

## **Conceptualization of Civic Character and Some Implications for Practitioners<sup>\*</sup>**

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### ABSTRACT

It is absolutely imperative that we should have civic character, and our education system should foster civic character in citizens. But what does it exactly mean civic character in the relationship between character and citizenship? What are the essential goals of civic character education? How do we facilitate the growth of students' civic character? These are the central questions addressed in this research. The objective of this research is to provide a "big picture" perspective on these challenging questions, by critically reviewing the relevant literature. A related objective is to deepen a full discussion of the various ways in which civic character is appropriately defined and pursued.

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## I. Introduction

Passion for the common good and social justice is the heart of civic character. Certainly in almost every country in the world, a concern with the development of good civic character has been a prominently common feature in public education. And the need to develop civic character has been one of ultimate aims of public elementary and secondary education (Shields, 2011: 51). In accordance with the needs of society, several theoretical frameworks have been developed in previous civic character research. Nevertheless, the extent to which these frameworks consider rigorously civic character in the relationship between character and citizenship, describe the foundational or core elements of civic character, and provide effective educational methods for civic character development, has been limited.

For this reason, in this research I pose the following three research questions. What does it exactly mean civic character in the relationship between character and citizenship? What are the essential goals of civic character education? How do we facilitate the growth of students' civic character? The objective of this research is to provide a "big picture" perspective on these challenging questions. To answer these questions, this research will first present basic assumptions underlying this research, and then review the character framework (especially moral character and civic character) described by Shields (2011), Berkowitz, Althof, and Jones (2008), etc. as well as the citizenship framework (especially ethical citizenship and legal citizenship) developed by Lowi (1981) and Cooper (1991). By evaluating and discussing these previous frameworks, I will suggest that essential dimensions of character and citizenship consist of distinct, yet overlapping dimensions, including moral character, civic character or ethical citizenship, and legal, political citizenship. Finally, this research will suggest pedagogical approaches and methods to foster key competencies of civic character.

## II. Basic Assumptions

There are three basic assumptions underlying this research. First, the concepts of character and citizenship are mutually intertwined and overlapped to a considerable extent. From ancient times to the present, the relationships between character and citizenship have been discussed from a variety of perspectives. Figure 1 represents the six types of Venn Diagrams showing all possible relationships between character and citizenship: (1) a mutual separate type, (2) type 1 inclusion — citizenship as a subset of character, (3) type 2 inclusion — character as a subset of citizenship, (4) a partially overlapping type, (5) a considerably overlapping type, (6) an equivalence relation type. It

is often suggested that (4) and (5) types are the proper relationships between character and citizenship (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Berkowitz et al. 2008; Butts, 2006; Halstead & Pike, 2006; Soder et al. 2001). I suggest that (5) type is the most suitable relationship between character and citizenship, because it is impossible to establish the state of character without citizenship, and citizenship without character. Also, citizenship formation necessarily entails character and moral formation, and vice versa. Through the exploration of concepts of ‘morality as a nucleus of citizenship’ (Halstead & Pike, 2006), ‘civic virtues’ (Butts, 2006), ‘democratic character’ (Soder, Goodlad & McMannon, 2001), ‘public morality’ (Bull, 2006), it can be concluded that there is considerable overlapping in the area of a civic dimension of character, or an ethical dimension of citizenship.

Each needs the other, but one cannot be substituted or replaced by the other, like (2) and (3). And we also cannot expect (6) type described by Aristotle (1999). Aristotle compared the criteria for being a good citizen and those for being a good man. He suggested that in the best *politeia* (political system) a good ruler who possesses practical wisdom can be both a good citizen and a good man. In the “real world”, however, it is nearly impossible to achieve these conditions.

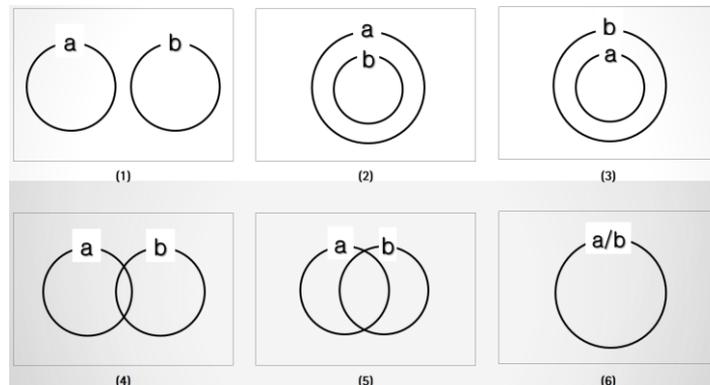


Fig.1. All possible relationships between character and citizenship

The second assumption to be made is that virtues and competencies are in complementary relations, in a similar way to the interdependent relationship between moral character and performance character (Davidson & Lickona, 2007). In Figure2, it is notable that potential virtues may be ineffective unless it's combined with competencies. What is also clear is that in reality, no one develops the full range of potential virtues, nor does anyone fully overcome all vices. You might have good or morally appropriate intentions but poor ability to execute. Thus, for potential virtues to be fully effective and realizable, it requires the ability or capacity to act in those ways; that is, for virtues to lead

consistent and stable behaviors, we often require certain behavioral competencies such as positive self-management and moral conflict resolution.

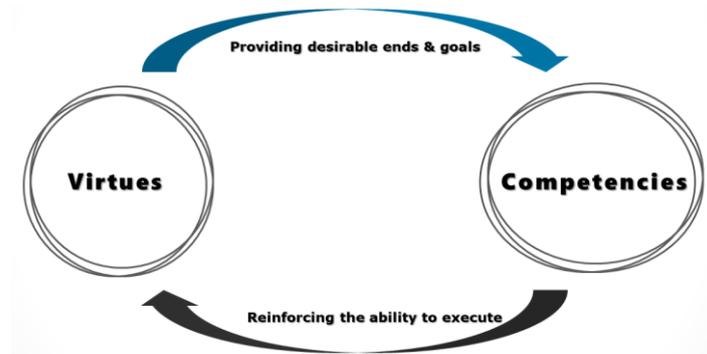


Fig.2. The relationship between virtues and competencies

On the other hand, competencies — an educational aim now emphasized almost universally — is not desirable and ethical in itself. In reality, the concept of “competence” suggests being able to meet some standard of excellence or qualification to complete a task. In this respect, we may apply key competencies to our own economic advantage with little serious consideration about others in our communities. Thus, virtues that motivate us to choose good ends/goals and then pursue them in a fully ethical way might guide competencies.

The third assumption to be made is that the concept of “competence” is more suitable and useful than that of “performance character” in the fields of character and citizenship education. Generally, both competence and performance character have striking similarities, because these two terms include the cluster of personal characteristics necessary for effective performance at work (especially at academic work for students) by an individual. However, competence is being viewed as both individual and community or organizational levels, both moral or ethical and civic dimensions, and both moral and non-moral properties (Schrijver & Maesschalck, 2013: 30-31), whereas performance character has been considered only as an individual level and dominantly or at least occasionally in the non-moral or value-neutral property in terms of outcome. Thus, the preferred term in this research is “competence” that has more comprehensive characteristics.

### **III. Civic Character in the Relationship between Character and Citizenship**

Considering these three basic assumptions, let's begin our discussion of character in earnest. In the widely read paper, 'Smart and good schools', Davidson and Lickona (2007: 2) suggest that character has two essential parts: performance character and moral character. According to them, performance character including qualities such as diligence, perseverance, and a positive attitude is needed to realize one's potential for excellence in any performance environment, while moral character including qualities such as integrity, justice, caring, respect, and cooperation is needed for successful interpersonal relationships and ethical conduct. And they stress that performance character and moral character are interdependent (Davidson & Lickona, 2007: 3).

Several years later, Shields (2011) proposes that in addition to moral character and performance character offered by Davidson and Lickona (2007), character education should develop intellectual character and civic character as well. Together, he suggests that the four forms of personal character define what it means to be a competent, ethical, engaged, and effective adult member of society. Also he approaches the task of conceptualization of civic character heavily depending on Boston's definition (2005): "the knowledge, skills, virtues, and commitments necessary for engaged and responsible citizenship. Civic character is responsible moral action that serves the common good". However, he did not provide a more elaborate conceptual definition that serves both academics and practitioners.

In addition, following Davidson and Lickona's conceptual definition of performance character basically, Shields (2011) states, "Performance character includes such qualities as perseverance, diligence, courage, resilience, optimism, initiative, attention to detail, and loyalty. Such qualities relate to the exercise of will and reflect honed skills in self-management." (Shields, 2011: 52; Shields et al. 2013: 174). I suggest that personal qualities of performance character such as resilience, optimism, and attention to detail, which might have a high degree of value-neutrality (Davidson & Lickona, 2007: 3) and foundational and ancillary characteristics necessary to make the other dimensions of character effective, needs to be distinguished from moral character and civic character, which are intrinsically good, worthwhile, or desirable. Also I believe that personal qualities such as perseverance, diligence, and courage need to be interpreted in the culturally sensitive context. Particularly, in many East Asian countries with the Confucian tradition, such qualities as perseverance (忍), diligence (勤勉), and courage (勇), described by Davidson & Lickona (2007) and Shields (2011), are associated with major moral virtues (Li, Fung, & Chen 2014: 77). That is, in the Confucian tradition,

perseverance, endurance of hardship, diligence, humility, courage, and continuous striving to self-improvement are based firmly in a person's quality to think soundly and behave in a normatively appropriate manner. Additionally, we should note that such qualities as resilience and optimism, unlike diligence and courage, are more like competencies, but not virtues. Thus, in my view, such qualities as resilience and optimism might be included in positive self-management as one of key competencies of moral character, by including the orientation of good ends and goals. And in the case of the Western countries, such qualities as perseverance, diligence and courage might be included in moral character, by combining with the purpose or reason for behaviors.

In fact, it was Berkowitz, Althof, and Jones (2008) who tried to offer some terminological clarification of the term "civic character". They defined civic character as "the set of dispositions and skills that motivate and enable an individual to effectively and responsibly participate in the public sphere in order to serve the common good" (p. 402). Along with this definition, they put their attention on the relationship between moral or character education and citizenship education for the development of civic character.

*Morality lies at the heart of civic character, and education for civic character necessarily has to address issues of morality. Democracy relies on certain procedural rules and political institutions but it cannot flourish if its citizens do not hold moral and civic values, and manifest certain personal virtues. Both moral or character education and citizenship education are central to the development of the civic character of citizens that is foundational to a democracy (p. 404).*

However, despite the fact that this research has had a strong influence on many researchers and practitioners in the realms of character education, the relationship between civic character and democratic citizenship is ambiguous still. Especially we do not know the differences between civic character and democratic (especially ethical, legal, political) citizenship in detail. And we do not know to what extent does the two terms have common properties as well.

Now let's move our discussion to citizenship. Citizenship has been traditionally defined as the rights (status) and duties (roles or qualities) of members of a political community (Marshall, 1950), but it is a multifaceted concept that consists of several dimensions. Because civic character needs to be explored in the relations among the ethical, social, and political aspects, this research especially focuses on the citizenship framework developed by Lowi (1981) and Cooper (1991). Lowi (1981) differentiated between legal citizenship and ethical citizenship: Legal citizenship is the status and role of individual members of a community defined by constitutions and statutes, whereas

ethical citizenship is the status and role of individual members defined by values, norms, traditions, and culture of a given community. Cooper (1991: 6) described these two terms in a more elaborate, sophisticated way: Legal citizenship, which is defined by formal rules and laws, may become the essential structure within which ethical citizenship develops, whereas ethical citizenship, which is manifested by citizens' participation in public affairs, may redefine legal citizenship.

*The ethical dimensions of the citizenship tradition have regularly given rise to changes in the legal definitions of citizenship. The franchise has been extended to nonwhites and women and civil rights have been expanded. These changes based on law would never have taken place without the sense of obligation and right to active participation in governance which has been embodied in the tradition of ethical citizenship (Cooper, 1991: 10).*

Also Cooper (1991) and his colleagues (Wang, Li, & Cooper, 2017) argued that citizens' participation in public affairs develop their post-conventional thinking necessary to redefine and transform the existing ethical and legal standards, collaborative attitudes toward the common good, and a strong sense of responsibility to his/her community. I think Cooper's ideas can provide plentiful implications for the improvement of the civic character framework.

By integrating various dimensions of character and citizenship discussed above, I suggest that character and citizenship consist of three dimensions: civic character or ethical citizenship, legal, political citizenship, and moral character. I also contend that the relationships among these dimensions are not clear-cut or rigid, but are continuous and dynamic.

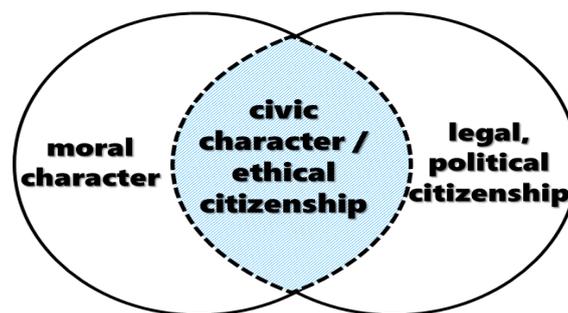


Fig.3. Three dimensions of character and citizenship

First, civic character is a set of civic virtues and competencies aimed at social justice and the common good — I don't argue here that citizens must completely abandon self-

interest, but that they should consider the self-interest in ways that include the interests of all or most members of a given community (Cooper, 1991: x). Although there are just a little bit different meanings in the strict sense, the concept of civic character is roughly interchangeable with ethical citizenship. Civic character or ethical citizenship calls for civic virtues and competencies in communal life, and it is the appropriate normative basis for good citizens' roles and qualifications. Ethical perspective lies at the heart of civic character or ethical citizenship, and education for civic character or ethical citizenship necessarily has to address issues of building ethical relationships among citizens and exercising ethical obligations as democratic citizens. These two terms (*i.e.*, a civic dimension of character and an ethical dimension of citizenship) which have a twin relationship commonly emphasize the importance of civic virtues and competencies to seek social justice and the common good. Thus, it can be argued that the concepts of civic character and ethical citizenship are conceptually intertwined and almost completely overlapping.

Ethical citizenship or becoming ethical citizens requires civic virtues such as social justice (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), civic friendship<sup>1</sup> (Dery, 2015; Government of Alberta, 2011), civic responsibility for the environment and other living creatures (Government of Alberta, 2011), in addition to Cooper's conceptual framework (1991: 5-10) including civic competencies such as citizens' post-conventional thinking necessary to redefine and transform the existing ethical and legal standards, collaborative attitudes toward the common good, a deeper and wider understanding of obligations to the community, and a strong sense of responsibility to the community. I argue that these civic virtues and competencies should contribute effectually toward realizing the following three essential goals in civic character education or ethical citizenship education: (1) human dignity and social justice-oriented civic identity, (2) moral-civic courage, and (3) critical, self-reflective thinking, in the context of neighborhood affairs and community involvement. In other words, the several virtues and competencies need to be pursuing these three essential goals of civic character education. It will be discussed in the next section in more detail.

Second, moral character is a set of moral virtues and competencies mainly aimed at cultivating his/her mind ethically and standing up for him/herself (especially in the Confucian tradition), and building and maintaining good relationships with others (in

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<sup>1</sup> A friendship of citizens is what Aristotle called '*Philia Politike* (civic friendship)'. In our contemporary accounts, civic friendship can be defined as something like compassion or sympathy as an essential mechanism in the cultivation of solidary attitudes and behavior. Coupled with a profound sense of equality and interdependence, this emotional and imaginative capacity is our best bet in generating care for others' well-being that is not bounded by our self-concern (Dery, 2015: 12).

both Eastern and Western traditions). The view of moral self-cultivation and self-improvement in the Confucian tradition has a long and distinguished history (Tan, 2017: 250). From a Confucian viewpoint, self-cultivation is aimed specifically at morally transforming the learners so that they can realize the Way (*dao*). The learning process involves being committed to studying, improving oneself by observing moral virtues and living ethically, and being guided by one's teacher. Also, in both Eastern and Western traditions, moral character has been long recognized as enabling us to treat others and ourselves with respect and care and to act with integrity.

Moral character at the very least encompasses a set of moral virtues such as integrity, moral wisdom, temperance, respect, caring, humility, propriety, moral responsibility, harmony, as well as moral competencies such as positive self-management (e.g. self-esteem, resilience, optimism, self-improvement efforts), and humanistic sensibility. That's the essence of moral character.

Third, legal and political citizenship is a set of key democratic competencies aimed at the healthy and effective functioning of a democratic society. A thriving nation depends on active citizens who participate in governance and political life. It consists of those democratic competencies such as (1) national consciousness or identity, (2) political literacy (especially knowledge of the political, legal and social institutions of one's country; understanding of key political and social issues; necessary skills and knowledge for effective political participation), and (3) understanding and belief in legal and political rights and duties of citizenship.

## **IV. Pedagogical Implications for Civic Character Education**

As mentioned above, civic character education or ethical citizenship education includes three essential goals in our social and political lives: (1) human dignity and social justice-oriented civic identity, (2) moral and civic courage as the strength of character to act on one's decision, and (3) critical, self-reflective thinking as a dedicated search and self-reflection for goodness and rightness. I put the label the 'civic character triangle' on this framework. These essential goals are necessary for overcoming situational power, and for increasing the possibility of moral-civic behaviors.

In fact, we have been confronted with numerous cases in which situational power — as noted by situationist social psychologists<sup>2</sup> such as Philip Zimbardo and Stanley

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<sup>2</sup> Situationist social psychologists tell us that information about people's distinctive character

Milgram, and also by the political philosopher Hannah Arendt (especially her concept of “the banality of evil”) — has prevented ethical and civic conduct. Acting on specific virtues, such as loyalty or responsibility, invariably reflects complex interactions between person and context. There may be times when a person of loyalty and responsibility is non-humanistic or destructive, for example. These examples include the Nazi Holocaust, the disasters involving the *Challenger* and *Columbia* space shuttles, and the torture of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq (Cooper & Menzel, 2013: 7). However, it is also true that in the long history of the world there have been exemplars (e.g. Socrates, Hugh Thompson, Jr.) to follow courageously their moral-civic conscience and ethical standards as righteous citizens, resisting evil and fighting against injustice, when faced with difficulties.

In the *Apology*, Plato's *Socrates* argues that he fears committing injustice more than he fears death. In support of that claim, he cites an incident in which he, at great personal risk, disobeyed unjust commands of the Athenian government.

*That was when the democracy still existed; and after the oligarchy was established, the Thirty sent for me with four others to come to the Tholos (Prytaneum) and ordered us to bring Leon the Salaminian from Salamis to be put to death. However, I showed again, by action, not in word only, that I did not care a whit for death if that be not too rude an expression, but that I did care with all my might not to do anything unjust or unholy (Apology - 20).*

Also, as we are all aware, US military helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson Jr. helped stop one of the most infamous massacres of the Vietnam War. Mr Thompson and his crew found US soldiers killing civilians at the village of My Lai on 16 March 1968. He put his helicopter down between the soldiers and the villagers and ordered his men to shoot their fellow Americans if they attacked the civilians.

Exemplars commonly had strong civic identities oriented toward human rights and justice. In situations of choice and conflict, they gave priority to civic conscience and civic friendship over individual self-interest. Also, they commonly had the moral-civic courage to uphold their ethical-civic values and high ethical-civic standards in their own decision making even in the face of significant external pressures, adversity, and risks. Additionally, they took seriously the question of “how to live, what to do, and how to handle this difficult situation?” and looked critically at the problem from multiple perspectives and took into consideration both the short- and long-term consequences that decisions have for all stakeholders (Heres & Lasthuizen, 2013: 56). And then they made

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traits, opinions, attitudes, values, or past behavior is not as useful for determining what they will do as is information about the details of their situations (Kamtekar, 2004: 458).

their decisions that adhere to social justice, the humanities and common good.

From the perspective of practical application in the field of civic character education, I do argue that active participation-oriented pedagogical approaches and methods, including conversation and discussion of pressing socio-moral issues, are important ways to cultivate students' civic character. For example, the opportunity to think and discuss continuously or at least occasionally, not only based on normative foundations and roots (*i.e.* human dignity and social justice) to guide thinking, but also observing the principles of inclusiveness, fairness, mutual respect, and listening in the process of conversation and discussion, can lead to formation of human dignity and justice-oriented civic identity. Also the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions confidently by creating an empowerment atmosphere can facilitate moral-civic courage. Further, the opportunity to deeply understand and evaluate others' voices without distortion, collaborate with others towards finding the truth, and apply self-assertion to their own life can lead to the increase of critical, self-reflective thinking.

Additionally, a growing body of school-based research suggests that character and citizenship education provides significant benefits to students, school culture and the community-at-large. Especially, acquiring civic character necessitates democratic and caring school atmosphere, and active participation opportunities (Berkowitz et al., 2008). Schools should provide students with manifold and continuous opportunities of practice by creating a school climate of caring such as 'schools with love and caring', but also providing just community-building activities such as community meeting. The former is generally structured on Nel Noddings' (2005) ideas. In her view, caring relations provide the best foundation for moral and character education and thus today's schools should be organized around centers or themes of caring. With Noddings' ideas, schools would create a learning environment that teaches students to care for all that they see around them. This includes themselves, other human beings, animals, objects, and even ideas. On the other hands, the latter is rooted in John Dewey's (2016/2004) ideas. He emphasized that schools needed to become more democratic themselves if they were going to contribute to develop students, future active citizens that have the proper democratic dispositions and participatory skills necessary to act for the common good. Dewey stressed that schools must cultivate the dispositions needed in broader society and become miniature democratic societies where students learn how their actions affect the well-being and success of the group (also see Shields, 2011: 51; Boyte, 2003; Berkowitz et al. 2008: 403).

## V. Conclusion

Civic character education should contribute to preparing youth to be conscientious community members and responsible citizens. Thus civically virtuous and competent citizens lie at the heart of the image of the ideal educated person in all over the world. And most schools around the world are doing some form of civic character education, although these efforts may not be explicitly called civic character initiatives.

In order to contribute toward our mission of fostering good civic character in youth, in this research I have tried to provide theoretical foundations and practical directions for the effective civic character education. To this end, this literature study focused on reviewing the most influential frameworks of civic character and ethical citizenship, rather than giving an exhaustive overview of everything that has been written on character and citizenship. My hope in this research is to provide something like a bridge (*i.e.* civic character or ethical citizenship) between two valuable but often competing ideas and to show that one does not always need to choose between character and citizenship. And I also expect this research will deepen a full discussion of the various and useful ways in which civic character is appropriately defined and pursued.

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