

What Do We Mean by “Character Education”? A Philosophical Clarification of its Aims and Three Core Dimensions

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Abstract: Character education has gained increasing prominence in different educational systems in recent years, yet a degree of conceptual ambiguity still surrounds this approach, as it is often associated with related concepts such as civic or values education. This article seeks to contribute to its conceptual clarification by proposing a framework structured around three core dimensions. Adopting an analytical methodology with a philosophical-educational orientation, it draws on a critical examination of influential theoretical contributions in character and moral education. The findings suggest that character education comprises three interrelated dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioural. The article also underscores the importance of teachers assuming their role as moral exemplars and argues for the institutionalisation of character education as a necessary condition for its universalisation and for configuring an educational model capable of reaching all students, regardless of particular or contextual variables, such as social or economic conditions.

Keyword: Moral Education

Introduction

Character education has become increasingly relevant in contemporary educational discourse and policy, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, where it has even been explicitly institutionalised in certain curricula and official documents (Arthur, 2005; Department for Education, 2019; Jubilee Centre, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2015; Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025). However, this boom contrasts with a notable conceptual indeterminacy: *character education* is often used as an umbrella term that absorbs or overlaps notions such as civic education, values education or moral education (Bernal et al., 2015; Curren, 2009; Kristjánsson, 2015; Naval et al., 2019; Vilafranca & Buxarrais, 2009).

This conceptual ambiguity is not only terminological but also philosophical and practical. It makes it difficult to determine which character traits are educable, on what normative grounds, and with what claim to universality. It also hinders the evaluation of programmes based on this approach and their acceptance by teachers, who often see character education as vague or poorly distinguished from other educational initiatives.

In contexts such as Spain, character education is beginning to gain visibility, albeit tentatively and with developments that are still fragmented (Fuentes, 2018). In a scenario marked by the pressure of immediacy, effectiveness, efficiency and usefulness as the dominant criteria for educational quality (Harrison, 2024; Ordine, 2013; Simons & Masschelein, 2014), it is particularly relevant to ask what character education specifically contributes, what understanding of character it presupposes, and what kind of human formation it advocates in contrast to purely instrumental views of education.

Objective

The aim of this article is precisely to contribute to the conceptual clarification of character education from a philosophical-educational perspective. First, it proposes a delimitation of the specific object of character education as opposed to related notions, distinguishing it from other constructs such as personality. Secondly, it argues that character education is articulated around three interrelated dimensions (cognitive, affective, and behavioural) that allow us to understand more precisely what it means to consider character as educable. Finally, it outlines some normative implications of this three-dimensional structure, both for the role of teachers as moral references and for the possible institutionalisation of character education in contemporary education systems.

Method

Methodologically, the work falls within the framework of philosophical research in education and adopts an analytical and critical approach focused on reviewing and discussing relevant contributions in recent literature on character education and the philosophy of education.

Results

What do we mean by character education? A proposed definition

The concept of character comes from the Latin character, -eris, 'character of style, distinctive character, engraver' (Corominas, 1987). Interestingly, its origin was linked to the engraving that appeared on coins; however, later on, the term came to mean that which distinguishes some people from others (Pala, 2011). This reinterpretation has led to an understanding of character as a complex construct, made up of various elements that give each individual a particular way of being. This understanding of character as a multifaceted reality has led character education to often adopt a holistic approach, in which both individual and contextual variables are considered for personal growth.

In light of the multiple influences involved in the educational process, it is necessary to distinguish between the terms character and personality in order to clarify the true purpose of character education. Character can be considered the result of education and cultural factors on our natural way of being (Caro, 2020). Its formation involves socio-moral competence, understood as the set of psychological characteristics that enable a person to act as a moral agent (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004) through educational and cultural influence. In this way, character is influenced throughout life by elements such as social norms, social class, and relationships with family and friends (Kupperman, 1990). Consequently, character is shaped by a set of social, cultural, and educational elements that influence the development of the main dimensions that make up the human being, exhibits a certain stability over time, and focuses especially on behaviour.

Personality, meanwhile, has been defined as a complex set of elements (intellect, character, temperament, disposition or attitude towards something, and mood) that is influenced by both external factors and biological elements and which, in turn, is dynamic and changeable (McDougall, 1932). From this perspective, character can be understood as only one part of personality, and its development depends largely on external elements to which the person is exposed due to their status as a social being.

Consequently, character education seeks to foster positive changes in students' character for two main reasons: 1) it aims to ensure that morally desirable behaviours become stable over time, and 2) character is an area in which education has a real

capacity for action and improvement, unlike other aspects of personality in which biological and innate factors are involved that are largely beyond the scope of educational intervention.

Character education has been described as a conventional educational approach in which values are assimilated through the process of socialisation and a normative approach (Caro et al., 2018). In this context, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by educational normativity. Normativity should be understood as the systematisation and intentional transmission of learning, characterised by two aspects: 1) that education necessarily produces reform and improvement in the individual, and 2) that cultural transmission is assumed to be an inevitable and inherent element of the educational process (Peters, 1978). From this perspective, character education is oriented towards the formation of morally relevant dispositions, which can be cultivated through educational practices that affect the cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions of students, an issue that will be developed in the following section.

Character definitions and assumptions about their educability

Based on the above distinction between character and personality, it is necessary to examine how character has been defined in recent literature, as this largely determines how we understand its potential for education. A brief review of the most relevant contributions reveals that there is no single definition of character, but rather a constellation of proposals that emphasise different traits and dimensions.

Curren (2017) understands that “a state of virtuous character is an acquired, stable, integrated and complex attribute of the person (...)” (p. 12), emphasising the acquired and relatively enduring nature of virtuous dispositions. Along similar lines, Bennett (1986) defines character as a set of specific traits, such as individuality, kindness, justice, or self-discipline, that guide behaviour towards what is considered right, even above personal interests. From a perspective more closely linked to democratic citizenship, Berkowitz (2012) presents character education as the planned development of human capacity for the responsible and respectful exercise of life in society. Arthur (2016), for his part, describes character education as a general term that encompasses all educational activities aimed at helping students develop positive traits called virtues.

In an explicitly Aristotelian vein, Kristjánsson (2015) proposes understanding character education as an umbrella term that refers to any approach to moral education whose primary objective is the cultivation of good character, understood as a subset of personality that confers moral value on the person and can be evaluated. Carr (2007) argues, along the same lines, that any social interest in character education must be oriented towards the cultivation of a morally good character.

Alongside these contemporary definitions, some classical approaches help to highlight the volitional and practical dimension of character. Thus, Brogan (1924) describes it as follows:

Character (...) is a right attitude of mind, a constancy of will, and does not consist in a mere theory; it embodies an ethical idea and carries it out in thought, word and action; (...) applies it in all human conduct. (p. 27)

This characterisation emphasises that character is not reduced to intellectual adherence to certain moral beliefs, but rather implies a stable disposition of the will that integrates thought, word and action in accordance with an ethical idea.

Taken together, these definitions highlight several common features. First, they present character as something acquired, relatively stable and integrated into the person, which allows it to be conceived as an object of intentional formation. Second, they emphasise its role in guiding behaviour, so that character education appears intrinsically linked to moral action and not just to the transmission of values or norms. Thirdly, they highlight the civic and community dimension of character education, showing that its scope is not limited to individual improvement, but also includes responsible participation in social life, something that is also emphasised in recent analyses of the role of character education in complex and digitalised contexts (Megawati & Prahmana, 2025). Finally, the repeated reference to virtues introduces the idea that positive habits can be consolidated to become identifying traits that shape a person's way of being.

This brief overview shows that talking about character education means assuming a conception of character as a set of morally significant dispositions that can be cultivated through educational processes that affect cognition, affectivity and action. On this basis, the following section justifies the proposal to structure character education around three interrelated dimensions: cognitive, affective and behavioural.

Dimensions of character education: cognitive, affective, and behavioural

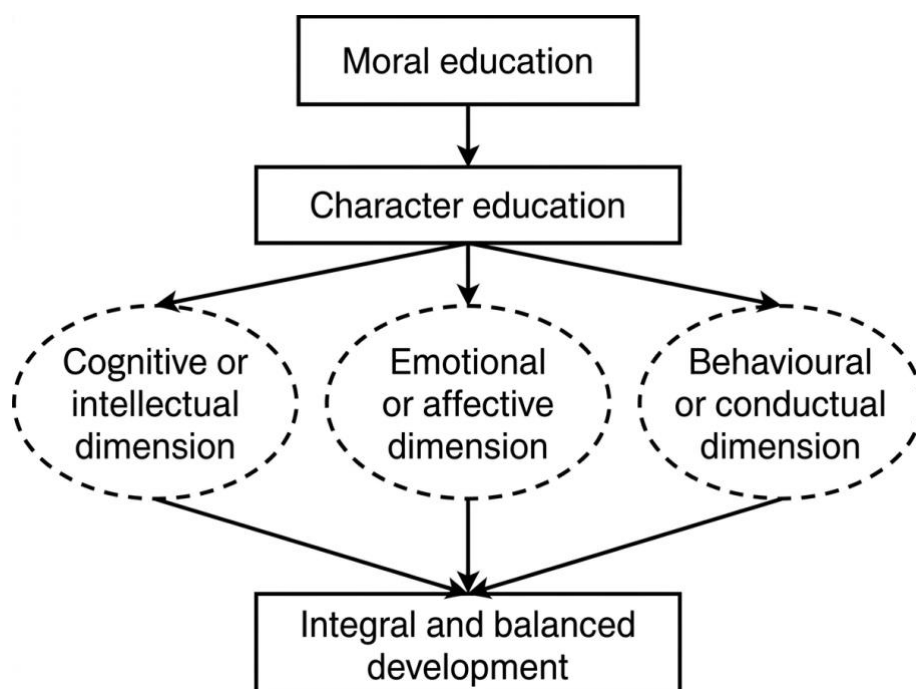
Based on the understanding of character as a set of morally significant, acquired and relatively stable dispositions, it is necessary to specify which dimensions of the person are involved when we talk about character education. The literature on educational anthropology has proposed various classifications of educable human dimensions which, although they differ in nuances, agree in pointing out the complexity and richness of human life.

Some authors explicitly include the spiritual dimension as one of the fundamental dimensions of human beings (Barrio, 2007; García-Amilburu et al., 2018), understanding it as “the most radical and intrinsic” (Bernal, 2008, p. 132). Others distinguish between a natural dimension and a rational dimension, with culture being responsible for giving meaning to reason and reason, in turn, giving meaning to nature (Bernal, 2008). Classifications have also been proposed that differentiate between intellectual, moral, civic-social, aesthetic-affective and religious dimensions (Barrio, 2007), or cognitive, physical, socio-emotional, creative and spiritual dimensions (Tyas et al., 2020). From another perspective, educational intervention has been advocated in general dimensions such as the intellectual, affective and moral, which encompass aspects such as intelligence, will, affectivity, character and personality, with the aim of promoting developmental habits (Touriñán, 2013). Similarly, biological, sensitive, affective, intellectual and volitional dimensions have been described, each with specific educational tasks (García-Amilburu & García-Gutiérrez, 2012).

In summary, these proposals show that, despite terminological diversity, there is fundamental agreement on the need to consider the cognitive, affective and practical or volitional spheres of the person together. On this basis, character education can be structured around three general dimensions that articulate and organise the others (vid. Figure 1): a cognitive or intellectual dimension, focused on knowledge of the good; an affective or emotional dimension, referring to the desire for the good; and a behavioural dimension, oriented towards the practice of the good. This approach, which systematises classic proposals by authors such as Lickona (1991) and Williams (2000), allows us to understand character education as a process that integrates knowing, feeling and doing in the moral formation of students.

Figure 1.

Human being dimensions that should be educated.



Furthermore, this three-dimensional structure provides a useful framework for engaging with recent debates on character education, which emphasise the importance of linking critical reflection with the formation of affective dispositions and habits of action in complex and digitised social contexts (Megawati & Prahmana, 2025). It is not just a matter of promoting certain cognitive or socio-emotional skills, but of coherently articulating the development of moral understanding, ethical sensitivity and virtuous behaviour (Axtell, 2025). The following sections will analyse each of these dimensions (cognitive, affective, and behavioural) and propose some implications for educational practice.

This three-dimensional framework clarifies, from an educational perspective, what we mean by character within personality: the set of cognitive, affective, and behavioural dispositions that have moral relevance and can be intentionally educated.

Cognitive or intellectual dimension of character

The cognitive or intellectual dimension refers to knowledge, the search for and understanding of truth, and is an indispensable component of character education, insofar as it requires discerning what is good and why it should be done. Among the actions that teachers can take to foster critical thinking and, therefore, the development of this dimension, are: transmitting, facilitating and substantiating knowledge, understanding it as an intellectual skill; showing a positive attitude towards truth, recognising one's own limitations; encouraging active and reflective listening; teaching students to decode the meanings of messages and to use language correctly; and, finally, conveying the importance of intellectual and moral freedom in order to promote the development of critical thinking (Barrio, 2007).

However, fostering critical thinking involves more than just mastering logical-argumentative procedures: it requires helping students to build wisdom not only through empirical reason or logic, but also through a broader vision that incorporates their own ethical and personal experiences (Ibáñez-Martín, 2021). From this perspective, it can be

said that the experiential learning promoted by Dewey (1998) and the link between reason and experience proposed by Kant (2000) directly influence the configuration of the cognitive dimension of character education.

Baehr (2016) has identified four sub-dimensions of the cognitive or intellectual dimension for the proper development of intellectual virtue. First, a motivational sub-dimension, relating to a sincere desire to know the truth. Second, an affective sub-dimension, referring to the enjoyment and positive feelings associated with the learning process. Thirdly, a sub-dimension of knowledge, performance or skill in relation to a particular virtue (for example, in the case of curiosity, the ability to ask questions constantly) which refers to the realisation of a virtuous trait in action. Finally, a sub-dimension of judgement, that is, the ability to discern when an activity is appropriate for a given context.

The transmission of values is part of the cognitive dimension of moral education (Ahedo & Millán, 2020), while the development of virtues appeals to the attitudinal dimension of human beings. In this sense, it can be said that virtues are 'values brought to life in the existence of each human being' (Caro, 2020), since it is virtues that serve as a guide and orient us towards values (González-Ginocchio, 2020). It is important to recognise, however, that knowledge of values is not enough to put them into practice: character education aims to teach morally virtuous behaviour. From a cognitive perspective, the development of critical thinking in students is necessary but not sufficient; teachers must go beyond the cognitive level and teach students how to behave morally in specific situations. It is possible to have a highly developed critical sense and still not act morally; it is possible to be an excellent professional without being a good person (Espinosa, 2020). This has also been pointed out in recent debates that contrast the exclusive emphasis on critical thinking with proposals for character education, insisting on the need to integrate rational reflection with the formation of moral dispositions and habits (Axtell, 2025).

Affective or emotional dimension of character

Currently, accountability in education systems is often based on criteria linked to academic results and, therefore, to predominantly cognitive learning. Quantified results have become almost exclusive indicators of the quality of individual schools and of the overall level of education in general (Díez- Gutiérrez, 2018), which has contributed to relegating the affective and behavioural dimension to the background, despite its essential nature in the educational process.

The affective or emotional dimension is a fundamental part of student development. The importance of educating affectivity is reflected both in its influence on learning processes (understood as the personal construction of knowledge) and in the integral development of the person (Aznar, 1995). Character education requires the cultivation of certain psychological traits that enable people to identify with values and commit to them (Etzioni, 1998); in this regard, emotional education plays an important role in decision-making (Richardson et al., 2009).

Adequate emotional development is crucial to prevent thoughts and behaviours from being swept away uncontrollably by feelings and emotions. In this regard, Oliveira, Rodríguez-Martínez and Touriñán (2006) point out that "(affectivity) constitutes a fundamental aspect of the individual's psychic life which, together with rational intelligence, is identified with the most important functions of behaviour" (p. 5). Feelings can be described as states in which a person is affected by the reality they experience and feels an impulse to approach what they interpret as good and to reject what they consider harmful (Escámez & Ortega, 2006). Emotions, intense and brief affective states;

and feelings, states of lesser intensity and longer duration, are modifiable and, therefore, educable; in fact, affectivity as a whole is only constructed in the context of mediated interaction (Aznar, 1995). This requires a process of deliberation, reflection and analysis of particular situations, in which values play a decisive role in the transformation of feelings (Escámez & Ortega, 2006).

This connection between deliberation, emotions, and character formation refers directly to Aristotelian ethics, where virtues are understood as acquired dispositions that allow the subject to order their affections and desires in accordance with practical reason (Aristóteles, EN, § 1179b). In this perspective, habit is not limited to the mechanical repetition of behaviours, but involves learning to feel appropriately in different situations, so that moral choices are internally consistent.

Considering the emotional dimension as an essential element for character development has made it possible to balance the emphasis traditionally placed on the normativity of emotions, delving deeper into both their positive and negative implications as well as their conceptual meaning and moral content. The contemporary resurgence of Aristotelian virtue ethics has also favoured greater interdisciplinarity between psychology and philosophy, which has led to the argument that certain emotions, such as wonder, are associated with greater ethical decision-making, increased generosity and the acceptance of prosocial values (Kristjánsson, 2016, 2017).

Behavioural or conductual dimension of character

The behavioural dimension is, in a sense, the visible result of the interaction of the other dimensions, and it reminds us that character education is primarily action-oriented. Educating character in its behavioural dimension implies a transformation and improvement of the individual and their way of being and behaving in the community. In other words, moral behaviour is the main goal of moral education; behaviour that must be learned and internalised until it shapes character (Escámez, 2003).

Along these lines, Watson (1984) advocates teaching virtues as a whole, that is, in a balanced way, avoiding overemphasising one virtue to the detriment of others. This promotes an accurate understanding of moral problems and a sensitivity capable of guiding action in accordance with the requirements of each situation. In recent literature, Sanderse (2020) has insisted that character education must create real opportunities for students to make ethical decisions and develop habits that allow them to internalise values considered positive until they become virtues, showing a stable commitment to their actions and emotions.

Kohlberg (1975, 1982) argued that appropriate moral behaviour requires, as a precondition, sufficiently mature moral reasoning. Based on his ideas, Malinowski and Smith (1985) conducted an empirical study to analyse the validity of Kohlberg's proposal and his classification of the stages of moral development. In an academic test context in which variables such as the need for approval, exam anxiety and feelings of guilt were introduced, they studied people's tendency to cheat. The results indicated that those who showed greater moral maturity tended to cheat less, that anxiety increased the number of instances of cheating, and that guilt was not clearly related to the level of moral judgement. This study, however, was criticised for its limited external validity, as the sample was not random and consisted solely of men (Wright, 1995). In any case, it illustrates the idea that moral judgement and behaviour are indeed related, but also that knowledge of good actions does not in itself guarantee their performance. Recent reviews (Bajwa & Ng, 2025; Hadi et al., 2025) of character education also emphasise

that the main challenge lies not only in improving moral judgement, but also in promoting the formation of dispositions that support stable virtuous behaviour over time.

Educating the behavioural dimension of human beings ultimately involves adopting a holistic view of the person: their behaviour should be consistent with their thoughts and values. This implies internal consistency (consistency in what one thinks) and external consistency (consistency between what one thinks and what one does) maintained in both favourable and unfavourable situations. This consistency profoundly shapes a person's character and identity (Musscheaga, 2001).

The educable human dimensions are interrelated parts of the same process, so their development must occur in a balanced manner, without excessively favouring any one of them. Otherwise, there is a risk of producing cynical students, when the cognitive dimension predominates without adequate affective and behavioural development; emotivists, when moral judgements are almost completely subordinated to emotional states, or impulsive individuals, when action is disconnected from both judgement and educated affectivity.

Purposes of character education in the contemporary educational context

All educational activities have a purpose and intention, and character education is no exception. In the current educational context, its proposal can be understood in at least two ways: on the one hand, as a way to overcome the suspicion of indoctrination associated with the teaching of values and virtues; on the other, as a way to counteract the tendency to reduce education to criteria of effectiveness, efficiency and immediate usefulness, reaffirming an aspiration for human universalisation.

Firstly, one of the most common criticisms levelled at the transmission of values in educational institutions is the risk of indoctrination. In response to this, the promotion of critical thinking is often presented as the antidote that would ward off this threat. Barrio (2007) warns, however, of the inadequacy of this simplistic opposition between teaching values and critical thinking:

There are those who think that the danger of indoctrination can only be averted by avoiding the transmission of positive knowledge, limiting oneself to spreading doubts (...) Any type of positive teaching (doctrine) would be indoctrinating. But this is impossible, since education, at least to a large extent, takes place through teaching. Indoctrination is a bad teaching practice, but that does not mean that all teaching is necessarily indoctrination. (p. 122)

From this perspective, character education is not identified with an uncritical imposition of moral content, but rather with a formative process in which the transmission of values, the exercise of judgement and the personal construction of meaning are articulated. Critical thinking is thus conceived not as an alternative to moral education, but as an internal component of character formation that seeks to help students understand, deliberate and responsibly assume the dispositions that guide their lives. Recent debates (Axtell, 2025) have argued precisely for overcoming the false dilemma between critical thinking and character education, calling for models that integrate intellectual autonomy and the formation of moral dispositions.

Secondly, character education can be interpreted as a response to the progressive technification of education and the primacy of quantifiable performance criteria. As previously noted, the contemporary educational paradigm tends to value immediacy, effectiveness, efficiency, and usefulness as central indicators of quality (Harrison, 2024; Ordine, 2013; Simons & Masschelein, 2014). Within this framework, there is a risk of

reducing education to the acquisition of functional skills adapted to market demands, neglecting the question of the type of person and citizen we wish to cultivate.

Character education introduces a different approach in this context: it aims to promote the development of moral dispositions that can be considered valuable for any human being, regardless of their social, economic or cultural status. This aspiration is rooted in the recognition that real societies are characterised by profound inequalities of origin, but also in the conviction that education, and in particular public education, is one of the most powerful tools for combating them. As Lledó (2018) points out:

(...) No, we are not equal (...) We are, in fact, unequal. From birth, we find ourselves entrenched in inequality. And not in the inequality of cultures or customs that can enrich healthy diversity, but in a radical inequality, an inequality of future and possibility (...) The recognition of inequality should not, however, discourage us in our idealistic pursuit of equality. Only societies that strive for equality can produce greater cultural wealth and material goods (...) The essential principle of this dream of equality is education. Its most equitable and generous instrument is public education, with its pedagogy of justice and solidarity. (p. 31)

Character education thus lies at the intersection between this pedagogy of justice and solidarity and the demand for an education that is not limited to preparing students for professional performance, but also contributes to the development of fundamental human capacities (Bajwa & Ng, 2025). The universalisation to which it aspires is not understood as homogenisation, but rather as recognition that certain values (such as honesty, justice, and generosity) can be defended as desirable for everyone, while critically addressing the structural conditions that facilitate or hinder their exercise.

From this perspective, the pursuit of truly universal character education requires the active participation of public educational institutions to ensure access and implementation. The institutionalisation of this approach is essential for it to develop in an integrated manner with students; however, such institutionalisation must be accompanied by adequate material and human resources, as well as a firm commitment to teacher training in this area. Without these conditions, character education risks remaining a mere rhetorical response to technocratic pressures, rather than becoming a concrete horizon for reorienting education towards justice and human development.

Conclusion

When we talk about character education, it is reasonable to think that we are ultimately referring to the very idea of education and its teleological orientation towards the improvement of human beings and their integral development. However, in the current context, education is often questioned and could be associated with the achievement of objectives that stray from a humanistic perspective, favouring criteria of performance, immediate usefulness or adaptation to the market. In this scenario, it might seem redundant to talk about education and character education, as the main objective of both should coincide. However, it is precisely the technocratic and functionalist drift of much educational discourse that makes it necessary to explicitly recover the notion of character in order to revitalise the understanding of education as a practice aimed at forming individuals capable of judgement, moral sensitivity and responsible action, and as a tool for social improvement and transformation that is not exhausted by the demands of the market society.

In short, philosophically investigating character education does not only involve defining terms, but also clarifying what normative commitments should guide teaching practice and educational policies in complex democratic societies.

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