Review of the Book:

Harrison, Tom, Morris, Ian, Ryan, John. 2016. Teaching Character in the Primary Classroom, London, Sage. ISBN 978-1-4739-5217-1, 185pp, £22.99.

This book has been written in recognition of the "resurgence of interest [in character education] amongst educational policy makers, researchers, teachers, employers, parents, children and young people" (p.1x). That level of interest is said to exist alongside a lack of knowledge among teachers about relevant research and practice. The authors suggest that in order to avoid the potential of character education to become damaging the authors aim to provide "clear, accessible advice on how teachers and other educators can successfully enhance character education provision in their schools" (p. ix).

There are 4 parts to the book: introducing character education (character matters; what is character education; theory and measurement; taught and caught); character education – taught (a taught course; teaching character through the curriculum; assessing and evaluating character education); character education – caught (whole school approaches; teachers as character educators; building character through co-curricular programmes working with parents and the community); and appendices (how to become a school of character – self audit; a framework for character education in the UK; character education teaching resources).

The core messages in the book are said to be summed up in the acronym FACT: i.e., education is about flourishing; being adaptable; good work being caught through the ethos of the school; and through explicit teaching - taught. The authors explain that the term "character education relates to any educational activity, implicit or explicit, that encourages young people to develop character qualities or virtues" (p. 18). The virtues that are highlighted are: moral, performance, civic and intellecttual (together with the intellectual meta-virtue of practical wisdom (p. 21)

The book is explicitly addressed to trainee teachers (the opening of chapter 1 asks readers to imagine a scenario in which they have not been offered a job after a seemingly successful interview and suggesting that "judgments of character are almost always the elephant in the interview room" (p. 4). There are extensive references to resources and interesting ideas and suggestions for activities in various contexts. Regarding assessment, readers are warned against grading and also against some sort of inappropriate therapeutic education.

The book provides a wide range of references (whilst being mainly but not exclusively UK focused) and encompassing the work of many (whilst being firmly located in the work of the Jubilee Centre for Character Education, University of Birmingham, UK).

There are some considerations of the criticisms that have been applied to character education. For example on pp. 28-32 and pp. 46-49 objections are countered. It is interesting that these counter arguments do not really tackle some of the criticisms head on and are cast in a partīcular way. The authors suggest, for example, that "character education is not necessarily religious" (p. 30) and that while they recommend not grading character there is guidance about stages in which it is possible for students to be recognised as having achieved "full virtue" (pp. 95-6).

There is a very interesting discussion about the need to avoid being too specific. This reminded me of the very sensible use of the word 'reasonable' in legal contexts (to be followed necessarily by interpretation) and of the use of human rights documents (which are not fully developed philosophical positions or a guide to specific action in all cases). But references to, for example, "the middle way" are rather vague. When things do become a little more specific, the challenge of meaning does not seem to have been resolved. For example, civic virtues are said to be about service, volunteering and citizenship. In the UK the Department for Education's references to neighbourliness and community are used about civic matters. There does not seem to be any sustained consideration of civic virtues in relation to the vast amount of (researched and inspected) work that has been done in recent years on citizenship education. This is a pity as there is certainly a great deal of scope to develop the work of citizenship education in ways which would more explicitly identify social and political and other matters to do with power and justice in a wider range of settings

than was sometimes used by those who promoted work in relation to the citizenship education programme of the National Curriculum in England.

Teachers and others will learn a great deal from this book. No one (of course) is against students and teachers being of good character. There are many valuable insights into the philosophical underpinning of character and there are many useful suggestions for practical professional action. This valuable work could be developed further with a fuller consideration of the nature of all the virtues – in my view especially the civic virtues – that have a rather small place in this publication.

Ian Davies,
University of York