

# Character education and the ‘priority of recognition’

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As part of a revival of interest in character education, English schools are required to teach the new ‘three Rs’: *resilience*, *respect* for ‘fundamental British values’ and *responsibility* for one’s own well-being. School inspectors evaluate children’s *resilience*, whilst the Department for Education has offered financial incentives to schools that ‘instil’ mental toughness and ‘grit’. However, this approach may prove counterproductive because it relies on teaching *about* desirable character traits and neglects the interpersonal relations within which ‘character’ develops. This paper argues for an alternative ‘fourth R’ of character education, based on Honneth’s theory of recognition. As an empathetic connection to others arising from their intrinsic worth, *recognition* precedes *cognition* and a detached, neutral stance. *Recognition* of others as a prerequisite for moral action provides a foundation for an approach to character education that takes account of intersubjective relationships in schools and the wider social context within which character is shaped.

Keywords: character education; resilience; recognition; disrespect; Axel Honneth

## Introduction: ‘producing’ character in character education

Educational concern with the formation of character in children is a feature of modern social history in many international contexts, driven by diverse political, social and economic objectives. In nineteenth century Victorian Britain for example, elite ‘public’ schools focused on the development of character through team games and physical activity with the aim of instilling discipline and leadership qualities (Dishon, 2017). For the masses, Victorian ‘moral training’ schools whilst teaching the three ‘Rs’ (‘reading’, ‘writing’ and ‘arithmetic’) also paid attention to close personal relationships between teachers and children, in order to access and improve the ‘child’s interiority’ (Allen, 2013, p. 237). In early twentieth century USA, schooling was expected to contribute to nation building, in the belief that it is more effective to ‘instruct the young’ than ‘coerce the

adult' (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 2). Since the 1970s, in line with Kohlberg's theory of moral development, teaching has been seen by many educators as an 'intrinsically moral enterprise' concerned with children's moral development and welfare (Arthur et al., 2017, p. 1; Kohlberg, 1981). The current revival of interest in character education has been premised on the notion of 'producing' desirable character traits in order to improve national economic competitiveness and increase social mobility. For example, the Department for Education (DfE, 2014a) discourse of 'excellent teachers' who 'produce well-rounded pupils', displaying resilience, self-control and a strong work ethic, resonates with the renewed crisis of low national productivity. Desirable character traits are viewed as means to instrumental ends: they support 'improved academic attainment', are 'valued by employers' and 'enable children to make a positive contribution to British society' (DfE, 2017). To boost schools' focus on what could be termed the new 'three Rs' of education: *resilience*, *respect* and *responsibility*, the DfE has offered Character Education Awards, as financial incentives for schools to engage in initiatives such as talks by motivational speakers, 'passports' to improve character, records of 'personal excellence', and rewards to motivate children to develop their 'ideal selves' (DfE, 2015, 2016b). A significant increase in government funding for character education has also been observed in the USA. For example, Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush tripled funding for character education, raising the total spent each year to the level of billions of dollars (Watz, 2011).

Of the 'three Rs' of character education, resilience is receiving the most prominence in England and school (Ofsted) inspectors now look for resilience in the classroom and the staffroom. A review of Ofsted inspection reports published on the Ofsted website since 2016, suggests that in a classroom rated as 'outstanding' or 'good', children show 'resilience in concentrating on work they are asked to complete

independently’, or ‘resilience to finish more challenging books’ (Ofsted, 2016).[1] Conversely, in an ‘inadequate’ school, inspectors find that: ‘pupils are not resilient learners. This is especially so for many White British boys’ (ibid.). Where school leadership is judged as ‘outstanding’, the headteacher pursues ‘the highest quality of education for pupils tirelessly and resiliently’, with resilience infusing the entire ethos of the school: ‘Staff model these values exceptionally well and, consequently, pupils are resilient, well considered and mature’ (ibid.).

These approaches to character education can be traced back to developments that have achieved a global spread in recent years: ‘Positive Psychology’ (PP, Seligman, 2002; Seligman et al., 2009); theories of emotional intelligence (EI, Goleman, 1998) and the ‘growth mindset’ (Dweck, 2006).[2] The issue of productivity, both in the classroom and the staffroom, is linked here to improving motivation, developing ‘aspirational’ cultures and utilising techniques for the regulation of negative emotions. An assumption taken for granted in PP is that psychological well-being can be developed by teaching ‘PERMA’: ‘Positive Emotions’; ‘Engagement’; ‘Relationships’; ‘Meaning’ and ‘Accomplishments’ (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 209). Appeals to ‘positive’ values are made to reinforce the production of desirable character traits, through ‘habit instruction’ (Goodman, 2018). For example: ‘Staff remind pupils of the school’s values such as ‘resilience’ and ‘responsibility’ throughout the day. Few opportunities are wasted to strengthen pupils’ positive attitudes’ (Ofsted, 2016).

However useful such approaches may be in teaching *about* character, they have been criticised for: recasting moral values as psychological constructs that can be measured and inculcated without requiring moral engagement (Ecclestone, 2012); assuming that desirable character traits can be instilled in children by mimicking desirable adult behaviours (Bates, 2017); encouraging a deficit view of the individual (Ecclestone

& Hayes 2009) and normalising a particular ideal of a ‘perfect’ self (Cigman, 2012). The idea of ‘producing’ certain types of children conjures up industrial images of schools as factories or assembly lines rather than environments in which children’s moral development can be nurtured (Carr, 2012). Importantly, such approaches encourage students to be self-absorbed and, by elevating positive, performance-oriented emotional states to moral virtues, they neglect more holistic, philosophical understandings of our human needs and moral standpoints (Smeyers et al., 2010).

Where informed by philosophical antecedents, character education in England draws mainly on Aristotelian virtue ethics, promoted by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (Arthur et al., 2015, 2017; Carr et al., 2017). The Jubilee Centre goes beyond the ‘three Rs’ of character education by positing that ‘good’ character embraces: moral virtues (such as honesty and kindness); civic virtues (community service); intellectual virtues (curiosity, creativity) and performance virtues (diligence and perseverance). To overcome the self-centeredness of psychological approaches, Jubilee Centre scholars promote character education that aims at enhancing students’ sensitivity to others, an ability to identify morally bad choices and the capability to reason about the justifications of their own actions (Arthur et al., 2015). Aristotelian virtue education thus transcends approaches that are either ‘under-theorised’, or theorised within frameworks which lack ‘a moral compass’ (Kristjánsson, 2016, p. 528). As Kristjánsson (2015) put it:

To be sure, resilience helps us bounce back from negative experiences and self-confidence makes us more efficacious in achieving our ends. The deeper worry is, though, that those ‘virtues’ can be positively dangerous if they are untethered from moral constraints. The missing element in the character make-up of the ‘banksters’ in the run-up to the financial crisis... is clearly not a higher level of resilience and self-confidence. What we want to instil in kids is not the grit of the repeat offender.  
(p. 6)

As illustrated above by the Ofsted reference to staff reminding pupils ‘of the school’s values such as ‘resilience’ and ‘responsibility’ throughout the day’, ‘under-theorised’ approaches may lead to practices for ‘habit instruction’ (Goodman, 2018) that normalise a lack of deeper moral consideration. To avoid such practices, the resources for developing ‘virtuous’ character, offered by the Jubilee Centre (2015) to teachers and researchers in the UK and internationally, are embedded within the neo-Aristotelian perspective. However, the Jubilee Centre’s (2017, p. 2) definition of ‘character’ as a ‘set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct’ may foster a focus on the individual rather than individuals-in-relation, acting in specific socio-political and economic contexts.

This paper seeks to contribute to character education by focusing on the hitherto neglected, albeit essential ‘fourth R’ of character education, *recognition*. It proposes a dynamic definition of character as a ‘capacity to engage the larger world’, pertaining to relational aspects of personality (Sennett, 2003, p. 63) and underpinned by the intersubjective view of the self (Honneth, 1995). To explain the importance of *recognition* in interpersonal relations in the classroom, the school and beyond the school walls, I draw on Honneth’s (1995, 2006) theory of *recognition*. Honneth’s work on *recognition* provides a synthesis of Hegel’s (1802/3) early writings on recognition, Mead’s (1956) social psychology and Winnicott’s (1965) psychoanalytic theory of child development. True to its Hegelian roots, Honneth’s account supports an engagement with moral questions that give rise to the struggle for *recognition*.<sup>[3]</sup> It also posits important political questions that have been ‘written out’ (Suissa 2015, p. 111) of programmes for character and citizenship education (Jerome, 2015; Weinberg and Flinders, 2018). This paper now proceeds to consider the ‘priority of *recognition*’ and how character is shaped through relations of *recognition* (or disrespect) in the family, the community, the state and the

public realm. A discussion of the global politics of *recognition* follows, shedding light on some of the limitations of Honneth's theory. Educational implications of a 'recognition-theoretical' (Honneth, 2006) view of character conclude the paper.

### **The 'priority of *recognition*'**

Honneth (1995, 2006) starts from a premise that individuals are not autonomous but mutually dependent and, therefore, our identity develops through interpersonal (intersubjective) relationships. Due to mutual dependence, our daily interactions are not 'characterized by a self-centred, egocentric stance but by the effort to involve ourselves with given circumstances in the most frictionless, harmonious way possible' (2006, p. 111). In our everyday encounters, *recognition* involves:

empathetic engagement in the world, arising from the experience of the world's significance and value... [which] is prior to our acts of detached cognition. A recognitional stance therefore embodies our active and constant assessment of the value that persons or things have in themselves. (p. 111)

The 'priority of *recognition*' means, firstly, that *recognition* precedes cognition ontogenetically and secondly, that the psychological development of the individual is rooted in social interactions based on inherent significance and value that people and things 'have in themselves'.

Regarding the first element of Honneth's explanation of the 'priority of *recognition*', ontologically, *recognition* comes before cognition or, in other words, our 'empathetic engagement precedes a neutral grasping of reality' (2006, p. 113). In my everyday encounters, I am empathetically oriented to others and the world, before the cognitive, neutral grasping of reality comes to the fore and before instrumental reason orients me to people and things in the world as means to my ends. It is important to note

that this is an ‘ontological’ argument for the priority of *recognition* in the sense of what *is*, rather than what *ought to be*. In other words, a thesis that an empathetic engagement is ‘prior’ to neutral acts of cognition is not to be understood as an idealisation of empathy as a value to espouse, but as a proposition that acts of *recognition* precede cognition. This account offers entirely different meanings of *recognition* and *empathetic engagement* to those developed within EI and PP. For example, the model of Emotional Intelligence also features ‘recognition’. ‘Recognition’ is, however, framed by Goleman et al. (2002) as acts of detached cognition (involving ‘self-awareness’, ‘self-confidence’ and ‘accurate self-assessment’) that are instrumentally deployed for improving work performance. A similar ‘rationalisation’ of empathy is revealed in the definition of empathy as a cognitive ‘ability to *know* how another feels’ [my emphasis] (Goleman, 1995, p. 96). In the ‘PERMA’ model of Positive Psychology, the meaning of *empathetic engagement* resides in ‘*knowing* what your highest strengths are, and then *using them* to belong to and to serve something you believe is larger than the self’ [my emphasis] (Seligman et al. 2009: 209). By contrast, Honneth’s account points to the vulnerability at the root of our compassion for others. This vulnerability is predicated on our inherently social nature rather than knowing and using our ‘highest strengths’ as self-defining, self-sufficient individuals.

This links to the second element in Honneth’s argument for the ‘priority of *recognition*’, namely an intersubjective account of identity as it develops within and through social interactions. Honneth works here with Mead’s (1956) social theory and Winnicott’s (1965) account of psycho-social development in early childhood to show that:

The progress that the child’s development must make if it is to lead to a psychologically healthy personality is read off changes in the structure of a system in interactions and not off transformation in the organization of individual drive potential. (Honneth, 1995, p. 99)

The way human life begins and unfolds in early childhood enhances a child's sense of interdependence and the need for mutual relations in which others are respected and loved for their own sake. Winnicott (1965) demonstrated that an infant's and young child's positive relation-to-self (basic self-confidence) arises from being cared for and free from the fear of being abandoned. Taking this further, Honneth posits that infancy and early childhood are a stage when the first mode of recognition, termed 'emotional support', is of crucial importance for psychologically and socially healthy development. The basic self-confidence that arises in intersubjective relations of 'emotional support', involves being able to express one's needs and feelings and constitutes a 'precondition for the development of all further attitudes of self-respect' (Honneth, 1995, p. 107).

Whilst caring relationships between the infant and the mother and other primary carers provide the conditions for the development of a child's basic self-confidence, conversely, physical neglect or abuse threaten both the basic self-confidence and physical integrity of the individual. Because basic self-confidence originates in infancy and early childhood, the crucial primary relationships will have run much of their course by the time children begin school. This does not mean, however, that the presence or absence of basic self-confidence may be taken for granted, or that the absence of basic self-confidence can be 'regulated' through Positive Psychology techniques or lessons in resilience and 'grit'. As explained by Winnicott (1965), good parenting is about remembering that children are vulnerable and the same principle should underpin the work of educators in the *loco parentis* role. Offering emotional support to young children unfolds through pedagogical relations that allow children to have needs, to be insufficient and vulnerable rather than 'tough' (Nussbaum, 2001).

The intersubjective view of development thus questions the Positive Psychology view of the individual as independent, self-sufficient and self-grounding. PP does not



allow for human weakness and vulnerability, leading to a one-sided approach, whereby one may gain recognition for one's strengths or achievements but remain misrecognised (disrespected) because of one's weaknesses. Goodman (2018, p. 10) notes that words such as 'morality' and 'virtue' recur in Seligman's work but his proposed desirable character traits are so 'psychologized that they could readily fall into character-without-virtue' model of character education that elevates humour, spontaneity, compliant behaviour and other positive personality traits to moral virtues. The formula for character education in the most recent schools' white paper follows this one-sided approach, whereby a *recognition* of children's needs has been replaced with the new 'three Rs', *resilience*, *respect* for 'fundamental' British values and *responsibility* for one's own success and well-being:

A 21st century education should prepare children for adult life by instilling the character traits and fundamental British values that will help them succeed: being resilient and knowing how to persevere, how to bounce back if faced with failure, and how to collaborate with others at work and in their private lives. These traits not only open doors to employment and social opportunities but underpin academic success, happiness and wellbeing. (DfE, 2016a, pp. 94-95) [4]

What has been 'written out' of the above blueprint for the 21st century education, is not just the essential human need of *recognition*, but also the public realm. The notable absence of the public realm is clear in the reference to collaboration with others, 'at work' and in 'private lives'. If we define 'the political' as the 'whole realm of human enquiry and experience that touches on the question of 'how people like us are to live together'' (Suissa, 2015, p. 110), then the 'disappearance of the political' comes to the fore, both in education policy and teaching resources. In citizenship education, the tendency to favour an individualised account of the 'good citizen' (Crick, 2000) has intensified since 2010. The post-2010 character agenda has been replacing a focus on 'collective, active (and

justice oriented) citizenship’, enacted in the public realm, with ‘volunteering, grit and resilience’ (Weinberg and Flinders, 2018, p. 577). The rare appearances of the word ‘political’ in statements connecting character education to citizenship are typically used in the context of ‘political participation’:

as if what is important is that children be prepared for participating in something already defined as the political system; not that they engage in meaningful thought and discussion about just what such a system is, what it should be, what participation in it consists in or why it may be valuable. (Suissa, 2015, p. 110)

Suissa argues that bringing the political back to character education entails supporting students in understanding that the political realm involves moral debates about human needs and social obligations related to these needs, as well as the question: ‘Are there some things we shouldn’t be resilient to?’ (2015, p. 111). As explained below, Honneth’s investigation of this question focuses on modes of *misrecognition* (disrespect) that give rise to morally justifiable struggles for recognition. This is because *recognition* and disrespect not only respectively enhance or challenge one’s sense of identity, but also provide a moral foundation for harmonious or conflictual relations in the public realm.

### **Recognition and disrespect**

Honneth’s (1995) theory of *recognition* makes a distinction between three modes of *recognition*: emotional support, cognitive respect, and social esteem. These three modes provide the basis for the corresponding development of: basic self-confidence (corresponding to emotional support), self-esteem (corresponding to social esteem) and self-respect (corresponding to cognitive respect). As explained in the discussion of infancy and early childhood above, these qualities are intersubjectively acquired through the *recognition* of others. Conversely, a lack of *recognition*, disrespect and denigration

of ways of life ‘injure or even destroy’ a person’s relation-to-self (1995, p. 94), providing moral grounds for a struggle for recognition.[5]

Developed in childhood as well as in later life, and predicated on *recognition* found in ‘communities of value’ (p. 111) is self-esteem. Self-esteem is linked to the social ‘worth’ of the individual, to his/her individual traits, abilities and achievements whose value ‘can be measured according to criteria of social relevance’ (p. 111). The development of self-esteem arises from intersubjective experiences which occur both during and beyond the school years and are based on being recognised as a person, a ‘being possessed of personal qualities’ (p. 112). Recognising a child as a person does not involve ‘the empirical application of general, intuitively known norms but rather the graduated appraisal of concrete traits and abilities’ (p. 113). This mode of *recognition* is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to realise in an education system which has established a normative view of the ‘exemplary pupil’ as one who displays ‘resilience, self-control, humour, charity and a strong work ethic’ (Morgan, 2014). This system prioritises cognition over *recognition*, replacing empathetic pedagogical relations with technicist activities such as setting ‘aspirational’ targets and ‘objective’ calculation of children’s progress through regular assessment tasks. These technicist activities encourage a tendency to perceive children as ‘mere insensate objects’ (Honneth, 2006, p. 129) rather than individuals respected for their unique personal traits and abilities:

in this kind of amnesia we lose the ability to understand immediately the behavioral expressions of other persons as making claims on us—as demanding that we react in an appropriate way. We may indeed be capable in a cognitive sense of perceiving the full spectrum of human expressions, but we lack, so to speak, the feeling of connection that would be necessary for us to be affected by the expressions we perceive. (p. 129)

On Honneth's analysis, character education that seeks to 'produce' pupils who fit into the mold of the standardised exemplary character, with little or no respect for the person, is a manifestation of a perceptive objectification ('reification') of pupils reminiscent of autism:

forgetting our antecedent recognition... corresponds to the result produced by a perceptive reification of the world. In other words, our social surroundings appear here, very much as in the autistic child's world of perception, as a totality of merely observable objects lacking all psychic impulse or emotion. (p. 129)

In prioritising top performance, education envisaged as a solution to a perceived national crisis in productivity or economic weakness fosters a tendency to forget the essential need of children and young people to be valued as persons possessed of unique traits and capabilities.

But character education that goes beyond teaching *about* character needs to also consider the wider social context and include the public realm that has been 'written out' of the schools' white paper (DfE, 2016a). Schools do not operate in a vacuum and 'character' or, to use Honneth's (1995) term, 'identity' is shaped within intersubjective relations throughout lifetime. In the public realm, deeper political processes have been at play that may undermine the self-esteem of those involved in education through articulations of disrespect. The discourses of 'derision' (Ball, 1990) levelled at teachers may undermine both the self-esteem of teachers and the social esteem that teachers need in order to be recognised, not just for their contribution to the education of children, but for their intrinsic worth as a community of value. For example, the former Education Secretary Michael Gove's (2012) references to teachers as the 'enemies of promise' and 'the blob' (Garner, 2014) undermined the dignity of the teaching profession. Disrespect has also been levelled at the lowest achieving 20 percent of pupils in England, objectified

as the ‘underperforming educational tail’ (Paterson, 2013, p. 11). The Ofsted (2016) statement above referring to the ‘many White British boys’ lacking in resilience resonates with the discourse associating white working-class boys and their parents with the ‘cultural blight of low expectations’ (Marshall, 2013, p. 13). These discourses undermine the very social contexts in which character develops: the family home, the school and the local community. As Honneth (1995, p. 134) notes, downgrading particular forms of social life as inferior or deficient is a type of disrespect that ‘robs’ individuals of self-esteem as well as the ability to ‘relate to their mode of life as something of positive significance within their community’. Although it is impossible to completely eliminate the hierarchy of values and cultural conflicts in which different social groups seek to raise the values associated with their own way of life, avoiding the denigration of the ways of life esteemed by the diverse groups comprising modern society may go some way towards maintaining more harmonious social relations. Avoiding the negative stereotyping of diverse groups may thus provide the social context in which children and young people’s respect for the ‘fundamental British value’ of *mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs* (DfE, 2014b) would develop.

The third mode of *recognition* proposed by Honneth (1995) pertains to cognitive respect, which is realised in the public realm through the *recognition* of legal relations and rights. Inclusive legal rights (and obligations) enhance the development of self-respect and moral responsibility. Conversely, ‘structural exclusion’ from the possession of certain rights within society deprives individuals of the experience of enjoying a ‘status of a fully-fledged partner to interaction, equally endowed with moral rights’ (1995, p. 133). The 2010 Parliament vote for the tripling of tuition fees can be cited as an example of the ‘structural exclusion’ that deprived young people in England of the right to free

education enjoyed by their parents' generation. This denial of the right to free university education, despite student protests, may be considered as equivalent to:

a violation of the intersubjective expectation to be recognized as a subject capable of forming moral judgement. (...) the experience of this type of disrespect typically brings with it a loss of self-respect, or the ability to relate to oneself as a legally equal interaction partner with all fellow humans. (1995, pp. 133-4)

This form of disrespect may both discourage young people from 'political participation' (Suissa, 2015) and adversely affect the development of moral responsibility that is at the core of character education. This situation has been exacerbated by the recent legal changes to the status of students as 'consumers' in the higher education market (Competition & Markets Authority, 2015). A student with a right to free university education has a legal status of a citizen, based on her intrinsic worth as a young person in a society which seeks to ensure a legally-equal interaction for all citizens. A student-consumer may have her consumer rights protected, but at a price: in tuition fees and the loss of her right to free university education. The title of the white paper for higher education, 'Success as a Knowledge *Economy*' [my emphasis] (DBIS, 2016), provides a symbolic denial of the need to be treated as citizens for of all those involved in higher education. A Honneth reading of these structural changes highlights an increasing commoditisation of social relations, which not only move away from the three modes of *recognition*, but actively encourage an egocentric calculation of particular situations and relationships solely on the basis of their utility value in achieving one's individualistic goals. As Honneth (2006) explains:

Subjects in a commodity exchange are mutually urged (a) to perceive given objects solely as 'things' that one can potentially make a profit on, (b) to regard each other solely as 'objects' of profitable transactions, and finally (c) to regard their own

abilities as nothing but supplemental ‘resources’ in the calculation of profit opportunities. (p. 97)

Examples of calculative reason abound in education policy, from the vision of 21st century character education, valued for opening ‘doors to employment and social opportunities’ (DfE, 2016a, pp. 94-95), to the higher education market which protects student-consumer rights in transactional relations of commodity exchange, where upon paying a high price for access to higher education one expects ‘value for money’ in return. On the ‘recognition-theoretical’ view presented in this paper, social relations underpinned by commodity exchange are counterproductive to character education. Honneth’s theory explains why it may be tempting to comply with what subjects positioned in relations of commodity exchange are ‘urged’ to be doing. In a moment of ‘cold, calculating purposefulness’ (Honneth, 2006, p. 91), a busy teacher may be tempted to deliver a lesson in resilience, ‘tick it off’ and go on to prepare children for high-stakes tests, as an important measure of her own performance. A headteacher held to account for the persistent underachievement of the ‘same’ group of boys in his school may resign himself to justifying this problem in terms of a ‘cultural blight of low expectations’. A school awaiting an Ofsted inspection may prioritise producing evidence of resilience for inspectors to see over working with vulnerable children. A policymaker may engage in calculative thinking on seeing little choice but to follow the party line. However, educating ‘character’ calls for resisting these moments of ‘cold, calculating purposefulness’ to shape relations differently, in school and beyond.

### **The global politics of recognition**

Honneth’s (2006) concerns about misrecognition resonate with those by other commentators who write about the ‘politics of recognition’ (Taylor, 1992) in the wake of

socio-political and economic changes brought about by globalisation, neoliberalisation and the transformation of modern industrial capitalism into ‘new capitalism’ (Sennett, 2000). The neoliberal restructuring of the capitalist state has led to the exclusion of large swathes of population from systems of recognition (Sennett, 2000; Butler as cited in Willig, 2012; Honneth, 2012). The diminution of the regulatory power of the neoliberal state results in diminished access to state-regulated opportunities for self-respect by society’s members. In the economic sphere, the deregulation and flexibilisation of labour means that, for many, work is no longer a reliable, contractually secure source of income and occupational stability. This situation has been exacerbated by growing numbers of people seeking legal recognition as immigrants or refugees with no legal status and state protection (Honneth, 2012).

Writing in the US context, Sennett (2000) shows how instrumentalist workplace relations of ‘flexible labor’ combine with the use of new technologies to give rise to the ‘dispensable self’:

The result of uselessness, de-skilling, and task-labor for the American worker is the dispensable self. Instead of the institutionally induced boredom of the assembly line, this experiential deficit appears to lie within the worker - a worker who hasn’t made him- or herself of lasting value to others and so can simply disappear from view. (p. 61)

At its most extreme, misrecognition is manifested in ‘new capitalism’ not just in the instrumental use of others but also in the ‘specter of uselessness’ which has come to haunt highly qualified professionals and manual workers alike (Sennett, 1998, p. 83). The pain of uselessness may be experienced particularly acutely by young people as they are being prepared in the course of their education for jobs that may become obsolete in the future. Sennett (1998) notes that protecting oneself from the ‘specter of uselessness’ may lead to



a corrosion of character. If we view good character in terms of durable aspects of the individual's make-up expressed by 'loyalty and mutual commitment, or through the pursuit of long-term goals, or by the practice of delayed gratification for the sake of a future end', then such durable aspects may be experienced as undesirable under conditions of 'disposable' work (p. 9).

And yet, 'without certain substantial forms of recognition, our lives continue to be at risk' (Butler as cited in Willig, 2012, pp. 140-41). A lack of recognition within social institutions leads to the exclusion of individuals and social groups from the 'structures' and 'vocabularies of political representation' (ibid.). Faced with the imperative to ensure inclusion of diverse social groups, many western democracies have grappled with the unresolvable tension between the 'politics of equal dignity' and the 'politics of difference':

With the politics of equal dignity, what is established is meant to be universally the same, an identical basket of rights and immunities; with the politics of difference, what we are asked to recognize is the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness from everyone else. (Taylor, 1992, p. 38)

The key implication of this tension is that 'difference-blind' principles may suppress identity by imposing a 'false homogeneity', under the banner of equal dignity (Taylor, 1992, p. 44). Respect for 'fundamental British values' (FBV, DfE, 2016a) currently being promoted as pivotal to preparing pupils for life in modern Britain is an example of such 'difference-blind' principles which, without a genuinely open debate and careful deliberation, risk generating expressions of a 'false homogeneity'. The implicit message that FBV are wholly 'British' contradicts their stated aim of forging cohesion in multicultural Britain (Lander, 2016). The label 'fundamental' implies that FBV provide basic core principles or a 'default position' which can be used to question the loyalty,

belonging and status of ‘outsiders’ (Healy, 2018). From the perspective of postcolonial theorists, the normative power of notions such as ‘fundamental British values’ gives rise to ‘recognition through assimilation’ (Spivak, 1994, p. 89), i.e. the appropriation of the non-British ‘others’ into the allegedly superior Anglo-European ‘inside’.

Beyond narratives of difference spun around binaries such as British/non-British, us/them or I/it, reside postmodern ethics of difference predicated on the priority of the Other (Bauman, 1993). The priority of the Other unfolds in intersubjective relations which are non-symmetrical, in the sense that ‘I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity’ (Levinas, 1985, pp. 98-99). Elaborating on the priority of the Other, Bauman (1993, p. 12) defines postmodern ethics as rooted in the moral impulse of ‘being-for-the-Other’ that is often silenced by universalised ethical rules. Taking stock of the moral ‘blind alleys’ of modernity such as the holocaust, moral indifference and the dehumanisation of others, Bauman argues that:

If postmodernity is a retreat from the blind alleys into which radically pursued ambitions of modernity have led, a postmodern ethics would be one that readmits the Other as a neighbour... into the hard core of the moral self, back from the wasteland of calculated interests to which it had been exiled... an ethics that recasts the Other as the crucial character in the process through which the moral self comes into its own. (1993, p. 84)

The socio-political, economic and moral challenges underpinning the global ‘politics of recognition’ call for a more complex view of ‘character’ than the ‘virtuous’ or ‘positive’ individual that provides the basis for the models of character education discussed above (Arthur et al., 2015; Goleman, 1998; Seligman, 2002). These challenges also illuminate the limitations of Honneth’s ‘recognition-theoretical’ (1995, 2016) view of character. Instead of improving social relations, *recognition* may become ‘reduced to polite behaviour or etiquette’ (Huttunen and Heikkinen, 2004, p. 163). It may also provide a

basis for recognising others 'through assimilation' (Spivak, 1994). Honneth's thesis of the priority of *recognition* has been problematised by Butler (2008) who maintains that a person must first become aware of himself, before he can take a view of another person.

Despite these limitations, Honneth's theory of *recognition* offers an important framework for understanding the foundations of character in the deep structures of our intersubjective experience as it unfolds in the family home, the community, the state and the public realm. As a critical theorist of the third generation, Honneth set out to avoid the second generation's search for universal, abstract principles of morality by anchoring his investigations in the lived experience of relations of *recognition* (and disrespect). The result of this endeavour is a theory which also provides a framework for understanding social conflict and resources for its practical overcoming (Hanhela, 2014b). The focus on the everyday aligns Honneth with postcolonial theorists whose methodology relies on retrieving embodied, local experiences and theorising them from situated, partial perspectives that counter the positivist myth of the detached 'vision from nowhere' (Haraway, 1988, p. 581). Honneth's critique of relations in modernity is not as radical as those offered by postcolonial theorists. However, just as Honneth's reconstruction of Hegel's writings on recognition was guided by a hope of following developmental paths as they lead 'towards moral progress' (Honneth, 2013, p. 38), his own thesis of the priority of *recognition* can also be taken as a path to be explored 'more adequately and more fully' in the future. It is also possible that a more adequate conceptualisation of character is to be found from a different starting point, pertaining to the priority of the Other (Levinas 1985) rather than the priority of *recognition* of others. It is also possible that both of these starting points lead towards moral progress.

Honneth can, therefore, be regarded as one of a number of critical thinkers who offer theoretical tools for deepening our understanding of character, with important

implications for character education. What their explorations point to is that character education that is true to the view of ‘character’ as an individual-in-relation, acting within complex and increasingly precarious environments, needs to be based on a genuinely open debate, questioning and critique. If certain questions cannot be debated:

then the very idea of ‘reality’ is being circumscribed by censoring powers... critique is linked both to deliberative democracy – the idea of an open and uncensored consideration of political values and actions... that is not regulated in advance by state or corporate power. (Butler as cited in Willig, 2012, p. 142)

The numerous crises ‘facing us today demand radical solutions’ and participation in debates about such solutions and about ‘the kind of society we want’ should be an essential element of character education (Suissa, 2015, p. 114). Given the problems of inequality, poverty and austerity (Lupton et al., 2016), coupled with problems arising from globalisation, what children and young people need to learn to challenge, is a lack of *recognition* of their moral rights, as well as those of others.

## **Conclusion**

The recent revival of interest in character education has generated a plethora of approaches and resources, ranging from materials embedded in the neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics developed by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues to techniques for the regulation of negative emotions offered by Positive Psychology. Seligman’s (2002) Positive Psychology and Goleman’s (1998) Emotional Intelligence models focus on ‘positive’ character traits aimed at increasing motivation and productivity. The Jubilee Centre embraces a broader approach, by promoting moral, civic, intellectual and performance virtues (Arthur et al., 2015). Policymakers’ interest in character education has led to the development of a very specific formula for ‘producing’ the desirable

character by inculcating, in the English context, the new ‘three Rs’ of education: *resilience, respect* and *responsibility*. This narrowing down of ‘character’ from the more broadly conceived virtues that, in line with neo-Aristotelian thinking, enable full human flourishing, to the purely instrumentalist goal of improved performance, is indicative of the priority of performativity in English education policy. The introduction of the ‘fundamental British values’ of *democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty* and *mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs* can be seen as an attempt to regain social cohesion, lost as a result of an increasing individualisation of social relations and other problems characteristic of ‘new capitalism’.

However, without political debate, questioning and critique of the socio-political and economic contexts that provide the conditions within which character develops, such approaches are unlikely to get to the heart of the complex problems that require of children and young people to be resilient, responsible and respectful of others. A more dynamic definition of ‘character’ is also needed that views character as an individual-in-relation, formed through interpersonal relationships and engaged in the larger world (Sennett, 2003; Honneth, 1995, 2006). The danger arising from the increasingly precarious socio-economic conditions is that patterns of human activity in the school, the workplace and the public realm may become dominated by the calculative, instrumental treatment of others and ‘rampant self-assertion’ (Honneth, 2012, p. 18).

This paper has, therefore, argued for the ‘priority of *recognition*’, as developed by Honneth (1995, 2006) and applied to the analysis of the current approaches to ‘producing’ character in schools. On Honneth’s account, character education needs to be seen within the broader social context, as a manifestation of *recognition* or its ‘opposite’, *disrespect*. Rather than teaching *about* the desirable character traits, character education needs to pay more attention to interpersonal relations, for it is these relations that provide the context

in which character is shaped. Contrary to the message conveyed through the industrial image of schools ‘producing’ the finished package, pupils displaying the ‘three Rs’ of *resilience, respect* and *responsibility*, character develops both within and beyond the classroom walls, as well as beyond the school years. As long as character education prioritises improving individual character without improving society, promoting resilience and other desirable character traits will be limited to trying to ameliorate some of the most severe consequences of social policy in the ‘cold climate’ of austerity (Lupton et al., 2016). On the intersubjective view of identity offered by Honneth (1995, 2006), however, it is an improvement in social relations, in the classroom and beyond, that creates conditions allowing good character to develop. As social relations in these contexts appear to be increasingly infused with ‘cold, calculating purposefulness’, remembering the ‘priority of *recognition*’ is an important task for all those involved in character education.

## Notes

1. To maintain the anonymity of the schools and Ofsted inspectors referred to in the extracts from Ofsted Reports cited in this paper, I have refrained from providing links to the reports on the Ofsted website.
2. There is no scope in this paper for a detailed review of these theorists. It is, however, important to note their limited engagement with the complexities of socio-political and economic contexts within which character develops. For example, Goleman’s (1998, p. 5) Emotional Intelligence model was first developed from research on factors determining ‘outstanding’ work performance in corporate environments. Seligman et al.’s (2009, p. 294) model of ‘positive education’ counters arguments of those who ‘believe that well-being comes from the environment’ by presenting the following ‘paradox’: ‘Almost everything is better now than it was 50 years ago: there is about three times more actual purchasing power, dwellings are much bigger, there are many more cars, and clothes are more attractive... there is more education, more music, and more women’s rights, less racism, less pollution, fewer tyrants, more entertainment,

more books, and fewer soldiers dying on the battlefield... Everything is better, that is, everything except human morale.'

3. Honneth's later work on educational implications of Hegel's theory of 'ethical life' (Honneth, 2010) has been criticised for a one-sided, 'positive' interpretation of Hegelian dialectics (Hanhela, 2014a).
4. 'Fundamental British values' include: *democracy; the rule of law; individual liberty; and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs*. They were introduced in 2011 in the UK government anti-terrorism 'Prevent' strategy (DfE, 2014b). In line with the objectives of 'Prevent', all schools in England have a duty to 'actively promote' these values.
5. A table summarising forms of recognition and disrespect and their corresponding dimensions of personality can be found in Honneth (1995, p. 129).

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