approaching a situation, or life in general, with excitement and energy, not approaching tasks or activities halfway or halfheartedly. People who are high in zest are excited to get up in the morning, and they live their lives like an adventure. (VIA Institute on Character, 2019)

In contrast to the high energy of the zestful individual, someone without zest might be characterized as sluggish, lethargic, depressed, or lifeless (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

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Peterson and Seligman (2004) described both physical and psychological components of zest. From a physical perspective, zest involves energy, alertness, and a lack of fatigue or illness. Thus, poor physical health negatively affects the ability to exhibit zest. From the psychological perspective, zest involves positive emotional energy, feelings of meaning and purpose, and the ability to act with volition. Thus, poor mental health is also negatively correlated with zest. However, zest may also serve as a protective factor, contributing to positive physical and mental health.

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Positive psychologists reported that zest is positively associated with individual well-being. For example, zest is strongly correlated to life satisfaction (Park et al., 2004) and personal happiness (Park & Peterson, 2006; Peterson et al., 2007). In children, it is also positively correlated with positive attitudes and emotions about school and positive school functioning, i.e., motivation, interest, and engagement in class (Weber et al., 2016). Zest also contributes to school achievement (Wagner & Ruch, 2015). In adults, zest is correlated with greater career ambition and predicts higher work satisfaction (Harzer & Weber, 2013). Overall, zest seems to be a positive trait that helps people be fully engaged in an active life (Peterson et al., 2007). Given this definition, most would agree that zest is a desirable trait leading to positive life outcomes.

How Might Zest have come to be Included in a Character Education Program?

To understand how zest came to become a part of a character education program, it is important to first define what we mean by character. There are actually a wide variety of definitions, descriptions, and lists of traits one might use when talking about character, but most align with one of two broad perspectives: (a) character as virtue and (b) character as personality. While there is overlap in these perspectives with respect to some of the specific traits that might be considered foundational to good character, these two perspectives offer very different accounts of the source of character traits, the universality of character traits, and the end goal toward which character is aimed.

Character as Virtue

According to the first perspective, character is associated with virtue. Virtues are aspirational traits, acquired not innate. The virtues to which we aspire are those which are “valorized in a society’s social institutions and celebrated in those exemplars who practice them well” (Hunter, 2018, p. 11). They are rooted in “a morality external to us to which we should submit our wills” (Hunter, 2018, p. 43). Besser (2008) noted, “We strive to develop the virtues in ourselves; we teach our children how to become virtuous; we seek out models of virtue to emulate” (p. 108). There are a variety of perspectives on how one might develop virtue. For example, sociologist James Davison Hunter (2018) emphasized the role that cultures and institutions (e.g., family, church, market, media) subtly play in forming our character without our even knowing it. In contrast, theologian N. T. Wright (2010) viewed virtue as acquired through a combination of intentional hard training and practice coupled with the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit until it becomes almost like second nature.

Regardless of their views on how virtue is acquired, those with a virtue perspective see character not as an occasional virtuous thought or act, but rather a set of habits of the heart, the mind, and the will which consistently guide moral and ethical decision-making and action,

particularly in challenging situations (Ryan, 1999). Character is more than just moral knowledge or moral behavior. It involves voluntary behavioral choices that reflect both an individual's accumulated practical wisdom and moral beliefs (Besser, 2008). Character comes about through "knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good" (Lickona, 1999, p. 41). From this perspective, children need character education in order to help them become good people. Because different cultures or cultural institutions hold different visions of the good, the particular traits or virtues associated with character (and therefore character education) will differ across time and place (Kingham, 2017), for "the substance of character always takes shape relative to the culture in which it is found" (Hunter, 2018, p. 6).

Character as Personality

Whereas the first perspective on character focuses on virtue, the second perspective emphasizes personality. From this perspective, character is defined as an individual's essential nature, or "the particular combination of qualities in a person" that distinguish her from others (Cambridge University Press, 2019a). Character traits are a subset of a broader range of personality traits, specifically those traits that lead to excellence and well-being (Park et al., 2004). Positive psychologists have identified a set of 24 character strengths they believe are valued across cultures irrespective of time and place (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Some of these strengths have obvious moral underpinnings and intrinsic goodness (e.g., kindness, fairness, and honesty) while other strengths are positive traits that are good only when used in service of good purposes (e.g., love of learning, leadership, and humor).

Psychologists, such as Linkins et al. (2015), viewed personality as a product of both genetics and environment. We each are endowed with an innate potential for a particular combination of three to seven signature character strengths. This potential is revealed, stimulated, and nurtured through favorable environmental conditions. Therefore, character is not defined with respect to an external standard to be instilled, but an inner potential waiting to unfold. Character is not something that will look the same for everyone,

but rather is "idiosyncratic and unique to the individual" (Linkins et al., 2015, p. 65). From this perspective, character development is about one's development as an autonomous individual with the aim of self-actualization (Hunter, 2018). Character education helps individuals identify their own character strengths and learn to use them strategically so they can thrive, living full and satisfied lives (VIA Institute on Character, 2019).

Zest and Character Education

The recent emergence of traits like zest, grit, and growth mindset in character education programs highlights the beginnings of a shift from the virtue perspective to the personality perspective in character education programs. This explains my own experience of disequilibrium when encountering zest as a trait. My previous experience with character education within the elementary school setting has been primarily framed through the Character Counts! curriculum, which has been the most widely used character education program in the United States in recent decades (Linkins et al., 2015). This program was developed in the 1990s when the primary impetus for character education programs was a concern for the moral decay of society and the belief that the well-being of our nation required intentional focus the development of caring and moral citizens (Brooks & Goble, 1997). Thus, this program aligns with the virtue perspective, emphasizing ethical and moral traits useful for positive participation in a pluralistic democratic society, for example the "six pillars of character": trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (charactercounts.org, n.d.). In contrast, zest is a personality trait, one of the 24 character strengths identified by positive psychologists. Its inclusion in a character education program emerges from concerns about individual well-being and the goal of increasing individual health, happiness, fulfillment, and achievement.

With this background in mind, how might a Christian educator respond to a trait like zest? First, Christian educators can affirm zest as a positive trait worth cultivating and celebrating in their students, a trait that will help students to thrive in school and in life. Second, given that (a)

not every student exhibits zest and (b) there is a limited research evidence as to how to cultivate zest (Park et al., 2004), Christian educators can conduct their own action research studies to explore what types of interventions or practices might help students of varying ages develop zest and to what extent this trait can be taught if it is not already one of an individual's signature strengths.

Finally, Christian educators must consider an important question: Zest toward what end? *The Character Strengths Handbook* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) begins to answer this question, suggesting that zest, along with honesty, bravery, and perseverance, is a strength that supports courage, whether that be physical courage (e.g., overcoming fear of danger or risk of injury or death), moral courage (e.g., maintaining integrity despite fear of losing friends, status, or employment), or psychological courage (e.g., facing inner demons or a debilitating illness). Yet we still might ask: Courage toward what end? For, as Augustine pointed out, virtues such as courage can become vices when used toward immoral or destructive ends (Niebuhr, 2001).

While positive psychology emphasizes self-actualization and individual well-being, many would argue that life should be oriented toward a greater purpose or good than the self. For example, Aristotle believed, "The good life is not...primarily about the individual; the good life, rather...contributes to the flourishing of the polis, the political community, and therefore enables each citizen of the polis to realize his or her flourishing" (Kingham, 2017, p. 440). Similarly, Hunter and Olson (2018) argued that character involves the capacity of an individual to "inhibit his or her personal appetites or interests on behalf of a greater good, to affirm and live by ideals of a greater good, and to freely make ethical decisions for or against those goods" (pp. 10-11). Cultivating zest in students in order to enhance their individual well-being is a worthy goal, but it is an incomplete goal. Christian educators must also consider ways to cultivate within their students a vision for the common good so that their zest and courage may be directed not toward immoral or destructive ends, not simply toward individual well-being, but toward the flourishing of their local, national, and global communities. For

example, students with zest as a signature strength might be challenged to reflect on ways to use their energy, enthusiasm, and interests to contribute positively to identified needs in their classrooms, schools, families, or communities, and then develop and carry out a plan. Investigating ways to help students identify and use their signature strengths for the common good is another pathway Christian educators might take to make an important contribution to existing theory and research.

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Implications for Character Education

Thus far, this paper has focused primarily on one character trait: zest. Zest may or may not become a cornerstone trait in future character education programs. However, there are important lessons from the exploration of this one trait that have implications for thinking critically and intentionally about character education more broadly. I conclude this paper by highlighting three such lessons.

1. Character and culture are intertwined.

Culture is not static, but rather ever-changing. Just as changes in a culture affect its people's ideas about the good life, their highest aspirations for themselves, and their sense of the ends to which they are working, it also changes their conceptions

of character and the goals of character education. Hunter (2018) provided a wealth of evidence for this claim in his account of the history of moral and character education in the United States. One clear example is found in Hunter's analysis of the McGuffey Readers, a series of reading textbooks popular in the United States in the 1800s and early 1900s.

Differences between the first and third editions of this textbook series reflect several significant cultural shifts, including changes in assumptions about human nature, the purpose of moral education, and the rationale for living a life of virtue. The first edition emphasized that children are born sinful. There could be no morality without reverence for God. Character education was about mastery of the sinful soul in order to serve God and neighbor, and virtue in the present life would be rewarded in the afterlife. In contrast, the third edition ascribed to more of a civil religion. This edition acknowledged that children are born capable of good or evil depending upon what was nurtured within them. The purpose of character education was to develop traits such as hard work, self-reliance, thrift, and skills to contribute to civic life. Those with virtue would reap material benefits in the present life.

Cultural change is not a thing of the past. In the decades to come, we can continue to expect and anticipate changes both in national and local culture which may alter conceptions of good character. When we encounter new traits, like zest, in character education curriculum, we might be tempted toward one of two erroneous responses. First, we might accept traits unquestioningly simply because they are there in published materials. Second, we might make quick uninformed judgments to reject what is new simply because it is different. Neither of these is helpful. Instead, we must simultaneously think critically and with an open mind, seeking to read and interpret the culture behind the trait in order to evaluate its meaning or significance. Drawing from the work of Vanhoozer (2007) and Kinghorn (2017), I suggest a number of key questions to aid such a critical interpretation:

- What are the theoretical or research origins of the trait?

- What problems does the trait attempt to address?
- What ways of being human or doing life are commended in the trait?
- To what sort of human community does the trait contribute?
- What about the culture would lead to the trait being identified as valuable?
- Toward what end does the trait point? Whose interests are served? Is this trait primarily about individual interests or the common good?

2. Character aims toward a vision of the good.

There are many perspectives on the kinds of traits that allow individuals and communities to flourish. There have been numerous classification systems and conceptual schemas proposed. In fact, Park et al., (2017) suggested that for many educators, "the question is not whether they want to develop character in students but, instead, which aspects of character should they prioritize?" (p. 17). Kinghorn (2017) suggested that any answer to this question must begin with a vision for human flourishing, and particularly the flourishing of polis, or the broader community or society. For the Christian educator, the polis toward which character is oriented is the Kingdom of God. While we cannot explicitly point students toward the Kingdom of God in public school classrooms, the Christian educator can begin to think about how to prioritize character traits by asking what it is that God intends for us as individuals living together in community. Based on careful study of God's nature and themes for communal life found throughout Scripture, Gutenson (2011) suggested a defining feature of God's intentions for communal life is self-giving love: love for God and neighbor, care and concern for the poor and marginalized, love for enemies. Gutenson noted that we are blessed to be a blessing and that we can be mediators of God's grace and mercy to others. This type of clear vision for life together can serve as a guide for Christian educators as they sift through psychological research and moral philosophies in their efforts to make decisions about which aspects of character to prioritize in their classrooms.

3. Focus on hearts, not behaviors.

Hunter (2018) pointed out that much of the empirical evidence shows that character education programs have often failed to increase moral or ethical behavior, whether these be programs featuring a virtue of the week, programs focused on rewards and punishments, or programs designed to support self-reflection around moral decision-making. He suggested that this is because character education programs have focused on character as an end, not as a means to a greater purpose. They have focused on behaviors, not hearts. And the grand narrative of creation-fall-redemption highlights we do indeed have heart problems. Though created good, both the human heart and the cultures we build have become corrupted, twisted, and misdirected. The problem is not “undisciplined selfish people who won’t submit to traditional moral values and responsibilities” (Keller, 2012, p. 160). Rather, as Niebuhr (2001) wrote:

Man’s good nature has become corrupted...He loves with the love that is given him in his creation, but loves beings wrongly and in the wrong order; he desires good with the desire given him by his Maker, but aims at goods that are not good for him and misses his true good... (p. 194)

Because our hearts are at the root of the problem, character education, or education of any type, can

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never be the silver bullet to remedy all societal ills. Christ alone has the power to fully transform and redeem human hearts and cultures. However, Smith (2009) suggested that education can indeed play a role in the formation of our hearts, not

through imparting knowledge or developing skill, but through routine embodied practice. The repetition of daily or seasonal practices trains our hearts, unconsciously shaping what we love and the purposes toward which we direct our lives, which then affects our future actions.

Therefore, as Christian educators, we can thoughtfully and intentionally reflect on the routines and practices we develop for everyday use in our classrooms and schools. If our vision for life together is oriented around the common good, then we can intentionally incorporate practices that will orient children toward community, toward concern for the needs of others, and toward self-giving love. Examples of these practices in elementary classrooms include morning meetings, class problem solving meetings, apologies of action, and service projects. During morning meeting, we make space for all members of the community, both physical space and participatory space, highlighting that all are valuable and important. During class problem solving meetings, students acknowledge shared problems and concerns and actively contribute to finding solutions that will be good for all. Apologies of action acknowledge the needs of a person or group who has been wronged and seek restitution and restoration of relationship. Service projects, whether canned food drives or toy drives, nursing home visits, helping younger students, or doing community service, point students to the needs in the community and ways they can contribute to something beyond themselves. Drawing on the work of Smith (2009) and Gutenson (2011), I recommend Christian educators reflect on the daily, weekly, and seasonal rituals, routines, and practices in their classrooms and schools using questions such as the following:

- What underlying purposes does each serve? What habits of body and heart are being developed?
- What kind of people are these rituals, routines, and practices working to produce and toward what end?
- How might I strengthen existing rituals, routines, or practices in order to orient children toward the needs of others and the common good? What new rituals, routines, or practices might I adopt?

Classroom and school rituals, routines, and practices can serve as an important form of counter-formation in service of the common good in a culture which emphasizes individual achievement and consumption.

Conclusions

In his book, *Every Good Endeavor*, Tim Keller (2012) asserted, "Every Christian should be able to identify, with conviction and satisfaction, the ways in which his or her work participates with God in his creativity and cultivation" (p. 41). For the Christian educator, character education is one clear example of how our work as teachers aligns with God's creative cultivation and renewal of individuals and communities. Cultivating the potential of each child through emphasis on character strengths that can lead to individual competence, success, and well-being (e.g., zest, growth mindset, curiosity, perseverance, self-control) prepares students with skills useful for contributing to the greater good. Working to foster a sense of moral purpose and responsibility beyond the self, characterized by care and concern for the common good, as exhibited by moral and civic virtues (e.g., respect, compassion, teamwork, justice) prepares students to seek the greater good. Thus, character education is one means by which we as teachers can use our work to further "develop, maintain, or repair the fabric of the world" and "develop all the capacities of human...nature to build a civilization that glorifies Him" (Keller, 2012, p. 50).

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