Chapter 2: Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Schools

Keeping the Student at the Focus – Character Education in a Multicultural Context

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Abstract

This paper will explore the effects of social interaction in a multicultural society on the formation of character and a values system in children. It will discuss how the school community can create a culture that supports every individual to explore one's values hierarchy while helping students to develop their character and flourish. It will argue that schools can help to foster a culture of inclusion where all can feel safe, valued and enabled to bloom. Schools that are firmly committed to developing the whole child give importance to character education. Character education is a systematic approach that helps students improve their moral judgment and thinking. It helps students to acquire basic human values. Character education becomes even more important in a multicultural context; it provides the essential tools that help one to be inclusive and integrate different beliefs. Humans are social beings and interact with others; this interaction helps individuals to change their attitudes to integrate within the group. The family, peers and schools provide groups of interactions that influence the children's character formation. They can provide groups of belonging where one can feel safe and widen one's belief system. The sense of trust created within groups of belonging provides a positive experience where one can examine one's beliefs and develop them. The role of the media and virtual groups should not be underestimated; in today's culture, they play an important role in values and character development.

Keywords:

character education, values education, values formation, schools and values

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Introduction

Humans are social beings; they form part of groups that foster belonging. These interactions with others help individuals to form their character, developing a values hierarchy which enables people to be valued individuals in society. This paper will explore the effects of social interaction in a multicultural society on the formation of character and a values system in pupils. It will discuss how the school community can create a culture that supports individuals to explore one's values hierarchy while helping students to develop their character and flourish. It will argue that schools help to foster a culture where all can feel safe, valued and enabled to bloom.

Over the past decades, Malta witnessed an economic boom. This prosperity led to more work being created and the immigration of other nationals to Malta. The culture of commodification might lead towards perceiving the other as a means to achieve one's ends, rather than treating others at *par*. Character and values education based on moral and ethical principles helps to instil sensitivity towards the other.

Within the family, children learn to relate and internalise values that are perceived as important by the family, which tend to be limited and skewed towards certain beliefs. Holistic values formation continues within society (Kunduroğlu and Babadoğan 2010). It is in a society where the individual obtains a particular outlook on life.

The Effect of Family, Peers and the Media on the Individual

Through interactions with others, we understand what society perceives as essential, and we integrate it while discarding what is perceived as unimportant. Family, friends and the media depict situations which enable us to evaluate social interactions. The preference for specific actions over others allows individuals to formulate a values hierarchy (Cannon *et al.* 2016).

The affection which children experience within the family influences their personal development (Iulia 2015), aiding to build trust in others. This trust affects the self-confidence, trustworthiness, awareness and interests of children (Mekonnen 2017). These attitudes naturally trickle onto other aspects of life and might affect the interactions that children have with peers (Jerrim and Sims 2019). Moreover, these attitudes will ultimately impact on the academic achievement of children (Li and Qiu 2018).

Different family demographics result in children having different access to resources. When speaking of indigenous children in Australia, Rahman (2013) indicated that different socio-economic experiences inhibited children from having a positive experience of schooling. Conversely, parents who had a high level of education were more actively involved in schooling, helping them to engage with school demands successfully (Mtemeri 2019).

Furthermore, Rahman (2013) posits that indigenous people might have a different understanding of the world, which could pose problems within a school system. Students with a different cultural baggage interpret the world differently. Since a multicultural society allows for different viewpoints that are the product of different socio-cultural backgrounds, children might end up finding themselves caught up within these cultural paradigms. If one is not aware of the different perspectives, these can pose problems within a classroom setting, and what adults might interpret as misconduct or arrogance would not be because the pupils are unruly, but because their upbringing has led them to interpret the world differently and thus, react accordingly.

Schools and other educational institutions such as nurseries provide the first stable peer group. Peers play another integral role in influencing the formation of a values hierarchy. Within the peer group, children learn to negotiate their ideas in a context beyond the family (Çubukçu 2012). The group becomes more defined during adolescence, during which time adolescents choose their groups and try to assert their individuality. It is within these groups that adolescents continue to develop their personality.

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Groups are regulated by behaviours, attitudes, norms and beliefs (Coates 2017), and individuals within the group are expected to abide and behave according to the norms of the group. The group helps the individual to re-examine and readjust one's belief system, and each of the different groups provides a values system and a 'curriculum' of how to deal with and relate to their society (Casey 2017).

In today's virtual world, the 'curriculum' is not limited to a group of peers who one physically encounters. Value readjustment is reinforced through the power of the media, which alters the way we interpret society. Virtual friendships have shifted relationships from qualitative face-to-face relationships to quantitative relationships determined by Likes (Graafland 2018). The amount of Likes on posts determines and directs the thoughts of adolescents.

Within this context, peers from all over the globe might influence ideas and the values hierarchy. While in the past, the parents and one's location could have limited access to diverse ideas, now they are just a few clicks away. Within the Facebook culture of Likes, users Like posts with which they self-identify, and in so doing they use "the Like to share their values with others" (Ozanne *et al.* 2017: 6). The pressure of the media thus constantly tests the values dear to the family or the community. The virtual peer group and adverts from all around the world continuously enforce some values while putting others into question. Thus, one continuously readjusts one's values belief system to the norms accepted by the general society, even if this is virtual.

The online media thus presents another form of peer and social pressure on the values hierarchy formation. Vogel et al. (2014) posit that there is a correlation between the use of Facebook and self-esteem, thus highlighting today's reality that the effect of online media on values formation and schooling is similar to face-to-face interactions, as it affects one's emotions and the same psychological and moral constructs affected by physical contact.

Children need guidance to reflect critically on their surroundings, and to comprehend how their understanding

of values fit within the whole system of family, peers and the global picture as presented by the media. Schools are the educational institutions that exist to pass information and skills from one generation to another. Nevertheless, the school community should be guided to empower students to interact with society critically, reflect on their actions and enhance their interactions, rather than simply convey information and reproduce society (Tzanakis 2011).

Schools as Institutions That Help in Values and Character Formation

Social values relate to those principles and beliefs that influence the quality of interpersonal relationships" (Taguma *et al.* 2018: 3). Schools help pupils to understand and examine social interactions; in so doing, they transmit values (Hopman *et al.* 2014) and provide a platform from where one can explore and test social values. Schools support and direct a core set of emotional competencies and ethical dispositions that are the foundations of character (Cohen *et al.* 2009). These core emotional and ethical dispositions ultimately direct the values hierarchy of the individual.

Adults in schools help the child to reinforce virtues and discover latent skills. Schools thus have a significant role in the character and moral development of children (Çubukçu 2012). These institutions help individuals to acquire basic human values and transform them into the desired behaviour (Cohen *et al.* 2009). All activity happening within schools, including adhering to policies, the teaching of the curriculum, and the instruction process, play a role in character education. The attitudes of adults and interaction with peers further reinforce character development.

Character education is a systematic approach that helps students improve their moral judgment and thinking. It instils basic values such as courage, loyalty, respect for others and self, honesty, responsibility and kindness; these values form the basis of every healthy relationship (Lickona 1996).

Character development does not happen in isolation, but within a social context (Smetana *et al.* 2013). It links the moral domain

with the conventional practices of society (Nucci *et al.* 2015). Nucci *et al.* (2015) propose that teaching should not be solely based on didactic instruction but rather on discussions and hands-on activities as these will facilitate social interaction, which in turn will create opportunities for teachers to make an input on a moral level.

Moreover, instruction should also present complex tasks and dilemmas where students would have to engage in higher-order thinking. These tasks help individuals to move beyond their concept of self by integrating the ideas of others while understanding their needs. Such activities also increase the socio-emotional capacity (Nucci 2019) of the individuals.

At its core, character is about moral choices (Nucci 2019). However, while traditionally character was defined in terms of manifested virtues (Carr 2008), it is challenging to limit the definition of character to the individual's exercise of virtues (Nucci 2019). Different cultures have different definitions of virtues, and the context determines whether one exercises a particular virtue or not (Nucci and Turiel 2009).

When analysing character development, although at times inconsistent, it becomes evident that decisions are rather coherent when applied to typical situations (Nucci 2019). One can thus interpret the character as acting in a sensible manner rather than a consistent way (Nucci 2019). It becomes the application of a particular virtue in context through "practical expertise" (Annas 2011). During childhood and older ages, typical patterns can be observed in moral decision-making; however, during early adolescence, decisions might be atypical (Nucci 2019). Peer pressure comes into play during this age range, affecting a young person's actions.

Thus, when focusing on character development one should focus on coherence, not consistency, across contexts (Lerner and Callina 2014). Character development is the process where one becomes aware of one's surroundings and develops into a moral agent (Berkowitz 2012). One learns to calculate how one's actions affect others (Killen 2007).

Schools are the communities that can allow for this development to happen under the guidance of caring adults; the social interactions that happen at school on a micro-level mimic society. Thus, these social interactions can be considered as training grounds that train individuals on the moral aspects that are valued by society. Schools could be those institutions that offer a safe environment where students can critically reflect on how their actions are affecting others. Indeed, if provided with the right conditions at school, students might be helped to reflect on what they learn on a didactic level and extend it to the moral level by understanding how their knowledge might affect others.

Schools as Normative Institutions

To help every individual flourish and discover one's potential, the school community should be responsive and sensitive to the culture surrounding it. It is the analysis of culture that helps schools to provide the best instructional needs for students (Gay 2018). Teaching should consider the socio-cultural background of the students, as this will help teachers to be responsive to the actual needs of every individual.

Keeping in mind that teachers have a crucial influence on character formation, Thornberg (2016) stresses the need for reflective practice when teaching values. Teaching should be adjusted so that every student feels welcome (Brokamp 2017) and empowered. Being attentive to the child's needs requires that the school educates the child as a whole and directs the teaching to the particular needs of the child. Teachers should thus reflect on the prescribed curriculum and understand how they can integrate this curriculum to respond to the needs of students.

Being student-centred allows for more effective teaching and a decrease in behavioural issues. Taking this student-centred approach motivates the students to learn and helps them to analyse their surroundings critically. Schools that adopt this approach provide a suitable platform from where holistic education can take place.

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"Holistic pedagogy concerns the development of the whole student and acknowledges the cognitive, social, moral, emotional and spiritual dimensions of education" (Tirri 2011). This pedagogy is not limited to the prescribed curriculum as dictated by syllabi. Moreover, nor is it limited to the confines of the classroom and it helps them engage better with their surrounding cultures.

Schools that embark on values education programmes devise their curricula to help students acquire a set of values which they deem important for the given society, which values in turn help students to evaluate their daily actions within their community. Values and character education thus strive to form students into people who can positively contribute to society.

School curricula have the task of forming and mediating the desired values in their students (Duman 2014). Although values could be topics of particular lessons within values and character education, pupils will pick these up through the interaction between other individuals. Most of the students' school life is in the classroom. Thus, the relationship with the teachers, the teaching style and the demography of the class plays a vital role in how the students experience school life.

The teacher can lead students to formulate their perception of success by capturing the motivational factors that influence behaviour, which in turn inspire students to pursue and achieve in educational activities (Abazaoğlu and Aztekin 2016). Consequently, teachers become agents who provide students with opportunities for problem–solving and decision–making, helping them to foster positive interpersonal skills (Cannon *et al.* 2016; Dovigo 2017).

Schools should make extra efforts to include every individual within the community. They should help in the adjustment of individuals whose cultural baggage has provided them with a different set of norms. Every individual has differences in one's baggage; it is this training that will help the individual to make the right decisions at the right moment (Cannon *et al.* 2016). Teachers should offer choices to children. These choices help students integrate virtuous decisions within their character (Çubukçu 2012).

Teachers who adopt the holistic pedagogical style teach for life and not for the exam, and instil a sense of responsibility in pupils to recognise learning as a tool that helps them become sensitive to their surroundings. This sensitivity opens students to become more self-aware and more emphatic to the needs of others and creates a safe environment where pupils could bond. Thus, schools will be catering for the primordial need of human beings by creating places of belonging where students can bloom (Riley *et al.* 2018).

The relationships which students form with peers and teachers provide different lenses through which the individual interprets school. Most of the students' school life is played out in the classroom. The students' experience of the school culture affects their behaviour and emotions (Roeser *et al.* 2000) and impacts learning. Consequently, teachers become agents who can control the environment where effective learning takes place, and the character can be trained while moral values are fostered.

Being drawn to positive values and integrating them creates what Cameron (2011) calls a heliotropic effect – a positive aura that generates a positive feedback loop which attracts the individual towards more positive attitudes. This positive culture helps students to become more socially connected and enhances self-esteem (Loukas *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, it helps students to work harder, be more disciplined and more self-reliant (Cannon *et al.* 2016). Moreover, as stated by Kuperminc *et al.* (2001), a positive culture buffers individuals from the adverse effects of damaging situations happening within or outside the school, and as affirmed by Burton *et al.* (2004), helps them to become more emotionally stable.

The ancient concept of *mimesis* proposes behavioural, psychological, cognitive and intrapersonal imitation that helps the individual to become a good person (Tsouna 2013). However, while schools are vital entities that develop values (Çubukçu 2012), and the adults present at a school play an indispensable role in values education as they are models and mentors (Arthur 2011), the teaching of values should not only be limited to the confines of the school. All stakeholders should work together and strive to form students into people who can

positively contribute to society. All stakeholders should thus be actively involved in teaching the values that the society and the school community deem as necessary. Society should thus support the narrative that sustains moral values.

One manifests one's values hierarchy through daily activities, and thus their development is difficult to measure (Sosik and Cameron 2010). Values and character development happen over an extended period and require constant feedback. Moreover, when providing feedback, one should be attentive to one's natural bias and subjectivity toward specific values or character traits (Cannon *et al.* 2016). The feedback needs to be the result of careful observation and coaching.

The following section will outline the methodology of this small-scale study. It will be followed by a discussion of the findings. Suggestions that can guide policymakers will then be put forward.

Nature of the Research

Through research, one tries to understand reality. The methodology used depends on the ontological and epistemological stances which one takes to interpret reality. Case study methodology helps to analyse complex issues happening within a confined system (Ary *et al.* 2018). This study employed an intrinsic case study approach (Stake 1995) to understand how this particular school develops values. Intrinsic case studies focus on the particularities of the case (Grandy 2012); this limits the generalisation of the study beyond its specificity. However, a single case can permit analysis of theoretical propositions based on real-world discovery; it can provide alternative links to a theoretical framework, and clarify unclear theoretical relationships (Fletcher and Plakoyiannaki 2012). The specific dynamics can never be repeated (Vicsek 2010).

Nevertheless, Thomas (2010) argues that a case study would represent the characteristics of the general population. One could deduce inferences from case studies if the case and its context are richly described (Simons 2015). Moreover, the

theoretical framework which directs this study might also influence another study.

Interpreting the Case

The study tried "to understand individual and shared social meanings" (Crowe *et al.* 2011: 4) through an interpretative approach. One cannot describe something without adding an interpretation to it (Pringle *et al.* 2011); knowledge is shaped by the psychological, cultural, biological sensitivities and limitations of the researcher; thus, true objectivity is impossible (deRoche and deRoche 2012b). Begoray and Banister (2012) suggest that researchers must have an ongoing critique and critical reflection of their biases and how these influence every process of the research. These ensure that the study takes into account the participants' and the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014).

Focus Groups

Four focus groups were held with students aged 11–15 since this is a stage when students become more independent and where peer pressure plays a significant role. Moreover, they are mature enough to understand the concept under study. A representative sample was asked to participate in the study; those who were willing to participate were invited for a focus group. Although there were different ethnicities, the sample included Maltese boys mostly coming from middle-class families. The parents have good educational standing and can support their children in academia, even if this is limited to following their children's progress and seeking the support of the school when needed. The students had quite a stable level of care, their parents being very supportive. These particularities might skew the results to the positive when speaking about character and values education.

Since the students were under the age of consent, parents/guardians had to sign a consent form in the name of their children to participate in the study. At the start of each focus group the rationale of the study was explained, we discussed safety during the discussion, allowing others to speak and creating an atmosphere of mutual trust. To further reassure

the participants, it was made clear that their identity would be kept anonymous. The participants were once again thanked for choosing to be collaborators in this study.

The opening question was then put forward for discussion. Semi-structured interviews were carried, and although questions were prepared, rather than being led by the written questions, the general discussion that emerged during the focus group led the way. Nevertheless, during the focus group session, reference was made to the questions so that all areas would be addressed. Students were asked to provide their perceptions on how the school prepares them for life. We also discussed what values they think that the school has taught them and whether this complements what they had learnt from the family, society and the media. Another part of the discussion revolved around how the school experience affects their character and values development and their contribution towards the school community. Throughout the discussion, students were asked to provide concrete examples without mentioning individuals.

Focus groups help to provide rich and detailed data (Carey and Asbury 2016) about the issue under investigation without being too interfering on the personal level. The group context can help individuals who would otherwise be too shy to participate, to narrate their own story. Robson and McCartan (2016) indicate that participants are empowered to make comments in their own words while the group itself helps to provide the necessary checks and balances so that extreme views are weeded out. In this light, focus groups help to generate data that explain how social norms and processes are interpreted within the group (Parker and Tritter 2006). One drawback is distinguishing between the different participant voices. A dominant individual could take over the conversation, limiting the input of others within the group (Carey and Asbury 2016). Care should thus be taken so that all participants' opinions are heard and given due weight.

At the end of every focus group, students were given instruction that should they need to add anything to the focus group contribution, even if anonymous, they can do so by writing their comment and posting it in an indicated letterbox away

from the researcher's office. This offer provided further safety for students who felt shy during the focus group and evened out possible peer pressure that might have existed during the focus group.

Table 1: Methods of data collection

Who	Method and mode of data collection	Participant Population
Year 7-8 students (age 11-13)	Focus Group - narrative	Two groups of 6
Year 9-10 students (age 13-15)	Focus Group - narrative	Two groups of 6

Analysis of Data

All collected data was qualitative and thematically analysed using NVIVO. This thematic approach linked back to literature and led to a clearer understanding of what was being researched.

While analysing data, both analytical codes, which give more meaning to the particular group, and also axial coding, which illustrated the phenomenon being described, were used (Cohen *et al.* 2018). These codes allowed for the creation of themes and hyper–themes, and also allowed for different themes to be linked together to arrive at more definite conclusions.

Ethical Issues

Power denotes an asymmetry of relationship and may manifest itself in various spheres of the community. While acknowledging the researcher's position, for this study participants were considered as collaborators in a bid to instil an atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding (Demirdirek 2012). It was also assured that the voices of all participants in the research were well represented. The representation of all voices allowed for a better understanding of the participants' perspective rather than imposing the researcher's biases and perceptions on their thoughts.

A letter explaining the purpose and use of the research was given to all participants invited for this study (BERA 2018). This letter explained the issues of anonymity, confidentiality and withdrawal. Thus, participants gave their informed assent, through the letter signed by their parents/guardians. Students needed the approval of an authorised third party (deRoche and deRoche 2012a). To protect the identity of the participants, they were referred to collectively as – student 1 (S1), student 2 (S2), etc. (Busher and James 2009). All data was securely stored according to the Data Protection Regulations.

Findings

Safety and belonging are two of the basic needs of individuals to function well. It is thus of utmost importance that pupils feel safe at school. According to Riley (2018), this safety results in better bonding between individuals. Participating pupils saw the school as their second home, showing that it provides the safety which one associates with home. Feeling safe and being present in a caring environment helps pupils see themselves and others positively and reduce misbehaviour.

A caring environment helps to nurture values. Hitlin and Piliavin (2004) see values as ideal attitudes and guiding mechanisms. The pupils perceived teachers as friendly and caring; this helped to boost their self-esteem (Schaps and Battistich 2002). They commented that teachers would tackle a problem to the end, until it is solved, even when problems were initiated online. The fact that teachers' care affected the pupil's confidence and trust in significant adults. Trust reduced competition in favour of cooperation and mutual respect. In fact, Berkowitz and Bier (2004) indicate that character is built through positive social relations.

Most students, when speaking about values which they acquired from home, indicated that there is a continuation between home and school. They discussed that what is dear to them at home is even encouraged at school. In fact, they said that this helped them trust each other. The students also discussed their rapport with other ethnicities and beliefs, values such as respect, a sense of communion, honesty, mutual help and appreciation for all transpired from the discussion.

They presented a positive vibe and hope; they also alluded to the fact that through online media, they interact with friends beyond the boundaries of the island. One can state that these are the bases of a community which influence a positive outlook to life (MacKie 2017).

Students also indicated that teachers help them to achieve more. The emphasis on achievement was made more explicit from the youngest focus group. They perceived achievement as a means to better themselves; the older pupils linked achievement to their future aspirations. Schools are seen as a means to pass on skills to the pupils. It transpired that the pupils appreciated enquiry-based, hands-on teaching. When discussing science, pupils indicated that they learned to be more inquisitive.

An interesting contrast between year groups was seen through the discussion on discipline. As pupils progressed through the years, discipline was seen more as a mutual agreement rather than obeying rules. Older pupils commented that 'when you break school rules, the authorities help you to see what was wrong so that next time around it will not be repeated' (S13).

While discussing the effect of the social media on their outlook of life and how this affected their understanding of character and values, although students stressed the importance of face-to-face interaction, they did not distinguish how the media affects them personally. The discussion then revolved around the virtual friend groups, their country of origin and their beliefs. Students then realised that their interaction with these virtual friends shapes how they interact with their family and at school.

Through the focus group discussions, it transpired that the school leadership is not perceived as aloof but reachable. Pupils indicated that leaders take personal care of them and appreciated that leaders come down to their level. They also acknowledged that through the leader's knowledge of the institution, one would influence and shape the culture. Their acknowledgement calls for a style of leadership which is more in touch with the people, and a move from management to leadership (Cauchi Cuschieri 2007).

Conclusion

This paper contended that values and character formation involve family, peers, schools, society at large and the media. The surrounding social environment, educational intuitions – such schools and other extra-curricular activity centres, as well as the home setting, all offer experiences where one can exercise, develop and integrate values and virtues that form one's character.

The students who participated in the interview confirmed that values and character are built through different sources. Even though at the school where the research was carried, there is a limited ethnic representation, still aspects of tolerance and inclusion were discussed. These aspects emanated even in the group dynamics during the focus group. It transpired that at the school, there is a culture that supports inclusion and tolerance. These statements confirmed that the development of values and character is sustained by a narrative that transcends groups of belonging. A positive school culture sustains the language of values and helps the students to integrate them into their daily decisions and actions. This integration helps them to be more sensitive to the needs of others irrespective of culture or creed.

Education is a powerful tool to develop future generations; thus, when planning educational reforms and policies, educational leaders should consider the whole network that affects the development of children. It is useless to focus on the curricular or the pedagogical aspect while bypassing the effect of the family, peers and the media. Holistic educational reforms should see that the family is supported to the extent that they are empowered to support the developing child. The socio-economic background of the family should be backed by more incentives that allow for genuine support of children. A holistic view of education calls for the supporting of a culture which sustains the narrative of tolerance and respect for all. Educational campaigns should not disregard the power of the media in transforming the thoughts and the values system of children and society at large. Consequently, media education should empower critical thinking that sustains a narrative which supports the formation of character and value. It is

within this culture that schools can effectively provide a holistic education that develops a moral child.

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