

Beyond Virtue

Educating students for emotional wellbeing is a vital task in schools. However, educating emotions is not straightforward. Emotional processes can be challenging to identify and control. How emotions are valued varies across societies, while individuals within societies face different emotional expectations. For example, girls face pressure to be happy and caring, while boys are often encouraged to be brave. This text analyses the best practices of educating emotions. The focus is not just on the psychological benefits of emotional regulation, but also on how calls for educating emotions connect to the aims of society. The book explores psychology's understanding of emotions, 'the politics of emotions', and philosophy. It also discusses education for happiness, compassion, gratitude, resilience, mindfulness, courage, vulnerability, anger, sadness, and fear.

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Beyond Virtue

The Politics of Educating Emotions

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The Education University of Hong Kong



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Foreword

In our everyday language, moral and emotional terms are intertwined in ways we barely notice. We are exhorted to ‘just be kind’, urged to control our anger, and offered practical tips for raising a resilient child. The moral significance accorded to certain emotional concepts, and assumptions about the emotional component of moral qualities, form an invisible backdrop to such discussions. Much of our contemporary discourse surrounding the emotions reflects the resonance, in everyday practices, of the philosophical notion of ‘the moral emotions’ and the language of virtues. It is the language of virtues, too, that suffuses contemporary talk of the moral dimension of education. Whether reflected in school policy statements and curricular documents or popular parenting literature, it seems uncontroversial to regard the development of moral qualities as a goal, if not *the* goal, of children’s education and upbringing. As David Bakhurst reflects, articulating a desire that he suggests is shared by most parents for their children:

I want [them] to develop virtues of kindness, generosity, courage, sensitivity, honesty, compassion, and loyalty, among others. ... I want them to be kind ... to be resolute, but not dogmatic; to be bold but not impetuous; to listen but not be gullible; to collaborate but to know when to assert themselves; to be tolerant, but uncompromising about serious wrong doing; to be conscientious, but not obsessive, and so on. (2005, pp. 270–271)

Yet it is one thing for people to believe that it would be good if children – their own and others’ – grew up exhibiting these qualities, and quite another to suggest that schools can and should ensure this, not to mention to make claims about how they should do so and what this would achieve. Such claims and proposals, however, abound in policy documents, popular literature, and academic research. Again, the language of the emotions is intertwined, in such proposals, with the language of virtues, as evident in the recent announcement by UK Secretary of State for Education that, as part of a new compulsory subject of health education, ‘young people will learn how to discuss their emotions accurately and sensitively’ (DfE, 2019). Current mainstream educational discourse is

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underpinned by the conviction that the emotions – particularly the moral ones – are an integral part of the aspiration to shape children’s character in desirable ways.

It is as part of a recent emphasis on children’s well-being that this new focus on educating the emotions has emerged in educational policy and practice. As Kathryn Ecclestone notes, emotional and psychological well-being has become an umbrella term that

draws in an extensive set of ‘constructs’ seen as amenable to development. These include resilience, stoicism, an optimistic outlook, an ability to be in the moment (or ‘in flow’), feelings of satisfaction, being supported, loved, respected, skills of emotional regulation, emotional literacy (or emotional intelligence) as well as empathy, equanimity, compassion, caring for others and not comparing yourself to others. (2012, p. 464)

As the previous list indicates, this contemporary enthusiasm for educating the emotions embraces not just the concepts traditionally regarded as ‘moral emotions’ – defined by Haidt (2003, p. 853) as ‘those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent’ – but also more explicitly individual, psychological traits or abilities. The perhaps intentionally vague phrasing of Haidt’s definition hints at an ambiguity which runs through a great deal of work intended to defend the educational value of putting the emotions on the curriculum: is the alleged link between emotions and the good of society a result of the fact that emotional responses – or in Hume’s term ‘passions’ – are the basis of our moral norms and actions; or is it the case that cultivating moral values and dispositions will give rise to particular emotional responses? Nowhere, perhaps, is this ambiguity more evident – centuries of philosophical literature on these questions notwithstanding – than in contemporary policy statements about character education. For the above emphasis on well-being and the associated proposals for a form of moral education that assigns the emotions central place are part of the broad project of character education. It is indeed under the rubric of this widespread talk of virtues, the moral emotions, and their importance for individual and social well-being that the notion of character education, once a deeply unpopular idea, has become mainstream in educational policy and practice in many state education systems around the world. Talk of character in mainstream educational discourse is infused with references to the emotions and their moral significance, as in the following definition from the UK-based Association for Character Education – a definition that reflects the ambiguity noted earlier: ‘Character is a set of personal traits that produce specific emotions,

inform motivation and guide conduct.’ A similar conflation between emotions, moral values, and personal traits is evident in the UK Government guidance on character in schools, which states the intention to help ‘young people to explore and express their character and build the skills they need for resilience, empathy and employability’ (DfE, 2019b).

The implementation and promotion of these goals, whether in formal education or parenting support, is often underpinned by references to empirical evidence from the field of psychology. It is easy, in the face of this array of claims and evidence, for parents and teachers to be seduced by the promise of interventions that will help children to flourish in a bewildering and stressful world. Underpinning these contemporary trends is the age-old hope that society will be less cruel, less unfair, if only we can raise a generation of kind and happy children. But equally one can be tempted, in the face of such an onslaught, to retreat into a familiar cynicism, driven by a conviction that political and social ills cannot be addressed and may indeed be masked by a focus on personal virtues. Schools, the cynics and critics may argue, should just get on with the job of teaching children how to read and write and basic knowledge about the world, and not be tasked with solving what are essentially political problems.

Liz Jackson manages to tread a fine balance between cynicism and hope. Ever conscious of the political context of our educational debates – as revealed by the book’s title – she nevertheless does not allow her trenchant criticism of some prominent approaches to educating the emotions to get in the way of a rigorous and sensible appraisal of the value of such programmes in different educational contexts.

There is a significant body of critical academic literature on the politics of the emotions. Given the wealth of philosophical work on the emotions and their role in education, and the growing body of psychological research in this field, it is no mean feat to draw both the critical insights and the empirical findings of this broad intellectual landscape together in a clear and accessible way.

As Jackson notes herself in her Introduction, while the book is called ‘beyond virtue’, it should not be read as a total rejection of the tradition of virtue ethics nor of the substantial body of recent educational research and scholarship that draws on this tradition. Her project, rather, is to show both sceptics and fans of this project of moral education that ‘there is more to educating emotions than people tend to realise’.

This admirable balance runs through the entire text. It is reflected in Jackson’s acknowledgement of her indebtedness to the work of theorists such as Megan Boler, who have questioned the way in which some emotions are conceptualised and valued in classrooms and analysed how political questions of power and agency interact with these

practices, and to philosophers such as Kristjan Kristjánsson who have charted the conceptual underpinnings of virtue ethics and related programmes of social and emotional learning.

Jackson is also clear about the modest scope and limitations of her discussion, explaining that her goal is not to defend a particular theoretical orientation towards emotions, but rather to ‘shed light on theoretical insights related to educating emotional virtues, primarily in schooling contexts’.

Jackson is a well-established philosopher of education and her philosophical background and orientation is evident throughout the book. Nevertheless, she manages to avoid the trap that Morwenna Griffiths warns of in her discussion of educational philosophy, namely of philosophers becoming like a ‘raiding party’, ‘using education as one more example where their laws and insights can be applied’ (Griffiths, 1999, p. 152). Griffiths’ preferred model of engagement is one of ‘mutual enrichment’ (Griffiths, 1999), and this model is reflected in Jackson’s careful and respectful engagement with the theoretical and practical resources developed by proponents of virtue ethics in education, such as those produced by researchers at the UK-based Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. Much of this work, she acknowledges, can play a valuable role in schools. A similar approach is evident in Jackson’s insistence on balancing external philosophical critique of the conceptual and normative underpinnings of work in psychology and other fields with a rigorous engagement with critical literature from within the disciplines, whether critical psychology, sociological critique, or methodological questions.

Similarly, throughout the book Jackson reflects, at key moments in the discussion, on concrete examples from educational practice. This includes a refreshing discussion of teachers’ own emotional responses, a positive use of examples of classroom pedagogy, and some practical suggestions for teachers, not least concrete proposals for giving them greater professional agency.

This book is helpfully divided into a first section that develops a broad theoretical framework for understanding the way in which discussions of emotional virtues in education has been informed by different philosophical traditions and empirical approaches, followed by seven chapters, each addressing a particular emotion. These chapters aim to offer a broad overview of the diversity of perspectives on emotions in society and their implications for educating emotional virtues, with a focus on the goals of moral and civic education.

The theoretical section offers a useful overview of different philosophical traditions, indicating connections with work in the social sciences. While covering standard Western philosophical approaches,

namely deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics, care ethics and other relational views, and existentialism, this section is engaging and accessible to non-philosophers. It includes a valuable discussion of non-Western philosophical approaches, specifically Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, and helpfully alerts readers to the connections between these traditions and some Western ideas when it comes to philosophical reflection on the moral and social significance of the emotions. This discussion also serves as a helpful reminder to Western scholars that Western views of educating emotional virtues are not universal. Here as elsewhere, Jackson's practical observations as an educator are always clearly in view, as she acknowledges her frustration with observing Western educators in diverse classrooms who 'often take up educating emotional virtues among diverse students with little appreciation for differences in view, due to culturally particular assumptions they bring into these tasks'. Likewise, Jackson does not lose sight of empirical, social factors in discussing philosophical ideas, thus illustrating, rather than just arguing for, the value of an interdisciplinary approach when it comes to thinking about emotions in education.

This section would make an excellent introduction to the topic of educating the emotions for people wishing to navigate the frequently bewildering contemporary debates, to unpack the philosophical assumptions involved, and to map out the often contrasting educational implications and tensions.

The book has both a descriptive, analytical strand and a critical strand. An important part of the critical strand involves indicating the weaknesses of many empirical studies on educating the emotions, whether through discussing specific methodological flaws such as the limitations of self-reporting, or making the important point that, as is the case with a great deal of education policy and research, studies developed in one area are often hastily applied to educational settings without an appropriate sensitivity to context. This is perhaps particularly true for psychological research, where theoretical positions are developed in therapeutic rather than educational contexts. Yet while critical of some of the methodological flaws of the theories she surveys, Jackson does not dismiss their significance for educational practitioners. Nor does she reject the possibility that empirical work in this field could usefully inform the work of committed educators.

A further element of this critical strand is conceptual, and here Jackson draws on philosophical work that conceptualises education as a moral practice (see Hogan, 2011; Pring, 2001), and on the broader tradition of philosophy of education that reminds us of the need for attention to the meaning and significance of our educational concepts. She also draws attention to the need to adopt an interdisciplinary perspective in

discussions of the emotions, drawing on the conceptual frameworks offered not just by philosophers but by social theorists and psychologists. Such work has done much to articulate and explore ‘the situational and social nature of psychological phenomena like emotions’, yet has ‘hovered at the edges of psychological research [and] have never become central’ (Turner & Trucano, 2014, p. 645, in Jackson, p. 17). Jackson’s interdisciplinary approach produces a highly readable excursion through a range of complex ideas, where psychological and sociological perspectives are often juxtaposed so as to draw out the different normative and conceptual assumptions that they suggest. This approach is reflected most clearly in her discussion of the way psychologists and sociologists theorise and reflect on ‘feeling rules’.

However, the main thrust of the critical strand of this book is a political one. As the title indicates, the political perspective is central to the book; yet this perspective, while evident throughout, is not hammered home or laboured. Although Jackson’s concern with questions of social justice runs through this work, this is a nuanced account which recognises the pitfalls of overlooking the important role of individual agency and emphasises that education is not just about creating better societies but about supporting the individual children encountered in classrooms.

Thus while the social–political context of education is always in view, Jackson’s own political perspective is not presented explicitly as a normative overarching framework at the outset. This could perhaps be seen as a weakness of the work, but I found it refreshing. Jackson’s aim, which I think the book admirably achieves, is not to convince the reader of a substantive moral or political view, but to alert them to the ways in which ‘moral and justice considerations are bypassed’ in certain prominent ways of thinking and talking about education. This is reflected not just in her analysis of research and academic literature, but in the examples she provides from everyday lives of teachers in schools.

In emphasising the political aspect of education, what Jackson is intent on doing is reminding readers – and teachers – that students have lives beyond the school gates, and urging them not to lose sight of the complexity of this social context and the challenges it raises for justice and equality.

As mentioned earlier, Jackson is clearly sympathetic to the strand of philosophy of education that has developed accounts of education as a moral practice. While many philosophers working within this tradition conflate education with schooling, this account leaves room, one must assume, for forms of educational practice outside the institutional structures of contemporary schools – forms like, for example, the radical deschooling experiments and therapeutic communities of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as contemporary democratic schools. Indeed,

Jackson hints at the importance of extending her analysis and critique to informal and non-traditional educational settings when she notes that ‘a politics of educating emotions approach considers how different groups are expected or encouraged (or not expected or encouraged) to feel and express particular emotions. Such expectations are educational, whether found inside or outside schools.’

Again echoing the concerns of many philosophers of education, and reflecting her own political commitments, Jackson notes that ‘social scientists do not have a particularly strong arsenal to justify educational practices based on their *moral* status, or their relation to social justice concerns’, tending rather to focus on ‘what practices and organisational patterns are functional or dysfunctional for individuals, groups, or systems’. There is nothing new in pointing out that, in the absence of a robust moral or political argument, what is considered functional or adaptive may not necessarily lead to normative educational conclusions. Yet this point bears repeating in a context where, as Jackson reminds us, the pitfalls of translating psychological insights from therapeutic and experimental contexts into normative recommendations for educational policy and practice have serious consequences. One of the perhaps inevitable consequences of this tendency for educational policymakers to enthusiastically embrace and translate findings from other fields is to suggest that there is a consensus or common-sense view on things like the role of happiness in education or the teachability or desirability of cultivating certain emotions and avoiding others. In demonstrating the conceptual and political problems with this tendency, this book serves as an important antidote to what has become, in many Western educational systems, something of an orthodoxy.

It is important to recall that, as Thomas Dixon notes (2012, p. 481), ‘The surge of interest in emotional intelligence and emotional literacy since the 1990s has given this topic new currency but, on all sides of the debate, it is mistakenly assumed that the idea of educating the emotions is something new.’ It is, however, certainly true that particular emotions have received renewed prominence and attention from policymakers in recent years, and have attracted a growing body of critical literature. Among these are the notions of resilience and grit. Thus it is not surprising to see these ideas, and some critical contemporary discussions of the political context within which they have emerged, given extensive treatment here. Yet there are more surprising inclusions, such as the discussion of vulnerability, which at first glance seems counter-intuitive, but which demonstrates the same careful balance between critical sociological analysis of contemporary discourses, insights from philosophy and psychology, and political reflection. The analysis of the different ways

in which vulnerability is conceived also makes some insightful comments on the interaction between different emotions and virtues in their social-political context. Another refreshing surprise is the inclusion of theorists not usually encountered in contemporary philosophical scholarship on the emotions, such as the eighteenth-century French philosopher Sophie de Grouchy.

It is notable that the list of chapter titles includes only one term – courage – that appears on Aristotle’s classic list of the twelve moral virtues. Jackson’s list of headings has more in common, in fact, with the list of ‘character strengths and virtues’ developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) and with the similar approach of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, who state: ‘We believe that character is constituted by the virtues, such as courage, justice, honesty, compassion, self-discipline, gratitude, generosity and humility.’ While some of these concepts have a more obviously emotional component, and can in fact be appropriately classified as ‘moral emotions’, using Haidt’s (2003) definition, others do not. Similarly, some of the concepts on this list have a more explicitly political connotation.

The omission of justice, the most political virtue of all, and on some views the central political value, from Jackson’s list is, I think, telling. It draws attention to the point that, although justice is, at least partly, ‘the first virtue of social institutions’ (Rawls, 1971), that is, a quality of societies and systems and not (or not just) of individuals, its political meaning is downplayed if not obscured altogether by its usual inclusion on such lists of the kinds of character traits that schools should be nurturing in young people. By clearly excluding this ‘virtue’ from the list of other character traits into which it is often smuggled, Jackson arguably highlights its distinctiveness. To the extent that the notion of justice features in her account, which it does at several points, it does so not in the context of discussions of individual qualities, but in the context of analyses of the background social and political conditions in which these qualities are valued and make sense. This is in marked contrast to the discussion of ‘The Virtue of Justice’ in the pedagogical resources developed by the Jubilee Centre, where it is conceptualised as a character strength: ‘We need to practise the virtue of justice in any situation where we feel unfairness is at work’ (Jubilee Centre, n.d.). If discussions of justice in the classroom avoid addressing ideas about a just society, notions of distributive justice, or just institutions, emphasising instead the idea of justice as a personal quality, then such educational interventions are not, as Jackson would no doubt agree, politically neutral.

As one of those who instinctively sides with the sceptics and the cynics regarding the recent enthusiasm for programmes of character education, it is such political suspicions that have driven my concerns. As I have

expressed elsewhere (Suissa, 2015), I find it troubling that an educational focus on questions about what a good or just society would look like and how it can be brought about seem to be pushed aside by a focus on cultivating a list of desirable character strengths in individuals. In attempting to chart a middle ground between the enthusiastic proponents of positive psychology and virtue ethics in education, and the critics of such projects, Jackson hasn't exactly cured me of my cynicism. What she has done, though, is offer a thoughtful and rigorous articulation of the difficult balancing act that all educators concerned with social justice have to manage: a refusal to accept a status quo that undermines human freedom, justice, and equality, and a commitment to challenging and changing it, alongside a pragmatic concern for the individual children they encounter, who are experiencing this political reality.

In responding to the criticism that character education is individualistic, prioritising an inward gaze over collective political action for change, Kristjan Kristjansson (2013) notes that proponents of character education, while ultimately desirous of 'the creation of positive institution', generally hold that 'the question of individual versus societal reform is a chicken-and-egg one – we need to start somewhere and, for developmental and pragmatic reasons, it is more feasible to start with the individual child, student or classroom than the whole school system of society at large'.

Yet Jackson's approach suggests powerfully that this is not, in fact, 'a chicken and egg problem'. As she puts it, 'Adopting an approach cognisant about the politics of emotion does not focus on promoting the cultivation of personal contribution well-being regardless of [social] conditions, but questions whether people should be asked or expected to adapt (or blamed for not adapting) to such systems' Such an approach can 'scrutinise the system, as much as individuals within it'. Her worry is that, in the current climate, for many educational practitioners, researchers, and policymakers, 'changing feelings has become the exclusive goal, dismissing the value of possibly changing situations'.

This is not a rejection of virtue ethics, a rich philosophical tradition with much to say about social and political engagement. But it is a warning against the enthusiastic adoption of seductively simple programmes of social and emotional learning and character education, where the message is that 'one's feelings [...] are the main locus of one's moral responsibility'. Grappling with political questions in the classroom when the world students experience is frequently an unjust and scary place is a risky and uncomfortable challenge for teachers. But as Jackson reminds us, this is what teaching students to understand the real world

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demands, and it is what is demanded of us if we are to be effective political agents as well as effective educators.

Judith Suissa

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