

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Between vulnerability and resilience: A contextualist picture of protective epistemic character traits

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Email: alice.monypenny@nottingham.ac.uk**Abstract**

In this paper, I argue that focusing on resilience education fails to appropriately reflect the socio-political nature of character. I define protective epistemic character traits (PECTs) as epistemic character traits which aid students in avoiding, limiting or mitigating harm in the classroom. I argue that the relationship between epistemic character and protection in hostile classrooms is importantly influenced by context in two main ways: (1) the exercise and development of some PECTs may carry significant cost for some students, and (2) social and developmental factors may promote or obstruct the development of virtuous PECTs for individual students. I employ two principles from Ian James Kidd's critical character epistemology—*aetiological sensitivity* and *normative contextualism*—and propose a revised approach to resilience education. I argue that this revision requires an increased focus on changing underlying structures of oppression and cautions against teaching a standardised list of epistemic virtues.

KEYWORDS

character education, virtue epistemology, vice, resilience, grit

INTRODUCTION

According to a contemporary line of thought reflected in character education, the character development of students should be guided in ways which will enable them to cope with many of the challenges they may encounter beyond the classroom. Education, the thought goes, should equip students with the skills, capacities and resources that will build their *resilience*.

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Resilience arises in part from external conditions such as supportive environments and nurturing relationships, and in part from individual character, ways of thinking and behaviour (Russell, 2015). These internal dimensions of resilience are emphasised within character education (see Earl and Arthur, n.d.; Walker, n.d.) and within educational psychologies inspired by Dweck's (2006) influential growth mindset model. Common to these approaches is a sense that students' character traits significantly affect the way in which they are disposed to respond to and cope with potential harms and adversity. It is this character-focused resilience education with which I am concerned in this paper.

Resilience education developed as a response to what Ecclestone (2004) termed a 'therapeutic ethos' in education and which she criticised for overemphasising the inherent vulnerability of students. Although there is still a place for recognising vulnerability within resilience education, I argue that as it stands, resilience education cannot adequately acknowledge or address underlying structural inequalities and their impact on students' abilities to overcome adversity. To illustrate, I focus on the relationship between epistemic character and students' abilities to respond to, and learn from, hostile climates in the classroom.

As an alternative, I propose an approach to resilience education which acknowledges and responds to the differing forms and degrees of vulnerability experienced by students and recognises ways that oppressive structures and systemic injustices impact on their development. This proposal appeals to two principles from Kidd's (2020) outline of *critical character epistemology: normative contextualism* and *aetiological sensitivity*.

I begin by setting out the context in which educational focus on resilience arose and explaining some existing criticisms. Secondly, I identify a connection between self-protection and epistemic character and define *protective epistemic character traits* (PECTs). I then argue that (a) the development and exercise of such traits may carry significant costs for some students; that (b) the social and developmental contexts of students may dispose them against responding to adversity by developing epistemic virtues; and that (c) a trait's status as protective is context relative. I show how attention to these insights allows us to develop a critical approach to resilience education. They lead us to question the teaching of a standard list of epistemic virtues and increase the focus on changing underlying conditions which may distort the epistemic development.

SELF-ESTEEM, RESILIENCE AND GRIT IN EDUCATION

The rise of the 'self-esteem movement' in the 1970s and 1980s constituted a cultural shift towards understanding the causes and impact of larger issues in terms of individual self-esteem (Emler, 2001, pp. 2–3; Noble and McGrath, 2012, p. 611). From the beginning, the movement had a marked impact on educational practices that included an increased focus on developing students' sense of achievement and self-expression in relatively non-competitive and failure-free learning environments (Noble and McGrath, 2012, p. 611).

Criticisms of the movement focused largely on ethical worries about insincere and exaggerated praise and the lack of evidence for the purported benefits of raising self-esteem (p. 612; see also Seligman, 2007). Many critics were sceptical of the movement's view of students as inherently vulnerable and in need of professional therapeutic support in dealing with life's challenges (see Ecclestone, 2004, 2008; Furedi, 2003). Educational environments in which students constantly receive praise and rarely, if ever, experience genuine failure, deprive them of valuable opportunities to develop a capacity to deal productively with frustration (Noble and McGrath, 2012, p. 611). Ecclestone also criticised the movement for failing to address underlying structural inequalities when exclusion is treated purely as an individual psychological condition to be remedied by increased self-esteem (Ecclestone, 2004, p. 129).

It was against this backdrop that resilience education developed: a model of education—encapsulated by the Penn Resiliency Program in the early 2000s (see Freres et al., 2002)—which aims to foster resilience by providing nurturing environments and cultivating individual skills and strengths (Gillham et al., 2012, p. 660; Noble and McGrath, 2012). A large amount of this work occurred in the field of character education whose aim was to develop students' character by facilitating the development of various excellences whilst mitigating or removing negative traits. The role of education

is taken to be in part the development of students' agency so that they can overcome adversity and achieve success. This will not be done, proponents of resilience education argue, merely by improving self-esteem.

Whilst the roots of character education lie in virtue ethics, some strong links were formed with positive psychology through a particular focus on what Brooks (2015) calls 'resumé' virtues—useful performative traits, such as resilience, grit and diligence, which improve one's ability to see a project through to the end and learn from rather than be demoralised by failure.

One character profile through which resilience has been exemplified and valorised in the social imaginary is the gritty individual. Grittiness is an individual quality defined as 'working strenuously towards goals, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity and plateaus in progress' (Duckworth et al., 2007, pp. 1087–1088; see also Stokas, 2015).

Duckworth's (2016) influential work on grit has been criticised both within and outside character education. From within, the primary focus on resumé virtues is charged with decoupling character development from moral development (Arthur et al., 2016; Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 6); for instance, Duckworth places no limits on which goals one can strenuously work towards whilst classed as gritty. Arthur et al. (2016) also note Duckworth's failure to question whether perseverance is always *valuable*, or discuss the role of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, in guiding the appropriate exercise of grit. Pushing through difficulty towards some goal is not worthwhile if the costs along the way are too high or the end has little value.

Outside the character education framework, there are further, more political, critiques of grit and resilience education. Just like the self-esteem movement before, the focus on grit and resilience can divert attention and effort away from addressing structural inequalities and systemic injustices. Stokas (2015, p. 522) argues that grit is often needed when critical support for success is missing. Focus on grit can convey to students that hostile environments and failures in support are to be tolerated and that they should succeed despite structural issues remaining unaddressed (pp. 521–522). Arthur et al. (2016) find it telling that Duckworth suggests that disadvantaged or underprivileged students in particular will need and benefit from education focused on the development of grit. They note that this starkly contrasts historical approaches to character development which saw the privileged and comfortable as the least experienced in enduring hardship and most lacking in grit. Students who are structurally disadvantaged most likely have already learned the need to endure adversity in education and other aspects of their lives (Stokas, 2015, p. 522).

EPISTEMIC CHARACTER BUILDING IN HOSTILE CLASSROOMS

My specific focus is the relationship between resilience and hostile climates in the classroom. I have chosen this particular focus because arguments opposing the strict policing and limiting of discussion within the classroom often implicitly (if not explicitly) appeal to the idea that facing hostile discussion can be valuable because it is 'character building'. Creating classroom environments which are too comfortable, the argument goes, undermines learning; it denies students vital opportunities to develop skills required for dealing properly with challenging environments.¹

I claim that exposure to hostile climates in the classroom does not straightforwardly develop epistemic character² in positive and beneficial ways. To fully understand the way in which character is formed and deformed under the influence of hostile classrooms, we need to develop a contextualist picture of the relationship between epistemic character and protection. In practice, this will involve rejecting the assumption that the same traits are protective for all students and will be developed and exercised by all students in response to hostile climates.

Consider the following case:

Elena is in a discussion-based class and finds the climate within the classroom to be extremely hostile. She faces constant hostility, ridicule and belittlement from her peers. Her contributions are dismissed as unintelligent or irrational because she is unfairly perceived not to be knowledgeable on the topic and incapable of making relevant and interesting contributions. She also comes up against viewpoints

which challenge her equal status within the classroom on the basis of her identity; for example, that women are irrational and cannot be trusted to reason objectively.

There are a range of different ways in which Elena could potentially be harmed in this environment, including a range of entangled psychological, social and epistemic harms. Starting with *psychological harms*, repeated exposure to degrading and discriminatory treatment is well-established to have long-term negative effects. It can damage how an individual, like Elena, sees herself and can cause what Bartky (1990) terms 'psychological oppression': the internalisation of discriminatory and prejudicial attitudes which cast one as inferior. As a result, her sense of and belief in her own abilities, potential and worth may be eroded—she may come to see herself as less capable than her peers, lower her aspirations and accept discriminatory treatment.³

She could also suffer a range of *social harms*—including exclusion, isolation and being treated as lacking equal status in the classroom—as well as harms which are more distinctly *epistemic*. For instance, as a result of a decreased level of trust in her abilities and potential, she may lose confidence in her beliefs, possibly losing some of her true beliefs. In turn, her epistemic development may also be restricted: she may not attempt more demanding epistemic tasks because she does not believe that she will succeed. Furthermore, the discriminatory treatment of her by her peers may deny her opportunities to develop and practice epistemic skills by not allowing her to take part in discussion as an equal participant.⁴

Whether, and how much, Elena will suffer these and other harms as a result of the hostile climate in the classroom will depend on how she is able to predict, avoid, respond to or mitigate harms. Epistemic character can affect how students are disposed to respond to potential sources of harm in the classroom. Epistemic character is, roughly, the way individuals are disposed to go about epistemic activities, including how they collect and respond to evidence, adopt or abandon beliefs, respond to challenges, ask questions and so on. It can influence whether an instance of inquiry goes well or goes poorly (Baehr, 2011, p. 1). Often these dispositions settle into stable *epistemic character traits*, such as open- or closed-mindedness, intellectual honesty or dishonesty.

The way in which Elena responds to her environment and the harms she encounters as a result, may vary depending on her epistemic character. Which of the many different epistemic character traits are relevant and important to her at a given time will depend on her specific interests, concerns, challenges and needs—what Medina calls her 'epistemic predicament' (2013, p. 28). Therefore, it is important to ask which particular epistemic character traits are especially salient to students who experience or anticipate different forms and degrees of harm.

PROTECTIVE EPISTEMIC CHARACTER TRAITS

PECTs are epistemic character traits which are developed and/or exercised as a means of enabling or disposing an individual to detect, assess or respond to actual or anticipated sources of harm in ways that tend to prevent, limit or mitigate those harms.

There are a number of different strategies for protecting oneself. I will discuss four strategies in this paper (although there may be many more): 'battle on through', 'believe in yourself', 'just don't listen', and 'keep your head down'. Each protective strategy can be made more effective through the possession and exercise of a number of epistemic character traits.⁵ I begin with two common strategies which are supported by traits commonly valued in resilience education.⁶

Strategy 1: 'Battle on Through'

The first protective strategy is to keep battling through adversity and not let challenges hold you back from achieving important goals. This can be made easier through the possession and exercise of *intellectual courage* and *intellectual*

perseverance. Suppose that Elena developed and exercised *intellectual courage* (roughly, the disposition to correctly perceive potential harms and appropriately persist in pursuing epistemic goals despite potential harms (see Battaly, 2017; Kidd, 2019b; Roberts and Wood, 2007) in response to the dismissal she faces in the classroom. Intellectual courage can be protective for Elena because it helps her to avoid and mitigate the long-term negative effects of repeated exclusion from discussion and dismissal on her learning and wider epistemic development. It can also mitigate the harms of individual setbacks and dismissals by motivating her to find other opportunities for participation and engagement in discussion. As I will discuss further below, epistemic character traits are only PECTs relative to some individual in some particular context: intellectual courage is a PECT for Elena in the hostile classroom because it helps her avoid or mitigate certain harms in that context.

Strategy 2: 'Believe in Yourself'

PECTs such as *intellectual confidence*—the appropriate grasp of the strength of one's epistemic position and abilities (Jones, 2012, p. 697)—and *proper pride* in one's intellectual achievements (see Tanesini, 2018, p. 26) aid self-protection by disposing students to have a robust sense of and trust in their own abilities and worth. These traits help some students to self-protect against psychological harms such as damage to self-esteem or loss of self-trust by disposing them to be resistant to the negative messages about their competency and self-worth portrayed by others. By cultivating and exercising the virtues of intellectual confidence and proper pride, Elena may be less likely to take to heart the challenges and smears on her intelligence because she is disposed to appropriately trust her own intellectual abilities. Although she may concede to some of the challenges she encounters in the hostile classroom, a positive attitude towards her epistemic position and abilities will allow her to view these challenges proportionately and avoid taking them as signs of her inherent or irredeemable incompetency.

COSTS AND BARRIERS TO DEVELOPMENT

We might hope that students who are taught to develop these PECTs will be able to respond to, and even thrive in, hostile climates in the classroom. However, the specific contexts of some students may mean that developing these PECTs is not as easy or beneficial for them as first thought.

Suppose that Elena comes from a working-class background. She has a strong regional accent which people tend to associate with her class background. She is also the first person in her family to attend university and she often does not recognise, and feels alienated by, some of the cultural references and expectations that her middle-class peers share with each other. At least some of the hostility she encounters is rooted in classist prejudice. Throughout her education, she receives very little encouragement in academic pursuits partly because her teachers, family and peers have low expectations because of her socio-economic background.

For the reasons set out above, intellectual perseverance and intellectual courage may be protective for Elena. But this may come at considerable cost. She may avoid and mitigate some potential harms by pushing forward despite obstacles, but as a result she has to put so much energy and effort into repeatedly trying to be taken seriously in the discussion, that she ends up feeling drained and demoralised and has less energy and time to spend on other aspects of her learning or other important projects.

Furthermore, internalisation of the attitudes of her peers and the lack of encouragement she has received in academic endeavours may contribute to a lack of recognition of herself as someone who is able to succeed in the classroom. This can make it difficult for her to become perseverant: if she does not see the end goal as within her reach, then it can be hard to see struggling to overcome obstacles in its pursuit as worthwhile.⁷

Of course, the picture will be extremely complex and the devil is in the detail; there will be many factors affecting how each individual student's epistemic character develops and is exercised in response to hostile classrooms. For now, I highlight three relevant factors: (a) the costs which the development and exercise of PECTs may carry for students given their context; (b) the way in which context can push epistemic character development in a particular direction and make some forms of development more difficult; and (c) the context dependence of an epistemic character trait's status as protective.

A PECT may help a student to prevent, limit or mitigate the incurrence of some particular harm and yet incur a cost. One way is by making the student more vulnerable to other types of harm: the exercise of perseverance is costly to Elena when it results in exhaustion and burnout. Even though she is disposed to weather setbacks for the sake of epistemic goods, repeated exposure may still have a lasting impact on her. This may be especially true if Elena must exercise a great deal of courage and perseverance in other areas of her life and has little opportunity for respite.

The exercise and development of PECTs can also be costly in terms of the time and energy it drains from other projects. Practising intellectual perseverance when one is constantly facing obstacles requires focus and determination. Having to put so much time, energy and focus to be taken seriously may prevent Elena from focusing on listening to others, thinking about the topic in question, or developing her understanding. The demandingness of this process, if often repeated, may have long-term impacts on Elena's learning, slowing down her progress or leaving other skills under-developed because she lacks the time or energy to invest in them.⁸

The aforementioned PECTs may also be costly if they are often misinterpreted, devalued or even punished when exercised by members of certain groups. For example, women (especially women of colour) may be regarded as bossy or arrogant when they display intellectual confidence because what others deem to be an 'appropriate' level of confidence in their abilities (given stereotypes about their lesser intelligence and expectations about feminine modesty) does not reflect their actual capabilities.

Students' abilities to take on these costs vary. Those who incur high costs elsewhere or look to the classroom as a place of respite because they face hardship in other aspects of their lives may be disproportionately disadvantaged by the costs associated with developing and exercising PECTs.

The second factor influencing students' responses to hostile climates in the classroom is the way in which the trajectory of their epistemic character development is directed or limited by background conditions. Medina (2013), building on work from feminist and critical-race theorists such as Claudia Card and W.E.B. Du Bois, examines how relationships of privilege and oppression create tendencies towards the development of particular epistemic character traits in differently privileged groups. He describes trends in character development amongst those who are privileged and those who are oppressed; charting patterns in the socio-genesis of many traits within relationships of privilege and oppression.⁹

Medina acknowledges that in many ways oppression hinders the development of certain forms of virtuous epistemic character:

[A]mong the consequences [of oppression] for marginalized subjects is the feeling of intellectual inferiority, a poor self-assessment of one's cognitive assets and capacities, which has many ramifications and an overall negative impact on one's daily life (the way one speaks or thinks; the way one envisions goals as legitimate and feasible, the way one responds to challenges, and so on). (p. 41)

Students who are systematically treated as inferior, less intelligent or less worthy of an educator's attention, are deprived of the encouragement, material resources, challenges, advice or constructive criticism that can build proper pride and intellectual confidence. For such students, cultivating these PECTs can require greater cognitive effort than for those who have received help and reinforcement along the way. If a student's general level of intellectual confidence has been eroded over time, it is less likely to be well-calibrated to their intellectual abilities. In this way, oppression and disadvantage can function as a force working against the development of 'believe in yourself' PECTs.

The same can be said regarding 'battle on through' PECTs. If a student is not treated by others as a capable knower and participant in the classroom that student is less likely to develop a view of themselves as a capable knower and participant. If they consider themselves to be someone who *cannot* achieve long-term goals because they lack the necessary skills and abilities, they are unlikely to see short-term adversity and challenges to be worth weathering for the sake of epistemic goals. Therefore, they are less likely to exercise intellectual courage and perseverance.

Even when these epistemic character traits can be developed, they will not be protective for all students. Drawing on Dillon's (2012) proposals for a *critical character theory*, Kidd (2020, pp. 77–78) sets out a picture of *critical character epistemology*. One of the central features he identifies is *normative contextualism*—the claim that the status of some or all epistemic character traits as virtues or vices will depend on the context of the individual possessing them (see also Daukas, 2019). I argue in the remainder of this section that we should adopt contextualism regarding the status of an epistemic character trait as *protective*. (Note that I do not defend here Kidd's claim that the status of the epistemic character traits in question as *virtues* or as *vices* can be context dependent, but instead I make a weaker claim regarding the status of epistemic character traits as protective.)

Imagine another student in a situation similar to Elena's but for whom the degrading and dismissive treatment from their peers is part of a much larger and systematic problem; the education system as a whole is biased against people from their social group, and the discrimination they face is reinforced at an institutional level. A motivation to overcome obstacles in order to achieve a goal can only take them so far if the obstacles are simply too great for them to overcome or they lack support from their peers and teachers. This suggests that intellectual courage will not prevent them from being excluded from discussion and missing out on opportunities to learn and develop epistemically. Instead, intellectual courage may leave them exhausted and drained with still little chance of ultimate success.

It is worth noting two things. Firstly, there is a distinction between epistemic character traits which fail to be protective for a particular student in a particular context and PECTs that result in, or make the student more vulnerable to, harms other than those they protect against. We may still say that these latter traits are protective in some respect (and thus are PECTs for the students in question) even if they do not make them better off overall. Secondly, there are also epistemic character traits which, initially do not appear protective, may be protective for certain students in some contexts because they avoid, limit or mitigate some harm(s). I will discuss examples of these traits in the next section.

This contextualism challenges the idea that there are some standard or even paradigmatic virtues which should be taught to all students as a means of protection. There must be a recognition that these virtues are not available or protective for all students and that other traits may be more accessible or appropriate for other students. Teaching a limited list of virtues will leave some students unable to face and deal with adversity.

A proponent of resilience education may argue that their approach is already context sensitive because having the relevant epistemic virtues requires having the practical wisdom to appropriately judge in which contexts to exercise them. If one genuinely possesses intellectual courage, then one would not expose oneself to harms for the sake of epistemic goals *regardless* of the severity of the potential harm and the likelihood and value of success. The intellectually courageous individual is not reckless—they use practical judgement to assess whether the risk of harm to which they expose themselves is not too great and is worthwhile. Intellectual courage would not demand of the student facing systemic discrimination that they stand up against these obstacles alone if doing so would be futile. Likewise, intellectual perseverance will not dispose individuals to endlessly pursue hopeless projects or ones whose end goal does not justify the time and energy which must be put into them (Battaly, 2017, p. 684).

I accept that resilience education can accommodate some context sensitivity in this way; however, I raise three points as to why this is not sufficient. Firstly, the contextualism provided by the role of practical wisdom in epistemic character has substantial implications for resilience education. Consider the paradigmatic picture of the intellectually courageous individual as being undeterred in their epistemic projects by threats of harm. They are not easily overwhelmed by challenges and adversity, but for the sake of avoiding foolhardiness they do recognise that in some scenarios backing down is the practically wise thing to do. Such a model has limited usefulness for teaching students who are systematically vulnerable, because for them the majority of the threats and challenges they face are ones that they cannot stand up to alone. If they possess intellectual courage, it will likely look very different.

Secondly, practical wisdom in exercising intellectual courage is displayed by those who have developed the epistemic virtue to a relatively high degree—those who have practice in exercising (or not) the virtue in a range of different contexts. Students who are just beginning to develop intellectual courage will not be so skilled in judging when its exercise is appropriate. As such, they may be prone to exercise intellectual courage in contexts which do them more harm than good. Therefore, even if intellectual courage is protective when developed to a high degree, the process of learning to be intellectually courageous may result in some students being prone to exercise intellectual courage in harmful ways—especially when the standard picture of what an intellectually courageous individual looks like does not match up to their reality.

Thirdly, and most crucially, in the instances in which practical wisdom dictates that intellectual courage should not be exercised, it does not offer any protection. In scenarios in which the battles are just too great for students to overcome, the virtue of intellectual courage (along with practical wisdom) tells them that now is *not* the time to battle on through. Intellectual courage therefore does not aid them adopting a 'battle on through' strategy for avoiding potential long-term harms.

ALTERNATIVE PECTs

As well as hindering the development and exercise of PECTs that are relevant to the two strategies already discussed, students' social and developmental contexts may dispose them to develop and utilise other protective strategies. There are epistemic character traits which, although vicious, can have some benefit for their bearer under certain conditions.¹⁰ It is epistemic character traits of this type which can support the third and fourth protective strategies.

This attention to the reasons for and conditions under which an epistemic vice is developed is what Kidd calls *aetiological sensitivity* (2020, p. 78). Aetiological sensitivity is a second feature of Kidd's critical character epistemology and plays an important role in its ameliorative project: by understanding why individuals' epistemic character has developed viciously, we can better understand what is needed to remedy those epistemic vices or prevent them developing in others.

Strategy 3: 'Just Don't Listen'

One way to respond to hostility, degradation or insults from others is just to block them out. Battaly (2018) discusses whether *closed-mindedness* (an insensitivity to relevant intellectual alternatives) and *dogmatism* (an unwillingness to engage with alternatives to a belief one already holds) can be beneficial for individuals in certain epistemic environments heavily polluted with misinformation or propaganda. An open-minded individual in such an environment risks being taken in by some of the misinformation around them. Because it is difficult to differentiate between reliable information and misinformation, they give consideration to any pieces of misinformation they come across. At worst, they may be convinced by some of the misinformation and replace some true beliefs with false ones. Even if they were to avoid this, they would have to spend a lot of time and effort separating out reliable information from misinformation.

On the other hand, a closed-minded individual does not waste time sifting through and giving consideration to misinformation—they dismiss it out of hand because they have a tendency not to give all relevant information due consideration. Because of this, Battaly argues that within environments rife with misinformation, closed-mindedness at the very least *minimises* bad epistemic effects for the individual (p. 41).

Battaly also notes how closed-mindedness can help members of marginalised groups avoid losing confidence in their intellectual abilities and overemphasising their limitations when their credibility is constantly doubted (p. 40). If Elena becomes closed-minded, she may be disposed to dismiss the views of her peers when they challenge her competency, especially those views which deny her equal status in the discussion. In this way closed-mindedness can be

a PECT for Elena as it allows her to avoid some of the potential psychological and epistemic harms which could arise from taking to heart those claims.

Strategy 4: 'Keep Your Head Down'

The final strategy involves students protecting themselves by avoiding conflict and placating those who are hostile towards them. One way students may adopt this strategy is through the development of the epistemic vices of *intellectual servility* and *intellectual timidity*.

Alessandra Tanesini argues that intellectual servility (excessive deference to others rooted in a lack of pride in one's intellectual achievements, feelings of shame and a need for others' approval (2018, p. 28)) can be developed as a survival strategy for members of oppressed groups (p. 30). When prevailing stereotypes and expectations state that one should be quiet and deferent, then living up to these expectations can allow one to gain some acceptance from those in positions of power. As Tanesini describes, '[i]t trades off social acceptance for self-esteem, dignity and self-respect. It results in the acceptance of a life lived in shame' (ibid.). Such individuals face a choice between having a healthy respect for their own competency and worth but being excluded from the epistemic community or being admitted only with a low status that denies them respect and recognition of their competency. For this reason, intellectual servility can be PECTs because they are a means of avoiding or reducing hostility and confrontation and harms which can follow from them.¹¹

In a similar way, intellectual timidity (shyness and lack of active engagement in epistemic projects stemming from a desire to avoid being negatively judged by others) can be a means of ego protection (p. 32). When one is likely to be unfairly dismissed as incompetent when speaking up, one can avoid the harms of such humiliation by shying away from being noticed.

The development of the PECTs under these two strategies can carry large costs. In particular, the development of epistemic vices constitutes a form of damage to epistemic character (see Kidd, 2019a, 2020). While students may develop and exercise these traits to avoid conflict, they do so at the cost of undermining their competency as inquirers. By developing intellectual timidity or intellectual servility and accepting or avoiding the negative assessments of their abilities by their peers, students become vulnerable to a loss of trust in their abilities and miss out on opportunities for positive development. By becoming closed-minded, they may dismiss genuine criticism and feedback and may miss out on valuable opportunities to revise their beliefs and improve their epistemic position. Figure 1 summarises the four protective strategies and the epistemic character traits which support them.

As discussed above, systems of oppression and privilege can impact the trajectories of individuals' epistemic character development. Several virtue theorists (Battaly, 2018; Kidd, 2020; Tessman, 2005) (within both virtue ethics and virtue epistemology) have noted that under conditions of adversity or oppression, the function of virtues can become distorted. Traits which are typically understood as virtues can make individuals worse off and adopting traits typically understood as vices can be the best means of surviving, or even thriving, in the environment (see Battaly, 2018).¹² Students may be more likely to develop vicious PECTs rather than virtuous PECTs due to (i) a lack of access to the resources needed to develop virtuous PECTs; (ii) significant costs in the development or exercise of virtuous PECTs; or (iii) creation of hostile conditions under which vicious PECTs become necessary survival strategies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESILIENCE EDUCATION

It would be wrong to conclude from the existence of vicious PECTs that we should begin to teach them to students as means of protection. Besides an intuitive resistance to actively teaching epistemic vices, doing so fails to alleviate the burden placed on such students who take on additional harms by developing epistemic vices to protect

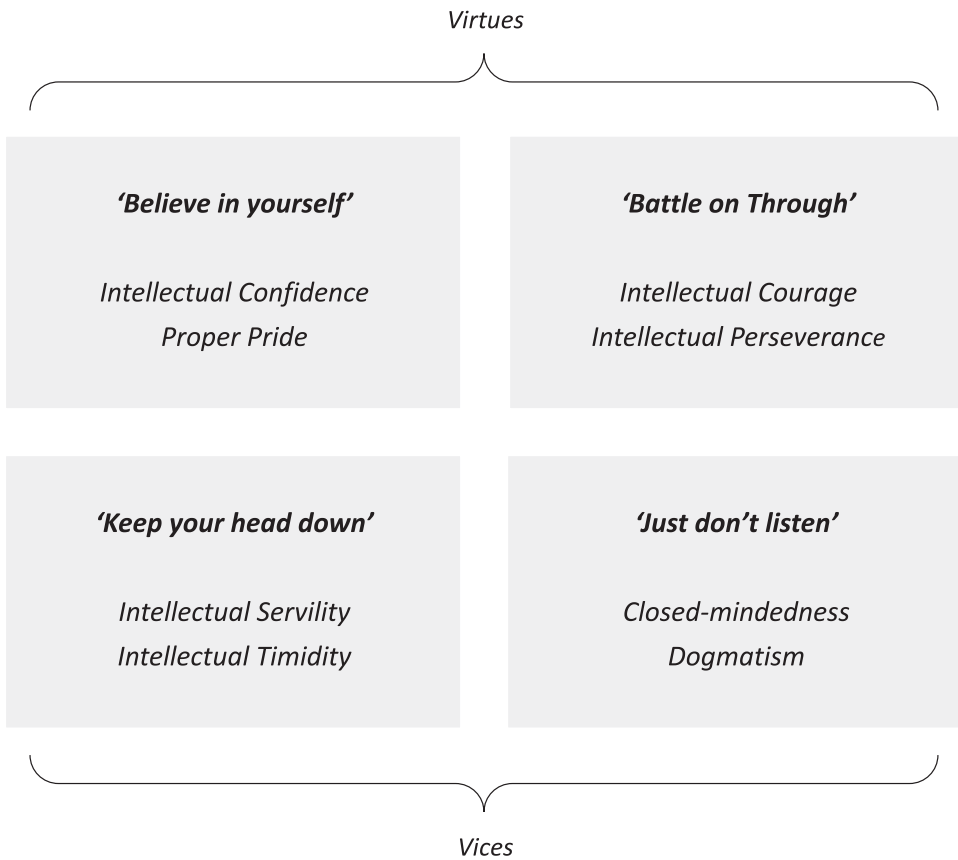


FIGURE 1 PECTs supporting the four protective strategies

themselves. Neither does it do anything to address the limitations that are placed on students' epistemic character development.¹³

Through the recognition of certain epistemic vices as PECTs, we can identify the aetiological root of those epistemic vices for some individuals. Namely, we can recognise that they are developed as means of protection when epistemic virtues are extremely difficult to develop, are even more costly, or are not in fact PECTs. Given the practical aim of character education to develop a programme for teaching epistemic virtues, understanding why epistemic vices are developed is an important step in avoiding and counteracting vicious epistemic character development. If we fail to recognise the protective role of these epistemic vices and the conditions which influences students towards their development, then we run the risk of unwittingly perpetuating their development by creating conditions ordinarily thought to facilitate the development of virtuous PECTs.

Looking through a critical lens, we can see that the relationship between epistemic character and protection is complex. Using the tools of critical character epistemology, we can approach character education so that it reflects how the social context and positions within oppressive systems will affect students. This change in our approach results in thinking about when an epistemic character trait counts as protective as well as the cost of developing such a trait and what obstacles there are to this development. This approach requires sensitivity to the underlying structures to realise the kind of protection that is necessary for some students.

We should challenge the assumption that there is a standard list of epistemic virtues which can be taught to students as a means of protection because the epistemic virtues on these standard lists will not be protective for all students. This perhaps is not just a problem for character education focused on resilience, but a more general problem for any character education approaches which offer a standard list of virtues to be taught to all students—although I have not touched on this broader question here. There is further work to be done in exploring whether character education more broadly can be reapproached through a critical lens.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ See, for example, Ramsey's (2017) critique of safe spaces in the classroom.
- ² I focus on epistemic character here but there may also be a similar relationship between moral character and protection.
- ³ See also Hookway (2010).
- ⁴ As an example, see Fricker's (2007, pp. 47–48) argument that repeated instances of testimonial injustice can have negative impacts on epistemic development.
- ⁵ My methodology is somewhat similar to that used by Baehr (2011) in his identification of six 'natural groupings' of epistemic virtues. Each grouping relates to a distinct 'inquiry-relevant' challenge and contains virtues which equip individuals to respond to and overcome these challenges. Like Baehr, I do not take the grouping I present to be a strict classification or taxonomy—they need not correspond to any structural connections or distinctions between epistemic character traits. The groupings of PECTs need not be considered the primary way of categorising epistemic character traits—it is simply the salient way of grouping them when thinking about epistemic character in the context of protection. There may be other ways of grouping epistemic character traits together which intersect with or are more fine grained than the groupings offered here.
- ⁶ For example, The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2012, p. 5) lists courage, confidence, determination, perseverance and resilience among the 'building blocks of character'.
- ⁷ The effects of stereotype threat (see Steele and Aronson, 1995) may also undermine the development of an individual's confidence in their ability within a particular domain by providing apparent evidence of lack of ability.
- ⁸ The relationship between discrimination and psychological health has been explored in literature on *minority stress* (see, e.g. Meyer, 2003, 2007).
- ⁹ Medina does note, however, that these patterns of development are neither inevitable for, nor exclusive to, any particular group (2013, pp. 40, 43).
- ¹⁰ Kidd (2019a, p. 222) describes education as 'epistemically corrupting' when it 'tends to encourage the development and exercise of epistemic vices'.
- ¹¹ It may be possible for students to adopt this protective strategy by displaying these behaviours whilst maintaining, but hiding, an appropriate level of trust in themselves. However, Tanesini (2018, p. 29) expresses doubt over whether this is possible over long periods due to the internalisation of such attitudes.
- ¹² See also Dillon (2012) and Daukas (2019) for work on virtue and vice under conditions of oppression.
- ¹³ Kidd (2020) discusses the ways in which social oppression can limit the development of epistemic character.

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