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From Virtue to Grit: Changes in Character Education Narratives in the U.S. from 1985 to 2016

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Abstract

How did narratives about character education in the United States change between 1985 and 2016 and what does this reveal about the changing meaning of character over this time period? Policymakers and pundits have frequently invoked ideas of "good" versus "bad" character as they attempt to blame individuals for their own circumstances. It makes sense to trace these narratives in their various forms, beginning with the discourse around character and children. Character education programs are a natural object to study in order to capture these narratives. Despite this, sociologists have largely ignored character education, which leaves a significant gap in the scholarly knowledge about both character education and the social construction of designations of "good" versus "bad" character more generally. In this paper, I address this gap by examining the narratives around character education between 1985 and 2016. After analyzing 600 articles from *Education Week* and the *New York Times* mentioning character education, I find that there is a significant expansion of the ways in which advocates argue for character education in the schools. Whereas earlier narratives encouraged character education as a means to teach students how to be good, moral people starting in the early 2000s, these narratives expanded to include teaching character as a means to improve academic performance. This finding is significant as we continue to see both education reformers pushing for character education as a tactic to improve achievements and policymakers and pundits invoking character flaws as a means to blame individuals for structural inequality.

Keywords Education · Character · Morality · Narratives · Content analysis

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Introduction

Policymakers and pundits have long relied on implications about "good" versus "bad" character to prop up ideas about who should be to blame for society's ills. Character is, in addition, embedded in a major educational phenomenon: character education. Ideas around character, such as teaching students to have grit, have become very popular again in recent years. Despite the centrality of this idea to American culture, the persistence of character education[1] in American public schools, and the wealth of research on character education in other disciplines, sociologists have not produced much research on this subject.[2] This is an important task to continue for two reasons. First, sociological perspectives should be included in the study of any major educational practice in order to include broader analyses of its social implications. Second, educational institutions are places of moral and ideological debate, so it follows that tracking the discourse around character education would provide insight into the construction of ideas about character (Dierkes 2012; Hunter 2000; Lachmann and Mitchell 2014; Meyer 2010). Studying character education can answer sociological questions about the social construction of "good" versus "bad" character – for example, how exactly is the meaning of character constructed?

I address this larger subject area by asking and answering the following questions: How did narratives about character education in the United States change between 1985 and 2016? What does this reveal about the changing meaning of character over this time period? In order to answer these questions, I analyze 600 articles from *Education Week* and the *New York Times* written between 1985 and 2016. Character education is not a central academic skill like math or reading, so its proponents must offer convincing justifications as they adjudicate whether or not it belongs in public schools. By capitalizing on the narratives of their argumentation, I track the ways in which the goals of and reasons for character education changed over time. In the end, I find that while in the late 1980s and 1990s narratives around character education focused on virtue and behavior management, in the 2000s, this broadened to include narratives focused on academic achievement.

This shift toward a focus on academic achievement is unsurprising given the general shift in American education toward an increased focus on measurable outcomes after the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which was enacted in 2002, right before this aforementioned shift. While I do not make a causal argument here, NCLB had documented effects on other types of school programming overall (Ravitch 2010), and also in nonacademic subjects like the arts and music (Beveridge 2010; Spohn 2010). This was a major policy change impacting most aspects of the education world, so it is unsurprising that it would spark a change in character education discourse. However, less attention has been paid to how the increased focus on academic achievement may or may not have played a role in changing mobilizations of the idea of character. The potential consequences are significant and important to consider (Biesta 2009; Granger 2008). A disproportionate number of students with markers of academic failure are low-income or students of color, and so argumentation for character education implying that

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[1] Character education is defined here as any curriculum designed with the primary goal of teaching a desired set of values or attributes meant to support students' social, emotional, or ethical development. It is related to but different from civics education, which is curriculum designed to teach about political participation; social justice education programs, which are designed to advocate for specific political issues like environmentalism; or anti-drug programs, which are designed to explicitly teach about the dangers of drug and alcohol use.
[2] With some notable exceptions, such as Durkheim (1925), Hunter (2000), Brint et al. (2001), which will be discussed later in the paper.

students who fail academically have some sort of character flaw has both racist and classist implications. Given these potential consequences, it is especially important for scholars to attend to the discourse surrounding character education in schools.

Literature Review

Character Education

Character education has been a major educational phenomenon in the United States since the days of the Puritans, and as such has been a major area of research for historians, economists, psychologists, and education scholars. Historians have examined trends in character education over time, including Edward McClellan who outlines the progression of character education in the United States through the 1990s and Leming who writes a historical take on best practices in character education (Leming 1997; McClellen 1999). Character education has played a role in US education since the time of the Puritans, reflecting and reinforcing Protestant values. While it certainly has come in and out of fashion, the idea that children need to be given a moral education in order to become upstanding citizens has been long lasting. Throughout the nineteenth century, efforts toward character education mainly focused on assimilating and homogenizing a growing immigrant population by teaching "a common moral code" (McClellen 1999, 23). In this sense, it was a deeply racialized practice, attempting to assimilate new Americans not perceived as white into the dominant culture. Character education fell out of fashion for a time around World War II and was revived in part in the 1960s. Then, in the 1980s, old fashioned character education programs reflecting Protestant values had a major renaissance, which has lasted up until today (McClellen 1999). This resurgence was concurrent with the Self-Esteem Movement, but they are not one and the same. While self-esteem advocates were concerned with children's self-concept, character education advocates were and are concerned with external presentations of values or traits (Humphrey 2004; Swann et al. 2007). In this project, I add to this historical understanding of character education by tracing the most recent fluctuations in discourse on the subject.

In addition, educational scholars have analyzed the efficacy of character education programs (Berghammer 2010; Shapiro 2015; Svirbel 2008), and considered unconventional methods of teaching character, such as using sports (Naylor and Yeager 2013) or animals (Arkow 2006). Economists have researched the impact of "noncognitive" skills on success later in life (Heckman et al. 2006).[3] There was a boom in academic literature analyzing the effectiveness character education programs in the eighties and nineties, and a new journal on the subject (*Journal of Character Education*) in the early twenty-first century. Scholars like Thomas Lickona, Kevin Ryan, William Kilpatrick, and Marvin Berkowitz put forth work emphasizing the social, philosophical, and ethical importance of teaching character in school (Berkowitz and Oser 1985; Kilpatrick 1993; Lickona 1992; Ryan 1988). These scholars, among others, continue their work in character education to this day, running some of the most influential character education institutions in the country.[4] Their work has also changed

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[3] Despite the difference in name, "noncognitive skills" still denote the same approximate set of nonacademic traits or attributes that fall under the banner of character education earlier on (Heckman et al. 2006).

[4] These include: the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs, The Center for Character and Social Responsibility (formerly the Center for Advancement of Ethics and Character), The Center for Character and Citizenship

in sync with the larger change in narratives I find in the *Education Week* and *New York Times (NYT)* articles. They have released new editions of their books, expanded their organizations' mission statements, and produced new scholarship attesting to the connection between character education and achievement (e.g. Lickona 2004, 2005).

This newer work dovetails with some of the more influential scholarship in personality psychology, which investigates the connection between personality traits, academic motivation, and academic success. Within the personality psychology literature, there is an understanding that people's personalities consist of a "big five" of traits: conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, neuroticism, and agreeableness. Conscientiousness includes things like self-control and grit, both of which fall under the purview of character education in many schools (Duckworth et al. 2019; Park et al. 2016). While some psychologists talk about these personality traits without labeling them "character traits" or even mentioning character or other morally charged descriptors (i.e. Duckworth et al. 2019), others do overtly make the connection between the conscientiousness arm of the Big Five personality traits and character (Park et al. 2016). Park connects different aspects of character to openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. While he cites different breakdowns of character, including Lickona's idea of performance character versus moral character and Piazza's idea of "value commitment versus core goodness," there is no discussion of character that can claim to truly shed its moral implications (Park et al. 2016).

While psychologists focus mainly on specific interventions, sociologists and education scholars can investigate the meaning behind the push for these programs. Rather than attempt to draw a boundary between morality and "performance character," sociologists can delve into this blurriness to discover cultural implications of such narratives. Some education scholars have started to push back against this new trend in character education research. Rose (2013, 2014), for example, notes that creating a cognitive versus noncognitive binary will further disadvantage already disadvantaged students, and that blaming low-income students' character for their academic difficulties is a distraction which can prevent meaningful policymaking. Kirchgasler (2018) and Ris (2015) each consider the concept of "grit," specifically, both in the present day and historically. They echo Rose's concerns about the consequences of such an individualist look at problems in education. This present analysis extends their scholarship by considering the historical discourses around the practice of character education overall.

Sociologists, on the other hand, have discussed the moral lessons learned in school as a part of the hidden curriculum (Dreeben 1968; Giroux 1978) or socialization efforts (Brint et al. 2001; Golann 2015; Guhin 2016). James Davison Hunter looks at whether or not character education programs are effective in changing student attitudes and classroom experiences, and argues that the plurality of moral beliefs existing in society in the new millennium prevent cohesive character education efforts from being successful (Hunter 2000). Education scholars Smagorinsky and Taxel (2005) attend to discourse around character education at one particular moment in history. They analyze proposals to the U.S. Office of Educational Research and Improvement, which was funding character education initiatives, as well as relevant op-eds and political speeches. These documents capture discourse around character education at one moment in time – the early 2000s – in two distinct regions: the deep south and the Midwest. By focusing on one moment in history, they are able to take a deep dive into understanding the multiple complex discourses various educational stakeholders engage in when proposing character education programs. Hunter (2000) looks at change over time leading up to 2000, and Smagorinsky and Taxel (2005) zero in on one specific moment in history. This current work extends their research by evaluating changes in character education discourses over time from 1985 to 2016.

The Social Construction of Character

Beginning with the Moynihan report in 1965, sociologists have long examined the relationship between character, morality, and failure. Moynihan argued for a connection between the culture in Black families and higher rates of poverty and violence (Moynihan 1965). In the 55 years since this report, sociologists have repeatedly and convincingly refuted this claim (e.g. Fischer et al. 1996; Small et al. 2010). Despite this, the idea that Black people and other people of color have character flaws that lead to higher rates of poverty has persisted. It is used as a political talking point to blame individuals for their own dire circumstances (Spencer-Wood and Matthews 2016). Specifically, politicians and pundits have marshaled this idea to turn white and wealthy people against welfare policies. They do so by promoting cultural stereotypes like the idea of the "welfare queen" and "deadbeat dad" which seek to demonize Black women and men, and thereby make them seem undeserving of state support (Cassiman 2008; Davis 2018; Hancock 2004; Mink 1998). To this end, scholars have also noted that programs related to welfare emphasize character training to make participants seem more responsible and therefore worthy of jobs, buying into the notion of "deserving" versus "undeserving" poor (Katz 2013; Purser and Hennigan 2017). It is clear from these examples that discourse around character is, in American society, always morally charged. Despite this considerable amount of scholarship considering and refuting the moral dimensions of poverty and assistance, there is less scholarship that attends to designations of good and bad character earlier in life. If, as some have argued, Black students are labeled as having poor character and are thereby blamed for any academic struggles, this begins the pattern we see play out later on in these policy debates (Love 2019; Perry 2016). As noted above, some education scholars have made the connection between these logics and character education, warning about potential consequences resulting in linking performance with morality (Kirchgasler 2018; Ris 2015; Rose 2013, 2014).

Studying character education is important for sociologists because education discourse can provide insight into the construction of ideas about character. Discourse about schooling often becomes ideological, political, and moral, because visions of schooling reflect our visions of a future society – the curricular priorities stakeholders argue for demonstrate the qualities they desire in future adult citizens. In this sense, the *content* of character education programs is less sociologically important than the *justification* narratives stakeholders offer for why teaching character is important. Scholars have explained that education is an arena in which all different political, economic, and cultural groups come together to "define what the socially legitimate means and ends of a society are to be" and that people "educationalize" social problems because schools are "an institution through which we can express our social goals" (Apple 1999, 67; Labaree 2008,154). Given this, it follows that justifications for teaching character can be seen as an expression of social goals. Vergari (2000) similarly argues that moral debates, which she terms "morality politics," come into play in public schools because schools play such a dominant role in society. Hunter argues that the particular confluence of morality, "educationalizing" social problems, and character education provides unique insight into understanding changing "moral culture" in society. In this current study I do not seek to make essentialist claims about America's changing "moral culture," but rather marshal the ways in which narratives about character in schools engage with moral justifications and arguments and thereby demonstrate changes in understandings of character over time.

Previous studies have also determined that changes in educational trends over time often reflect larger cultural and political changes in society. Some of these studies have considered changes in history curricula as a means to understand the relationship between political

structure and the framing of history (Dierkes 2012; Lachmann and Mitchell 2014). Others have used textbooks as a site of global comparison in order to investigate whether or not global curricula are isomorphic or more disparate in terms of how they address human rights, social science, and environmentalism (Lerch et al. 2017; Meyer 2010). These scholars demonstrate the utility of using changes in education as a proxy for changes in society overall. Given this, examining educational institutions, such as *Education Week* or the education section of the *New York Times*, is particularly useful for understanding changing discourse or, as Vergari says, "morality politics" around ideas of character (Vergari 2000). One way to examine these institutions is to analyze the discourse they engage in. Specifically, in this paper, I examine the narratives about character education put forth in these publications. Analyzing the *stories* within these texts provides insight into potential changes in that projected vision of the future citizenry that comes up in discussions about schooling (Polletta 2009). The stories in the articles about character education are fairly simple: they present a problem and a solution. I find that while the *problems* change over time, the *solution* remains the same: teaching character in school. In the end, I am left with data that demonstrates changes in concerns about character over time, which, in turn can illuminate changes in our conceptions of "good" versus "bad" character over time.

Changes in Education System

An additional impetus for an analysis of these particular years is that research shows that there has in fact been a major change in educational trends during this time span. David Labaree (1997) argues that three educational goals have come in and out of focus in the United States over the years: democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. Social mobility, he argues, has overtaken the other two in recent years, leading to an increased focus on measurable education outcomes and standardized testing. His prescient analysis anticipated a shift even further toward social mobility—after the No Child Left Behind Act passed, schools became even more intent upon focusing on individual achievement.

Many other education scholars confirm his argument, noting both the effects of an individualistic mindset (Demaranth 2009) and the general shift in education toward increased standardization and measurement (Biesta 2009; Granger 2008). Scholars have noted that an increased focus on individual success and social mobility creates an environment in which academic failure is seen as the individual student's fault (Apple 2004). In addition, research shows that these achievement-focused models that sometimes produce higher test scores can, in fact, have negative consequences on students' self-concept and ability to think critically (Golann 2015). These models can also lead to communication problems between teachers and students, which could lead to further issues in the classroom (Carter 2003). This shift toward social mobility showcases a move between two classic American values—democratic equality and individualism. The consequences of this shift toward social mobility and individualism within the realm of education are important for scholars to map, and this paper adds to this mapping by tackling the character education area.

Methods

In order to properly investigate both the change in the discourse around character education in the United States and the implications of this change, this paper analyzes 600 articles: 477

from *Education Week* and 123 from the *NYT*. *Education Week* is a periodical published for various people involved in education, including academics, parents, teachers, and other school officials. It was founded in 1981 by the group Editorial Projects in Education and has the following official mission: "raising the level of understanding and discourse on critical issues in American education" (Education Week Website, N.d.). It receives funding from 13 different foundations that span the political spectrum, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation. The publication combines both online and in print materials—while it used to be a weekly print periodical, now it has a robust online presence, including many blogs. In order to calibrate the findings from the 477 *Education Week* articles, I also include analysis of 123 articles from the *NYT*. The *NYT* is a newspaper of record for the United States and represents a broader readership and authorship than the education-focused *Education Week*.

The *Education Week* articles were downloaded from their website, which maintains a comprehensive online archive. The *New York Times* articles were downloaded from Proquest, which also consists of a comprehensive online archive of published articles. Articles were selected for inclusion in the analysis with the following search terms: "character education," "moral education," and "noncognitive skills." This range of search terms represents both the broadest discourse ("character education") and then more specific elements of this discourse ("moral education" and "noncognitive skills"). Despite the fact that "social emotional learning (SEL)" has also grown in popularity in the last decade or so, this was not included as a search term because, while in some articles, SEL refers to character education, and in other cases SEL refers to psychological *skills* that are distinct from character education. The articles in which SEL is invoked as a kind of character education are automatically included within the three search terms already in use. Using these three search terms, 739 articles were downloaded and read. Articles that came up in these searches due to mentions in sidebars, spam comments, or related topics that did not actually mention character education were discarded. After discarding these articles, the sample consisted of 600 articles. There tended to be more articles in the later years of the sample, due to the fact that *Education Week's* online operations became robust and included many additional venues for publication, like blog posts. Table 1 illustrates the breakdown of articles per year.

These 600 articles, which span multiple newspaper categories (as represented in Table 2 below), were content analyzed using an inductive coding strategy determined by the author. Each article was read four times, at minimum. During the first reading, year, author type, and broader ideas were inductively coded. After this first round, I generated several analytic memos, through which I found that, because character education is not always a curricular requirement in schools, more than half of the articles in the sample include a narrative justification articulating why this curriculum is important. A subsequent analytic memo allowed me to consolidate these narrative justifications into three main codes: virtue narrative, behavior narrative, and achievement narrative. The second reading was used to recode the articles into these three categories, as well as to determine how many of the 600 articles had justification narratives. I found that 387 of the 600 articles had these justification narratives. The articles without justification narratives remained in the sample, providing important political and historical context. The third round of coding was used to confirm and fine-tune the codes, and the fourth round of coding was completed to code for specific article type and check the codes an additional time.

These 600 articles include 228 news stories, 162 feature stories, 177 opinion pieces, and 33 pedagogical research analyses. The 387 articles with justification narratives include 113 news

Table 1 Articles Per Year ($N = 600$)

Year	Number of Articles
1985	2
1986	0
1987	7
1988	9
1989	6
1990	3
1991	6
1992	9
1993	7
1994	12
1995	35
1996	23
1997	22
1998	14
1999	28
2000	41
2001	46
2002	30
2003	33
2004	21
2005	16
2006	17
2007	22
2008	14
2009	20
2010	13
2011	19
2012	26
2013	31
2014	22
2015	26
2016	20

stories, 122 feature stories, 128 opinion stories, and 24 research analyses. News stories included reports on policy changes, political events, or campaigns. Feature stories were about schools and schooling and were also written by reporters but were distinguished from news stories because they included an angle from the reporter, not simply facts. Opinion stories included both op-eds from academics, educators, reporters, and politicians as well as letters to the editor. Research analyses included stories sharing new academic research reports, often with an angle. All four of these categories of articles were included in the sample because together they make up the discourse around character education promulgated by the written media. The narrative justifications coded are, therefore, not always the author's – in news and research stories they are sometimes the narrative justifications of the politicians reported on, or scholars' work being summarized. While perhaps it might be cleaner to only include opinion pieces, by building in the narrative justifications expressed in these newspapers, whether through news, pedagogy, or opinion stories, I analyze the discourse existing among the constellation of actors who play an active role in determining the culture of schooling (see Table 2).

The coding strategy for these three justification narratives is as follows, and is represented in Table 3 (below). First, articles were coded as "virtue narrative" if they included a justification for teaching character purely for the sake of instilling morality. These articles mentioned

Table 2 Article Types in Sample

Article Type	Total Number of Articles	Number with Justifications
News	231	113
Feature	162	122
Opinion	177	128
Research	33	24

one or more of the following words: moral, morality, Christian, and virtue. They encompass three central themes: a desire to return to teaching Christian values in school, a general call for schools to teach morality because it is tradition for schools to do so, and a call for schools to teach students values to produce good American citizens (this is distinct from civics education, in which programs are designed to teach students about the functions of the government in order to produce good citizens – the end goal might be similar in this case, but the programs themselves are different). Second, articles were coded as "behavior narrative" if they included a call to teach character education specifically to resolve immoral behaviors. These articles often discuss themes related to society's moral decay, and almost always propose that schools should fix the rampant immorality present in modern youth. Virtue narrative and behavior narrative are similar and did co-occur in 23 articles. They can be understood as a spectrum ranging from the former, which addresses morality for morality's sake, to the latter, which highlights a moral *problem* that character education should be used to solve. While they *could* be combined into one category, the distinction between the positive intentions of virtue narratives and negative context of behavior narratives are analytically important to keep separate. Third, articles were coded as "achievement narrative" if they included a call to teach character in order to improve academic performance in school or achievement later in life. Thematically, these articles discussed how character education could improve grades, test scores, college acceptance, college completion, future income level, and general ability to

Table 3 Explanation of Codes

|	*Virtue Narrative*	*Behavior Narrative*	*Achievement Narrative*
Words	Moral, morality, virtue, Christian, American	Moral crisis, ethical, behavior, discipline, bullying	Grades, scores, college completion, success
Themes	Older, more virtuous times, role of school in moral development, democracy	Moral decay in society, school's role in fixing this problem, scandal and crisis	These qualities are as important as academics, research-based connections between academics and success
Examples	"Schools should use character education to help students develop a 'moral compass.'" (Education Week 2000) "Building character is such a vital function of public education that it should permeate virtually every hour of every student's day... Lessons in honesty, responsibility, and other basic values should pervade even after-school activities" (Sommerfeld 1994)	"There are deeply disturbing signs of a moral crisis in our society and, therefore, schools ought to initiate or strengthen values education efforts." (Beane 1992) "The fundamental tragedy of American education today is not that we are turning out ignoramuses, but that we are turning out savages" (Close 1994, in a speech about character education programs)	"He called for more attention to character education and service-learning programs, saying they lead to improvements in student achievement." (Jacobsen 2007) "Many school administrators are realizing character education, once thought of as an intrusion on the school day, can actually help students perform better." (Adams 2013)

thrive as an adult. These articles co-occurred with the behavior narrative 11 times, with writers claiming that character education would help both behavior and academics. Additional thematic areas were also systematically coded. These included: political advocacy, funding, renewed interest in character education, and discussions of race and socioeconomic status.

While these 600 articles were the main source of data for this project, supplementary primary source materials were also examined to add depth and context to the analysis. First, state-level character education policies signed into law between 1985 and 2016 were analyzed and coded for the three justification narratives. Second, while there have been no federal character education laws, some *states* did enact character education policies between 1985 and 2016. These were downloaded from the Education Commission of the State's database and were coded for narrative justifications as well. There were 45 character education policies included in the database, 23 of which had narrative justifications. Seven of these were virtue narratives, 11 were behavior narratives, and eight were achievement narratives. Three included both virtue and behavior narratives. Third, there are federal-level grants that states and other entities can apply for to use to fund character education programs. The descriptions of these programs (which changed several times between 1985 and 2016) were considered. Finally, organizations, political speeches, politicians, and policies (signed or failed) mentioned in the 600 articles were researched and read about for additional political and historical context, though they were not systematically coded unless they were enacted state policies (listed above).

Using these methods, I have been able to examine the ways in which the various actors involved in the institution of schooling have discussed, justified, and argued over character education over this period of 31 years, including both those who published articles in *Education Week* and the *New York Times* as well as certain politicians and policy makers, academics, and organizational leaders who are cited in these articles. Studying how the discourse around this subject has developed in print media, within its historical and political contexts, allows for insight into the reasons these actors think character is important. These reasons then reflect cultural and educational priorities, which sheds light on how character education has changed.

Findings

After considering the narratives around character education between 1985 and 2016, I find that between 2003 and 2004, there is a significant change in the prevalent story about the need for character education. Whereas between 1985 and 2003, articles use virtue narratives, behavioral narratives, or a combination of the two, achievement narratives begin growing in popularity in 2003, and ultimately overtakes the other two by 2004 (see Fig. 1 below). While the state policies I coded were far fewer, they follow a similar pattern (see Fig. 2 below). In describing the substance of this change in the sections to follow, I illustrate the meaning behind this change and discuss what it reveals about broadening understandings of and expectations for character. People who argue for character education – either through op-eds or in reported-on political endeavors – are forced to clarify and articulate what they believe to be a particular problem with students that explicit character education can fix. Given this, looking at the arguments for teaching character provides a proxy for understanding changes in the meaning of character (see figures below).
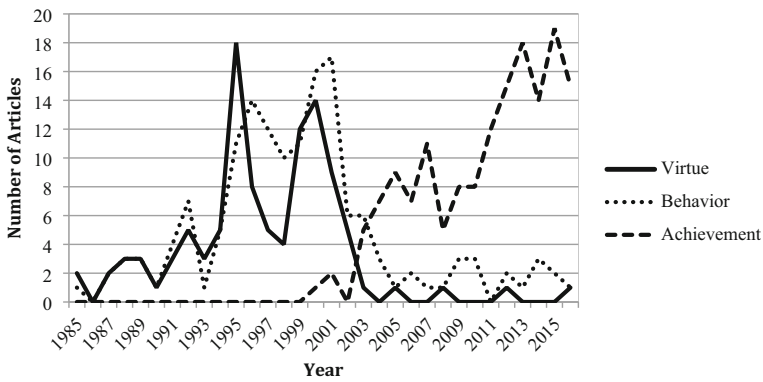
Fig. 1 Narratives about Character Education Programs in *Education Week* and the *New York Times* Between 1985 and 2016
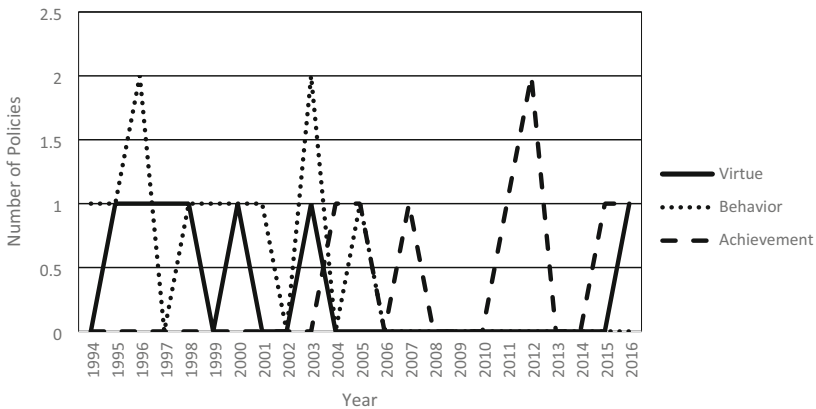
Fig. 2 State Character Education Policies with Narrative Justifications

Virtue Narrative

I define the virtue narrative as actors advocating for the importance of character education purely on the basis of communicating a set of values that would make the ascendant population more morally scrupulous – not to fix any particular problem, but just to add to society's moral well-being. Almost half (47%) of the articles that employ a justification between 1985 and 2003 use a virtue narrative, as opposed to only 2.8% of such articles between 2003 and 2016. For example, *Education Week* reporter Reagan Walker cites President George H.W. Bush's Secretary of Education, Lauro Cavazos, as stating that schools should teach virtue, meaning "justice, temperance, and courage" (Walker 1989). In order to be classified as a virtue narrative, character is not presented as serving any specific purpose or to solve any specific problem: it is presented as baseline important skill for students to learn.

Many of the articles that employ a virtue narrative make some reference to the history of Western civilization. For example, reporter Wynne explains, "In all other cultures, and for most of Western history, the formation of good character has been the principal goal of

education, in particular, and of youth upbringing in general" (Wynne 1985). These historical references are a nod back to earlier times when character education was seen as a simpler task—although it is clear by looking at the history of these programs that there was a fair amount of contention involved even then. Similarly, in an op-ed for *Education Week*, sociologist Amitai Etzioni argues, "We urgently need to find ways to encourage families to resume attending to their most elementary responsibility: laying the foundations for the moral upbringing of the next generation. To the extent that this is not achieved, by default schools must help discharge this duty" (Etzioni 1994). He, too, romanticizes an earlier time when families were believed to take on more responsibility for the moral education of their children. Some of these articles are more straightforward though, drawing on an implied historical reference in order to argue for the importance of character education programs, but not necessarily with the goal of achieving some specific result. Some, for example, make arguments such as this: "Schools have a very clear social mandate to teach civic and moral values" (Schmidt 1990).

The virtue narrative is reported on in both policy contexts and plainly cultural contexts—both of which are at times clearly linked to the concept of traditional values. In terms of broad political context, it is important to note that Reagan's Secretary of Education, William Bennett, was a major proponent of character education. He pushed policies requiring this curricular content during both his tenure in the job and after, even eventually publishing a children's book on the subject that includes a poem about perseverance that today's definition of grit certainly resonates with: "Tis a lesson you should heed, Try try again;/If at first you don't succeed,/Try, try again;/ Then your courage should appear,/For if you will persevere,/You will conquer, never fear;/Try, try again" (Bennett 1995, 9). This book links the political and cultural landscapes, demonstrating how the broader ideas in the political realm become part of culture and discourse.

In addition, on a more specific note, many states began writing character education policies into law during this time period. For example, *Education Week* reports on a 1994 bill in Florida that seeks to "teach children about the traditional values of self-restraint, obedience…sobriety, honesty, truthfulness, work ethic, financial self-support, reverence for the institution of marriage, preference that children be born within a loving marital relationship, chastity, fidelity…," calling this list of traits "the common moral duties and obligations necessary to insure and promote an orderly, lawful, moral, and civil society" (Education Week 1994). Virginia also enacted a bill in 1998 that "establishes the Commonwealth Character Initiative, a unit to provide resources and technical assistance to school divisions regarding successful character education programs and practices designated to promote the development of personal qualities" (Education Commission of the States (ECS) State Policy Database, N.d.). These are two of seven bills that employ a virtue narrative. Some, if not all, of these initiatives received federal funding to enact their programs, from a 1995–2001 program called the Partnerships in Character Education Program. This program funded character education initiatives that taught values such as "caring, civic virtue and citizenship, justice, fairness, respect, responsibility and trustworthiness" but did not mention any connection to academic achievement (State Pilot Projects 2012).

While this—the virtue narrative—was not the *only* narrative about the importance of teaching character, its tendency to cull up older, more homogeneous, Christian times in the United States and its focus on these so-called traditional, time-honored values is an important set of moral and cultural messages to note. In considering David Labaree's argument about the changing goals of schooling in the United States, this call to the past gathers even more importance: it is a signpost of education as

a means to democratic citizenship, a cohesive community with a consensus on important values, rather than purely a means for social mobility.

Behavior Narrative

Throughout the first time period from 1985 to 2003, another narrative occurred a bit more frequently than the virtue narrative: behavior narrative. These two narratives are similar as they each center around a concept of explicit morality. Given that they both operate from a similar definition of character education as a return to "proper" values, these two narratives can be seen as two sides of the same coin. However, they are distinct from each other in the following way: while virtue narratives exist when actors hoped that the outcome of character education programs would simply be virtuous citizens, behavioral narratives exist when these actors identify specific, immoral behavior problems and turn to character education as the solution to these problems. About 60% of articles with a justification between 1985 and 2003 employ a behavior narrative, compared to 16% of the articles between 2003 and 2016. In addition, 11 out of the 28 state policies signed into law over this time period mention some kind of behavior narrative (three mention virtue, and the other 14 are very simple and offer no reasoning or justifications in their statutes) (Education Commission of the States (ECS) State Policy Database, N.d.). For example, North Carolina's 1999 bill includes the following language: "[To teach students about] being in proper control of your words, actions, impulses, and desires, choosing abstinence from premarital sex, drugs, alcohol, and other harmful substance and behaviors; and doing your best in all situations" (Education Commission of the States (ECS) State Policy Database, N.d.). This is one of 11 policies enacted with behavior narratives. This narrative is also present in previous scholarship about character education. Smagorinsky and Taxel note in their book about character education in the early 2000s, "Many in the United States believe that the nation has entered the twenty-first century in a time of moral decline" (2005, 19). In fact, several of the discourses they discuss in their book, which was researched and written during this first time period, involve correcting problematic behavior.

In 1987, a reporter covering a White House conference notes that, "The spread of drug abuse, suicide, and other destructive behaviors among the young" are the primary reasons to support character education (Education Week 1987). In addition, a study published by the Josephson Ethics Institute (and thoroughly reported on by *Education Week*) in 1992 showed that teenagers had grown far more likely to lie, cheat, and steal than they ever were before, and quite a few articles cite this study as another reason why this kind of teaching is important. Another article from a conference in 1995 mentions that, "…social trends beg attention, too. Youth violence and adolescent suicide have risen dramatically in recent years. Drug use and teenage pregnancy remain serious problems" (Lawton 1997). Even more dramatically, a 1994 article states, "The fundamental tragedy of American education today is not that we are turning out ignoramuses, but that we are turning out savages" in reference to a spate of rising crime among the younger members of the population (Sommerfeld 1994). These problems are presented as evidence that America's youth has a serious problem with behavior and value systems, which is a social problem that indicates a failure to reach the educational goal of democratic citizenship. Students who are prepared to be good, contributing citizens do not "lie, cheat, or steal," do not do drugs, get pregnant young, or act in a violent manner. This is a moral crisis: schools are set up to teach students to be productive members of society, and they are failing.

A moral crisis warrants a moral solution, so it follows that concerned community members, teachers, parents, and policy makers would turn toward character education as a means for solving this problem—making this a popular subject for op-eds in both *Education Week* and the *New York*

Times. Not only are schools failing to reach the goal of democratic citizenship, they are also expected to correct for the problems that arise when this goal is not met (Labaree 2008). At that same 1987 White House conference, the assistant secretary of education, Chester Finn, Jr. is reported to have said that "there is a public hunger for schools to deal with morality" (Education Week 1987). This "public hunger" does not arise from a pure belief in the necessity of teaching virtues for their own sake—the desperation for moral education stems from the social problems in the form of immoral behavior that schools are expected to fix. Character education, therefore, is being propagated here as a behavioral fix: youth of the time were seen as displaying problematic behaviors, and educational leaders thought they could instruct them to be and act more appropriately. It is clear that these two common narrative trends—virtue and behavioral—are direct products of a time in which there was at least perceived consensus that American youth was in moral disarray.

Achievement Narrative

Although programs with the articulated purpose of improving students' virtue or behavior do not completely disappear, a new narrative about teaching character emerges in 2002: achievement narrative. I coded for this narrative when advocates specifically make reference to ways in which schools can or should use character education to boost students' academic performance or general life success. Between 2003 and 2016, articles using an achievement narrative make up 87% of the sample of justification-employing articles. Between 1985 and 2003, these articles make up only 3.6% of this sample. In terms of specific policy changes, the federal character education grant started under President George H.W. Bush and boosted by both Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush, added in a requirement for programs to connect character programs with "other reform efforts and curricula" which was not present in earlier renditions of this grant program. At the state level, new character education policies include eight that specifically mention achievement, and only three that mention behavior, and one that mentions virtue. For example, Oklahoma's 2013 policy states, "Subject to funding, the state board may award grants to align character education with the state curriculum in reading, mathematics, science or social studies and demonstrate how character education teaches life skills that lead to career readiness" (Education Commission of the States (ECS) State Policy Database, N.d.). In effect, Oklahoma districts and schools hoping to enact character education programs would have to prove how such programs improve student achievement. This emergence is notable, albeit not surprising: After the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, educational programs tended to have to provide evidence for their link to improved test scores in order to secure funding (Ravitch 2010). While the data in this study do not provide sufficient evidence to prove causality, it makes sense to acknowledge that No Child Left Behind was a behemoth in the education world and changed most educational institutions in one way or another.

It is hard to be completely certain whether something so new and impactful is simply an emergence or is truly a shift. However, despite older narratives for character education arising on specifically tragic occasions such as 9/11 or the Virginia Tech shooting, there are a few concrete signs that the achievement narrative began to take priority over others. As was mentioned above, in terms of sheer numbers, this is a clear shift in priorities. On a micro level, this change can be seen through individual opinion writers in *Education Week*. One frequent contributor, for example, who had written numerous articles on character education but had made no mention of academic success in the past claims: "A strong case can be made that the poor academic performance of American high school students is directly linked to their

failure of character: that is, to their lack of strong personal habits" (Ryan 2003). Rather than using the typical virtue-based or behavioral narratives for teaching character, here he notes a new moral crisis in America: failing grades. These sorts of adjustments can be seen on an organizational level as well. Character Counts! (the organization affiliated with the Josephson Institute) also creates a section of their website for testimonials regarding how the program helped students boost test scores. While their signature character traits remain the same, this additional section of their website documents how their program both helps schools comply with No Child Left Behind guidelines and improves students' academic performance. These are clear moves on the part of all actors—both individual and organizational—to bridge their old goals to the new social problem that character education is aiming to fix. One reporter in *Education Week* notes, "Indeed, character education's very survival depends on its quantifiably improving students' academic skills" (Sutton 2009). These sorts of changes demonstrate the extent to which this new justification for teaching character reaches—it is not a minor new trend; it really seems to become the dominant idea.

There is perhaps no better example of this new brand of character education than Angela Duckworth's research and organization called the Character Lab, which both researches and disseminates ideas about how to use character education to improve students' success in school. Duckworth's research, cited a number of times throughout the *Education Week* articles, emphasizes character *strengths,* or social-emotional skills, that students need in order to be successful. Specifically, her work argues that by teaching students to have grit (another word for perseverance), schools can help them overcome their academic struggles (Duckworth and Quinn 2009) However, her research and this new mode of discussing character present this trait (and others) with different language and context. For example, in a 2013 letter to the editor, Mary Bruce says, "Though the terms can vary…the message is clear. These mainstream pieces linking a 'can do' attitude with real results are rooted in research" (Bruce 2013). When she says results, she is referring to academic outcomes—here there is no language waxing poetic about the purpose of school or America's moral decay.

While it might be simpler to argue that this brand of character education is not really character education at all—that it is something different, more testable, concrete, and scientific—in looking at both the terms used to label these programs and the definitions researchers provide, it is clear that this is not something new altogether, but just a re-categorization or rethinking of the purpose of character education. One 2010 article summarizes research by psychologist Neal Schmitt, saying that the "biggest predictor of success is a student's conscientiousness, as measured by such traits as dependability, perseverance through tasks, and work ethic" (Sparks 2010). In this particular context, the word *character* is not mentioned, but *noncognitive* stands in as a proxy for the same idea. Despite the fact that the language of the article is centered around economic ideas like expected utility from enrolling in college, the actual traits described are the same as or very similar to those described in virtue or behavior justification articles. It is clear that the definition of character, as it relates to schools, has broadened to include these measures of academic success. While the concept of social-emotional skills has also become more prevalent, and some of them do overlap with character, these skills tend to be more specifically related to the managing of one's emotional capacities and responses—things such as demonstrating empathy or recovering emotionally from a setback.[5]

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[5] Character Counts! trademarked the "six pillars of character" which are: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.

Given this rather narrow distinction, it might seem strange that someone like Angela Duckworth's research would fall under character. Perhaps, if it did not, the story would be different: there would not be an emergence of a new narrative around character, merely a dying out of character education and a blossoming of something new. However, the overlap between personality psychology and discussions of character discussed above keep them coupled. Throughout the data, Duckworth as well as journalists like Paul Tough (and lesser known journalists, too) specifically identify this new trend as an element of character education. In an interview with *Education Week*, Tough explains that "economists call these abilities non-cognitive skills, and a lot of educators call them character strengths. The ones I wrote about in *How Children Succeed* include grit, persistence, conscientiousness, curiosity, self-control, and optimism" (Kerchner 2014). Duckworth could have called her organization Social-Emotional Learning Lab, but she specifically chose *character* for both the name of her organization and the name of the skills she aims to teach—character strengths. She includes social emotional intelligence as one of these strengths but does not use that terminology to describe her overall project. Regardless of her intent, this categorization choice can still have an effect. The first effect is that it shifts the conversation about character education to one that has broadened its potential outcomes—not only can these programs fix behavior and instill virtues, they can also boost academic performance. In addition, it provides a vehicle through which traditional ideas of what a good, productive, and virtuous citizen is (i.e., gritty, conscientious, hardworking, reserved) can continue to be seen as vital even in a completely different educational landscape in which schools are focused on a different set of goals. These ideas are inherent in the American myth and are repackaged to remain relevant despite significant changes to the system employing them.

The Construction of Character and Inequality

Along with the broadening of character education narratives to include academic achievement, there was another trend in the data, one that other scholars have analyzed as well (Kirchgasler 2018; Ris 2015; Rose 2013, 2014). Both the *Education Week* and the *New York Times* articles increasingly begin using low-income and struggling schools filled with mostly students of color as examples, as opposed to earlier articles, which tended to mention middle class, majority white schools. For example, one 1989 *New York Times* article describes New Jersey's effort to create a council to "define commonly acceptable values" in response to increasing promiscuous and risky behaviors. The students described in the article are those who rent limousines and beach houses for prom weekend—clearly not the lowest income bracket in the state. However, in 2006, one article mentions that teaching about values helps close the achievement gap between black and white students, and researchers at Stanford called for this education to be put in place in majority black schools to see if it would make a difference. There are also many more mentions of character programs turning around struggling schools, as well as mentions of character programs working in charter schools like KIPP "fixing" the "most difficult" populations of students. This change demonstrates that the achievement narrative blames low-income students and students of color for the structural struggles they face by arguing that academic achievement is a matter of character rather than structural inequality.

As the conversation shifts from a discussion of character as a solution to value-based behavioral problems to one considering character as a solution to academic problems, both the tenor and the content of the conversation changes. One teacher wrote into *Education Week* to proclaim her discomfort with teaching her students grit, saying, "Should we really be grading kids on their character? There is a lot of effusive language around this idea—that kids need to

hear about their failings, to foster perseverance—but I have a problem with just who's doing the judging here, making precise numeric determinations about students' integrity. If your mother works two jobs to feed you and keep the lights on, isn't that grit? Is trying hard—even succeeding—in school more important than trying hard in life?" (Flanagan 2012). While all students in America were just as likely to be considered part of the value-based behavioral social problem, only a specific subset of students more likely to be part of the problem of academic failure: students struggling in school. Students struggling with academics are disproportionately low-income students of color, meaning this emphasis on teaching character to improve academic achievement is specifically tailored toward teaching this most vulnerable population of students. Sociologists have long since disregarded the idea that failure should be attributed to a problem with morality (Small et al. 2010), and scholars have also noted the potential consequences of connecting *academic* failure with character education (Rose 2013, 2014). It is clear that this new retooling of character education has the potential to reinvigorate culture of poverty theories, and this implication certainly requires additional research into the ways in which character education programs are implemented in classrooms in order to fully map out the scope of these potential consequences.

This idea—that working hard is important and can lead to success—is not new. Rather, as Hunter says, "The significance of moral education is found in its articulation of the moral culture we adults idealize. It is a mirror of the moral culture we prize and thus seek to pass on to succeeding generations" (Hunter 2000, 9). As stated above, other scholars have made also made this connection in the context of character education, noting the potential consequences of the surge of this kind of discourse (Kirchgasler 2018; Ris 2015). Taking this argument at face value, the vision of morality articulated through the discourse around character education certainly shifts: an earlier focus on traditional values and creating well-behaved, docile citizens shifts towards a focus on social mobility and achievement. No longer are educational stake-holders so concerned with turning out democratic citizens, prepared to live meaningful and impactful community lives; instead, the concern is with academic success as a proxy for later life financial success. This shift in emphasis is felt throughout the school system, so it follows that it would be noticeable in the realm of moral and character education as well.

Conclusion

Despite both the centrality of ideas about character to American culture, character education's long history as a major educational phenomenon and robust literatures on character education in other disciplines, there has been little sociological research analyzing character education in the United States. This paper asks: How did narratives about character education in the United States change between 1985 and 2016? What does this reveal about the changing meaning of character over this time period? I find that there is, in fact, a significant broadening in the narratives about character education in the public-school curriculum. Whereas between 1985 and 2003 most actors argued for character education either solely to instill virtue or in order to solve a behavior problem, starting in 2003 the narrative changed. Instead, actors argued for character education as a means for improving students' academic performance and general life outcomes.

This finding has a few implications for the present research and for future research projects. First, analyzing narratives about character education as an across-time phenomenon places new and trendy character-based education reform strategies within their proper historical context, extending research done by educational scholars (i.e., Kirchgasler 2018; Ris 2015).

This context–a history of character programs meant to explicitly correct behavior and beliefs that existed outside the mainstream, middle-class, white norm–demonstrates, in turn, that narratives about character are inherently moralized. Understanding new character-education programs that are focused on the connection between "good" character and good test scores in this light, it is clear how such programs could quickly become problematic by reinforcing popular and yet disproven ideas about the culture of poverty. This study demonstrates that simply focusing on the efficacy of interventions neglects essential social context. This should not be the last study to consider these sorts of questions – future research could look more deeply into the way narratives about character play out in curricula or in classrooms.

On a broader level, this finding demonstrates the ways in which ideas about "good" versus "bad" character are socially constructed in the discourse about character education. Because character education is pervasive but not mandatory, its proponents must argue for its necessity in school. These arguments are often presented in a simple "problem and solution" narrative, with a broad social problem as the "problem" and character education as the "solution." By tracing the changes in these narratives over time, this analysis demonstrates changes in what counted as having "bad" character over time. While prior to 2004 having "bad" character had to do with a more "traditional," mainstream, white, middle class set of behaviors and values, the shift after NCLB associated having "bad" character with academic failure. While virtue narratives and behavioral narratives are still racialized and classed, this broadening of the narratives around character to include academic achievement indicates an even tighter association between character education narratives and the narratives connecting poverty with character or cultural flaws we see deployed in connection with welfare policy.

While this finding is notable and telling, it is not entirely surprising. It is logical that as educational goals in the United States shifted from a focus on democratic citizenship to a focus on social mobility, the desired purpose of character education shifted as well (Labaree 1997). The No Child Left Behind Act placed an exceptionally high value on test scores, and, as such, it makes sense that nonacademic programs and curricula would need to rebrand as programs that would benefit those same test scores. While this paper does not make a causal claim, it logically follows that educational debates would change after such a major change in policy. Another possible explanation for this change is the aforementioned explosion of research in this area – both in education and in personality psychology. Psychologists have been very successful at translating their research into actionable school-based interventions, and trend-setting charter school networks have picked up on this research as well.

The true cause of this broadening, however, is less important than what it says about changes in moral culture in the United States. Changes in the justification for teaching character reflect broader changes in society, insofar as desired curricular elements reflect the desired future citizenry of the country. In the future, sociologists can continue to research these broad changes in moral culture, and in so doing, continue to extend the psychology and economics literatures which focus, respectively, on the effects of specific traits on specific academic outcomes and on the costs versus benefits of instituting these sorts of interventions in schools. Especially given that oftentimes psychology and economics research *becomes* school-based interventions, a broader breadth of research in this area is essential. In this study, I do just this: map changes in the narratives about character over time, finding that the understanding and expectations of good character broadens to include academic achievement. Providing this context is significant because it provides a look at the potential unintended consequences of connecting character education to school reform, and also demonstrates how ideas about "good" and "bad" character are constructed in education-related discourse.

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