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Charakterová výchova na vybraných pedagogických fakultách v České republice

Character Education at Selected Faculties of Education in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

This paper attempts to map the state of character education at selected faculties of education in the Czech Republic. The aim of the study was to analyze courses from education and psychology modules of teacher training study programmes to find out to what extent the courses match the prototype of character education designed by McGrath (2018). Qualitative content analysis of the course descriptions showed that only a small number of the courses match the prototype in all the criteria, but many courses contain several aspects of character education.

Keywords: Character education. Prototype. McGrath. Faculties of education. Teacher training. University courses.

Introduction

The main aim of the research presented in this paper was to ascertain to what extent character education is part of teacher training programmes at selected faculties of education in the Czech Republic. The paper presents the analysis of courses from the compulsory modules for future teachers focused on education and psychology, identifies to what extent they match the prototype of character education introduced by McGrath (2018), and provides examples of the courses related to character education at the selected faculties of education.

Definition of Character Education

Lickona (2018, p. 54) views character education as “deliberate effort to develop virtue”. Character education is often framed by its goals (McGrath et al., 2022, p. 231). A commonly defined goal of life is “human flourishing” (The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools, 2022, p. 6), which is, in Aristotle’s account, an “enduring contentment with one’s life” (Aristotle, 1985, p. 33). Similarly, the goal of character education can be seen in the increased manifestation of qualities that benefit oneself and others (Duckworth & Meindel, 2018, p. 37). US Department of Education (2005) summarizes character education as “a learning process that enables students and adults in a

school community to understand, care about and act on core ethical values such as respect, justice, civic virtue and citizenship, and responsibility for self and others”. Ideally, character education should permeate all school subjects and develop virtues of common morality and understanding of excellence in diverse spheres of human excellence (The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools, 2022, p. 6).

The comprehensive goal of character education is, in some authors’ perspective, the goal of all education. The concept of Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* should be enriched by a spiritual aspect of character education, which should help children realize their awareness of transcendent ideals (Kristjánsson, 2016, p. 717).

Not all character education scholars consider teaching character education in structured courses necessary to achieve the aims of character education. However, many believe that intentional character education classes are beneficial and crucial to successful character education (e.g. Berkowitz & Bier, 2008, Sternberg, Jarvin & Reznitskaya, 2008). Therefore, identifying the standard features of a course in character education is one of the key problems that educators face and that authors such as McGrath et al. (2018, 2022) have offered a solution to. This study attempts to contribute to the discussion by assessing university courses for future teachers.

Character Education in the Czech educational context

Character education is a term that is not yet deeply rooted in Czech academic discourse. It is often used interchangeably with other terms, such as ethical or moral education. The goal of ethical education is educating learners for prosocial behavior (Lesňák & Štěrbá, 2016, p. 48). Ethics is a course taught only at some Czech primary and secondary schools that choose to add it to their school curricula. It addresses multiple topics including ecology, economy, human health, and sexuality from the standpoint of key values (Brestovanský, 2020, pp. 93–94).

Character education is not a stand-alone subject, but rather a toolbox that helps schools create a suitable environment for character development of their learners and supports the efforts of the teachers of ethics education. Character education must be complex, well thought-through and permeate all aspects of school life (Vacek, 2010, p. 70). Hábl (2022) also sees character education as not different in its content from moral education, but as an education philosophy, an all-encompassing attitude towards teachers’ work. Vacek & Švarcová (2007) claim that the condition to implementing character education well at any school is the teachers’ belief in the idea that character development is a crucial task of all educators.

Prototype Matching and McGrath's Prototype of Character Education

Prototype theory, first developed by Eleanor Rosch, suggests that items can be sorted into categories based on their possession of certain criterial features (Rosh & Mervis, 1975). Because category boundaries are often unclear, each member of the category has a unique status. A prototype is the most central member of a category as it has the most features commonly associated with the category. Other less typical members of the category possess only a few of the typical characteristics (Guo & Wang, 2020).

Using the method of prototype matching for our study seemed quite appropriate because though it allows us to clearly identify members of the category of character education, it does not completely exclude courses that have only some aspects of character education but are not typical examples of a course in the field.

Our study used McGrath's (2018) prototype of character education, which consists of seven central features. A course in character education should (McGrath, 2018, pp. 26-30):

1. be school based,
2. be structured,
3. address positive psychological attributes (where positive psychological attributes are both "enduring and malleable" (p. 26),
4. address identity (which is the feature that ought to distinguish character-focused courses from those that are skill-based),
5. address moral growth,
6. address holistic growth (this idea rests in the Aristotelian belief that all virtues need to be developed in order for a person to become truly virtuous),
7. be centred around practical wisdom (ability to use one's virtues well in different contexts).

Research Sample

The scope of this study was limited to three major faculties of education in the Czech Republic: Faculty of Education at Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Education at Masaryk University in Brno and Faculty of Education at Palacký University Olomouc. As each of these universities offers hundreds of courses, the focus of this study was narrowed down to the courses that impact most students, i.e. courses in the education and psychology modules. All compulsory and compulsory-elective courses from these modules in bachelor's, follow-up master's and primary education study programmes were subjected to the analysis. The analysis was based on curricular documents and course descriptions available at each university's websites.

Language courses were excluded from the analysis because they do not primarily address any of the attributes specified in the prototype. Exploring the potential of a language course for character development is intriguing but beyond the scope of this paper.

Similarly, all courses that deal with the matters of research, research methodology, and writing a bachelor's thesis were excluded. Finally, we also did not assess teaching practices at primary and secondary schools as they focus mainly on developing students' teaching skills, and since students carry out their practices at different schools, their experience might differ significantly.

Content Analysis and Categorizing

The research method used in this study is qualitative content analysis. As coding was based on an existing theory, in our case McGrath's (2018) prototype of character education, directed content analysis was used (Newby, 2010, p. 485).

The curricular texts were analysed in detail. Each section of a text was assigned a name – or a code (Corbin & Strauss, 1999, p. 43). Five categories based on McGrath's (2018) criteria were used, and the codes sorted into them, leaving out the ones that did not fit into any of the five categories.

The categories used were the following:

- positive psychological attributes,
- identity,
- moral growth,
- holistic growth,
- practical wisdom.

The first two criteria, i.e. that the courses have to be school-based and structured were omitted since the focus of this study are officially accredited university courses, which automatically meet these criteria.

For this study, we modified McGrath's (2018) criteria to be applicable to the course descriptions subjected to our analysis:

1. A code is categorized as a “**positive psychological attribute**” if it explicitly mentions a positive psychological attribute. For example, if a course description simply states that the course addresses the issue of stress, it was not added to the category because positive psychological attributes are not mentioned explicitly.
2. A code is categorized as “**addressing identity**” if it deals with enhancing students' understanding of their own identity or that of their learners. McGrath (2018, p. 27) emphasizes the difference between skill-based courses and courses that deal with “narrative identity”. It was, however, not always clear whether a course addresses identity and psychological

attributes from the standpoint of skill enhancement or narrative change. Frequently, these two approaches were tightly interwoven and difficult to separate. In this analysis, all the codes related to the topics of identity of students, or their potential learners were categorized as addressing identity.

3. A code is categorized as **“moral growth”** if it addresses values, morals or ethics in an implicit or explicit way. Moral development seems to be the least addressed criterion in all the analyzed courses and is explicitly mentioned only infrequently. Therefore, all the course descriptions that include topics of tolerance, courage or other values, while not explicitly addressing the concept of morality, ethics or values as central to the course were also considered in this category.
4. A code is categorized as addressing **“holistic growth”** if it studies the students’ and learners’ personality from more than a single standpoint. If the code explicitly mentions developing a student or learner holistically or that it aims to develop different areas of their life simultaneously, it is categorized as addressing holistic growth.
5. A code is categorized as addressing **“practical wisdom”** if it suggests that the course aims to help the students apply its principles in practice. Some of the analyzed documents attempt to explain how and when their students will be able to use the knowledge and skills they should acquire. For lack of a better indicator, we decided to rely on statements of this kind to decide whether a course addresses practical wisdom or not.

Prototype Matching

After analyzing each course description carefully and assigning the codes to different statements, we sorted the codes into the suggested five categories and eliminated those that did not fit into any category. If a category was assigned at least one code, the course was considered to match the criteria of McGrath’s (2018) prototype. Finally, we decided to what extent the courses match the prototype based on how many categories of the prototype were matched with a code from the analyzed text.

Overview of the Main Findings

A total of 231 courses were analysed: 91 courses at Charles University, 55 at Masaryk University and 85 at Palacký University in Olomouc. Out of these courses, six matched McGrath’s (2018) prototype in all the criteria (see Table 1 below). The following text focuses on the six prototype matches in more detail to illustrate the most typical examples of character education courses according to McGrath’s (2018) prototype. For the overall analysis of the criteria in the analysed courses, see Bačíková & Babická (2022).

	Bachelor's degree courses	Follow-up master's degree courses	Primary education courses	Total
Number of complete prototype matches	3	1	2	6
Number of courses matching in 4 criteria	3	1	0	4
Number of courses matching in 3 criteria	8	3	6	17

Table 1: Prototype matches

The content analysis revealed the six courses described below to be clear prototype matches.

Introduction to psychology is a compulsory course at the bachelor's level at Charles University in Prague. The course syllabus states that its goal is to provide its students with the general overview of the discipline as well as to help them to apply it in real-life situations they could encounter as teachers, which clearly addresses practical wisdom. What seems to make it a good example of character education is its focus on studying humans as complex beings and dedicating some time to studying their moral, social, and emotional identity. On the other hand, the course addresses a lot of content that has little to do with character, which raises a question whether characteristics that prevent a course from being considered as character education should also be defined.

Self-education for teachers is a master's degree course at Charles University. In certain aspects it resembles the bachelor's degree course in *Social Skills* (see below). It also aims to help students understand themselves as human beings and future teachers, develop positive psychological attributes and try to see how the techniques used in the course can be beneficial in their future life and profession. The course also studies what role ethics plays in our quest for self-development and thus complies with all McGrath's requirements for a prototypical character education course.

Primary education teacher training programme at Charles University offers a course called ***Personality and social education*** consisting of two parts. Based on our analysis, both these courses also match the prototype in every aspect. Identity of the students is the most frequently discussed topic, focusing on positive psychological attributes and how the students can stay in line with their

values in their future profession. The second part of the course focuses on three basic aspects of a teacher trainee's development – personal, social, and moral.

Theory and methodology of education is an online course in the bachelor's degree study programme at Masaryk University in Brno, which attempts to address methods of stimulating personal growth and teach students to help their learners develop positive psychological attributes actively and effectively through games and other strategies. Its curricular document states that values education is one of the key terms that the course works with. Though this course clearly addresses all the concepts outlined by McGrath's (2018) prototype and we therefore consider it a well-rounded example of character education course, the fact that it is an e-course raises possible doubt about its effectiveness without the personal guidance of an educator.

Personal and social development is a bachelor's level practical course at Masaryk University heavily based on discussion, games, and self-knowledge. The content of the course centres around the student's identity, but it also aims to increase the quality of the moral and ethical development of its students and to help them understand how to address their emotions in a mature way.

Although the other analyzed courses were not representatives of clear prototype matches according to the analysis, many contain at least some attributes of character education. The following two courses are presented here as examples.

Social skills is a course for bachelor's degree students at Charles University. Unlike *Introduction to psychology* (see above), it does not cover a large amount of content but rather allows its participants some time to assess their own personalities, strengths and weaknesses and help them to consider how to become better humans and teachers. Everything is considered from the perspective of the student's personal and professional life. Communication skills are emphasized and practised throughout this course. The only aspect missing is moral growth.

Educational psychology 2 is a theoretical course for students of master's degree study programmes at Palacký University in Olomouc that focuses on learners, their personality and the relationship between teachers and students. It studies self-reflection, self-evaluation, and their use in the classroom. From the language used, it is not obvious if the course addresses the students directly or rather leads them to study identity and personality development as a theoretical concept. It matches the prototype in its focus on identity, holistic approach to students' development and its focus on practicality.

Research Limitations

This research study was limited by several factors. Firstly, it focused on courses at three faculties of education in the Czech Republic only. These were selected both for their prominence amongst Czech universities, for the authors' affiliation with one of the universities, and for the access to the curricular documents. Secondly, the study was limited to courses from the fields of education and psychology in the modules common to all the students in the teacher training programmes. Thirdly, it is based solely on the analysis of publicly available curricular documents.

Another key limitation of this study is the scope and form of the analysed documents. Each course description was written by a different person, the texts often do not follow one clear structure and vary in their length and style. During the analysis, it became apparent that more formal language might evoke an image of a lecture that is less character-oriented and more theoretical. Although the texts were carefully read many times to prevent researcher bias, the above-mentioned made the process of assigning the codes more difficult.

The lists of recommended literature were also included in the analysis. However, while some teachers provide as many as 50 titles, others only include several URL links, which might have caused unevenness in the level of understanding of the analysed syllabuses.

It is obvious that the analysis of course descriptions cannot be sufficient for well-rounded understanding of a course, as the texts might not fully reflect reality. Consequently, this study can be followed by research into how these courses are taught, if they are effective, and what teaching methods and techniques are used.

Conclusion

The occurrence of character education courses at the three selected universities seems to be relatively rare. We have identified six courses that match all five criteria of McGrath's (2018) prototype. In general, the courses that are prototype matches focus on psychology and personal development and typically occur in bachelor's degree study programmes.

McGrath's (2018) prototype proved to be a useful tool for the preliminary assessment of courses in character education. It appears to be simple to use, provides the necessary framework for determining if a course is character education or not without being unnecessarily restrictive. However, it may not be suitable for general use, as the criteria are not clearly defined, only based on literature overview, and do not take into consideration the teacher's intent, the used teaching method or the format of the lessons. The model recently designed by surveying field experts (McGrath et al., 2022), seems to be more

comprehensive and it might be beneficial to compare the curricula to the newly designed prototype.

Though this study does not aim to provide any conclusive results about the current state of character education at faculties of education in the Czech Republic, the obtained data provide a useful insight into the issue and can be used as a starting point to map the situation further.

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