



Statement on Embedding Civic Character in Schools

Draft

12th and 13th January 2023

Preface

This statement has three aims. The first aim is to illuminate the important role that schools play in the civic lives of their communities and in providing experiences of communities (including those of the classroom and the school itself) for pupils. The second aim is to identify how civic character can be embedded in schools with the goal of educating pupils to be active, informed and morally responsible citizens who contribute to the good of their communities. Given that social and moral responsibility lie at the heart of education for citizenship education, that 'moral values and personal development are essential preconditions of citizenship' (QCA, 1998: 11; Peterson and Civil, 2022) and the importance of recognising diverse viewpoints about morality and citizenship in democratic life today, the third aim is to stimulate further dialogue about the civic role of schools, as well as about the importance and nature of civic character for healthy and flourishing democratic life. This statement, developed in consultation with school leaders, builds on and is informed by the extensive research conducted by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues since its inception in 2012, including the recent *Civic Virtues Through Service to Others* study.

The significance placed within this statement on the adjective 'civic' is important (Jubilee Centre, 2019). The adjective civic denotes the expansive scope of virtues and character education and the social connectedness of humans to their wider communities. Furthermore, civic is a positive adjective that includes citizenship and ideas about the good citizen, but also speaks to the communal ties through which civic life is engaged and experienced. In this statement, civic is used as an inclusive term that signals a commitment to equitable and diverse forms of democratic citizenship.

Introduction: The Importance of Civic Character in Schools

All schools cultivate character, though not always in ways that are connected to or help in the development of pupils as active, informed and morally responsible citizens. Given this, the key question is not whether schools play a role in educating pupils' civic character, but whether this role is intentional, whether it is planned and what form such education takes. Intentionality, planning and clarity regarding form and purpose are essential foundations for embedding civic character in schools.

Central to understanding civic character is to comprehend those civic virtues that enable citizens to engage and participate in the civic lives of their communities, both within and beyond the school gates. Understood broadly, civic virtues are positive and stable character traits that enable citizens to participate in the public life of their communities, whether locally, nationally or globally. In a plural democracy, civic virtues help citizens to understand themselves, understand and get along with others and enable effective participation in the various institutions and organisations of political and civil society that comprise the public domain. The formation and expression of civic virtues are vital for individual and societal flourishing, particularly because they enable citizens to come together with others to contribute to the common good and to discuss common interests. Important civic virtues include civility, tolerance, service to others, volunteering, community awareness and neighbourliness. These civic virtues are only truly possible in communities characterised by trust, care and equity and in which citizens have agency over their lives and communities.

Civic virtues are not all that civic character requires. Civic character is a wider term that recognises that other categories of virtues – most importantly moral and intellectual virtues – are important for being a good citizen. While at times they are cast as

separate fields, the philosophical, conceptual and educational links between character and citizenship are both possible and necessary, particularly if the agency and potential of pupils as active and positive members of their communities are to be recognised and promoted (Crick, 2000). In addition, pupils (just as with all citizens) require important knowledge, understanding and skills if their democratic participation is to be informed and effective, and if they are to understand themselves and society. Intimately linked to this concern is the necessity that pupils have access to extensive and sustained opportunities to form, express and enact their civic character through experiential activities. Understood in this way, civic character is concerned with, and involves discussion about: (1) the relationship between the moral, civic and intellectual virtues necessary for good citizenship; (2) the connections between the individual and the community; (3) the importance of critical thought, reflection and action within social, cultural and political frameworks and traditions; and, (4) the value of supporting pupils to understand contemporary society and to develop the knowledge, skills and virtues needed to contribute to their communities and to strengthen social justice in diverse communities.

Embedding civic character in schools is, in the face of many contemporary discontents both within and beyond democracies (including polarisation, fake news, authoritarianism and apathy), a significant undertaking. In this context, it is vital to emphasize that educating for civic character is not a remedial activity directed at “fixing” pupils, much less “fixing” certain groups of pupils. Rather, developing the character required for being a good citizen, like citizenship itself, should be viewed as a positive activity exercised together with others. Through such activity, the essential ties and bonds between citizens are recognised and further cultivated, and ideas of the common good discussed (Arthur, Kristjánsson and Vogler, 2021; Peterson, 2020). Indeed, and as Aristotle made clear, social and political associations are needed if humans are to form and express virtue and, ultimately, are to flourish given that the good life is realised at least in part through our attachments to others.

The virtues at the heart of civic character, and the knowledge, reasoning, emotions, relationships and experiences that sustain them, can not be taken for granted. Nor, too, can it be expected that the virtues necessary for civic character will develop without careful, intentional and systematic

education in schools and other public institutions. For these reasons, the opportunity to form and express civic character is an entitlement that all pupils deserve and need. With this in mind, it is also important to recognise that not all pupils have equal access and opportunity to develop their civic characters – including discussing what forms such expression might take. Efforts to embed civic character in schools must work to involve and include all pupils in equitable and just ways given, not least, that civic character is essential for, and to, just, equitable and inclusive communities.

Embedding Civic Character

As mentioned above, and as is the case with character education more generally, embedding civic character in schools needs to be intentional, and is at its best when it combines clear language, action, criticality and reflection in the pursuit of autonomous, wise judgement and is prioritised by committed leadership, teachers and other staff (Jubilee Centre, 2019; Jubilee Centre 2022). Here, the ‘caught, taught and sought’ typology set out in *The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools* (Jubilee Centre, 2022) and *The Character Teaching Inventory* (Arthur, Fullard and O’Leary, 2022) offers a helpful and positive structure for identifying the various strategies and mechanisms through which schools can, and do, embed civic character. A caught, taught and sought approach to civic character enables schools to develop a cohesive and consistent approach throughout the school, including the development of the language and vocabulary necessary for pupils to understand and reflect critically on the virtues involved. Through a caught, taught and sought approach, all members of the school community (most importantly pupils) are able to ‘join the dots’ between the various elements of their education that contributes to the development and expression of civic character.

Core aspects of a caught, taught and sought approach to embedding civic character include:

Civic character caught: civic virtues and other virtues necessary for civic character lie at the heart of the school’s mission and vision. A clear language of civic character is in place within the school, is actively used by and within the school community and provides the basis for critical reflection and dialogue about the meaning and purpose of civic virtues and civic character. Relationships within the school are civil and democratic, and a strong sense of belonging to the school community, the local

community and beyond is engendered in pupils, staff and families.

Civic character taught: the virtues, including civic virtues, that underpin the school's vision of, and for, good citizenship are taught explicitly within the formal curriculum. Through teaching civic character, opportunities are available for pupils to engage in discussion about issues and matters that are relevant to their own lives as young citizens. Teaching and learning approaches are attentive to civic character and seek to promote dialogue, positive classroom climates and enquiry-based learning – all underpinned by the core knowledge, understanding and skills required for civic character to be informed and wise. Civic character depends on pupils learning about, through and for deliberative and dialogical engagement with their peers, their teachers, their families and others within their communities.

Civic character sought: a range of opportunities and experiences are provided for all pupils to engage in enrichment and other activities through which they can engage in community with others to engage in dialogue, learn about the interests and views of others, volunteer, serve others, influence change and address injustices. Through such activities and advocacy, pupils can develop a habit of working with and for others, and can demonstrate civic leadership to take responsibility for their own civic engagement and social action on matters of concern to themselves and their communities.

This latter element of character sought is of particular import. In terms of character education more generally, character sought 'involves the desire to discern and freely pursue one's own character development. It involves reflection and ultimately planning and setting your own character commitments – that is commitments to something worthwhile' (Arthur and Kristjánsson, 2022: 2). Transferred to the more specific focus on civic character, civic character sought entails that pupils are educated to have autonomy and good judgement (appropriate to their age) in choosing those activities and connections that chime with their own worthwhile character commitments, including those commitments chosen in community with others (Callan, 1997). To be truly educational and democratic, this autonomy and good judgement, which involves and is developed through deliberation, will necessarily involve pupils in giving due thought and reflection to the sort of democracy in which they live and wish to live (Peterson, 2020).

Schools and Communities

Adopting a caught, taught and sought approach to embedding civic character cannot be understood properly without paying due attention to the relationship between schools and communities. Schools have long stood and acted as formative institutions within, and for, their communities. A common way to understand schools is to identify them as, at the same time, being communities in and of themselves and being situated actively within communities. This way of conceiving schools as communities and as active participants within communities is instructive and raises important questions about how civic character is cultivated within and beyond the school. The findings of various research studies, including the Centre's recent *Schools, Civic Virtues and the Good Citizen* research report (Peterson and Civil, 2022), have examined and illustrated how schools act as 'hubs', actively contributing to the civic lives of their communities. It may well be the case, indeed, that there is an important reciprocal relationship between (1) the school being a positive civic community itself; (2) the school playing an active role within and for its communities; and (3) the school providing a range of opportunities for pupils to engage within their communities.

Of course, engaging with communities is not always easy and straightforward. Not least, there are significant resource, logistical and practical constraints that inhibit what is possible for schools and, ultimately, what is experienced by pupils. Additionally, given the diversity and plurality of interests within contemporary democracies, school leaders and teachers may not feel comfortable or supported to engage pupils in what are often sensitive and, at times, controversial, matters. In democracies today, it is vital that civic character, and the associated virtues, are not defined in fixed and inflexible terms. As such, the development of civic character is a vital and necessary prerequisite if pupils are to form their own commitments and views about what it means to be a good citizen and about what it means to live a good life, and are to enter meaningful and constructive dialogue on such matters with others who may hold different views.

Whichever of these challenges are being encountered, schools, leaders and teachers need support if they are to embed civic character effectively. Whether provided by government, community organisations or families, developing civic character is the responsibility of society as a whole, and all societal institutions must take the

role seriously and be vigilant to the needs of, and faced by, schools. Only when all institutions come together in a collective effort will the civic role of schools, including the embedding of civic character, be fully realised. This role is not one that can be left to chance. To do so would compromise further the stability of democratic society and the chance that more just, healthy and flourishing communities might be possible.

Some Questions for Further Discussion and Deliberation

Though this statement intends to be clear and bold about the importance of embedding civic character in schools, given the complex and often contested nature of questions regarding citizenship, civic virtues and the common good, it is recognised that more conceptual and practical work is needed. Important questions that could shape such work include:

- What are the obstacles or barriers to civic engagement, including that of young people? How might these challenges be overcome?
- What more can government, community organisations or families do to support schools with a 'sought' character programme in order to level the playing field of access to opportunities for experiential activities?
- How can educators be empowered to develop the civic character of their students in the classroom so that they can effectively tackle sensitive and controversial matters?
- What are some of the practical challenges of embedding character education into schools and how might these be overcome?
- How best can schools position themselves as having an active role to play in the civic life of the wider community alongside being a positive civic community in itself?

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