Does reading good books make us better people? Many authors have held that stories play a key part in leading us into the virtues. One particularly promising literary resource, however, has been overlooked by character educators: the Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis. To date, this much-loved series has sold 100 million copies in 47 languages. In 2015, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe was included in Time magazine's 100 best books for young adults. Given the extraordinary popularity of the Narnia stories and their strong character themes, we believe these novels are a rich resource waiting to be tapped.

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“The Fantasy Advantage,” in Scientific American (March/April 2016), reviews new research indicating that young readers “absorb some lessons better when they are wrapped in magic and imagination.” Fantasy literature like Lewis’ Narnia novels can be an effective vehicle for character education.

With a 1-year pilot project grant from the John Templeton Foundation, we designed and tested, in five diverse schools in the North of England, a literature curriculum that had 11- to 13-year-old children read and reflect on one of three Narnia novels. Eleven-year-olds read The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe; 12-year-olds, Prince Caspian; and 13-year-olds, The Voyage of the ‘Dawn Treader.’

These three titles form a unit in that they all feature children from the Pevensie family as protagonists. Working with teachers and two C.S. Lewis scholars, we identified...
12 virtues that are, at various points in the stories, exhibited by one or another character. (See p. 3 for how we defined these virtues.)

Besides providing captivating, character-rich stories, Lewis’ Narnia novels offer a philosophical grounding for character education in that they depict a universe governed by moral laws that he called “the Tao.” In his 1943 book on education, The Abolition of Man, he explained that the Tao is a Chinese term for the moral order of the universe, “the way life works.” The Tao is innate and universal, a law like gravity in the physical sciences but with one important difference: We have a choice as to whether we obey it—and have harmonious and flourishing lives—or not.

In The Abolition of Man, Lewis cites the many cross-cultural affirmations of the moral laws comprising the Tao—laws commanding justice, condemning greed and cruelty, specifying duties to children and elders, and the like—that can be found in the great texts of different religions, cultures, and traditions as diverse as the ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Old Norse, Chinese, Indian, Roman, Greek, Australian Aboriginal, and American Indian.

This empirical evidence of a universal moral law provides important support for a central tenet of character education: There are “core ethical values” that all persons are obliged to recognize and respect. That principle stands in opposition to the moral relativism of the age that regards morality as just a matter of opinion. The Tao can be summed up, in Lewis’ words, as “the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are.”

Our Narnian Virtues project draws encouragement from the recent success of the Knightly Virtues project of the University of Birmingham’s Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (www.jubileecentre.ac.uk). That project developed a literature-based character education curriculum using four well-known stories—Gareth and Lynette, El Cid, Don Quixote, and The Merchant of Venice—and to date has been experienced by nearly 30,000 9- to 11-year-olds in schools across Britain. Its popularity suggests a hunger on the part of schools for high-quality, virtue-laden materials that can be integrated into the regular academic curriculum.

The Narnian Virtues project expands previous literature-based character education interventions in that it:

- uses stories whose protagonists are similar in age to that of the students reading the novels
- focuses on helping students translate better understanding of virtues into more consistent virtuous behavior
- investigates the difference parents make when they work with their child on fostering the Narnian virtues in family life.

The Pilot Project

In the Narnia classroom, the teacher explains to students that virtues are good moral habits and vices are bad moral habits. This emphasis on the role of habits in the life of character is consistent with classical thinking going back to Aristotle, who taught that a virtue is not a mere capacity or ability, but a disposition—a tendency to act in a good way.

Every teacher receives a Teacher’s Guide. Every student gets a Student Workbook, Student Journal, and a copy of the Narnia novel under study. As children read their novel, they do a “virtue analysis” in their workbook of selected extracts from the story (see p. 5). They highlight in green the virtues shown by the story characters in a given passage, and highlight in yellow the vices shown.

Students then explain (in writing) how the character in question displayed the vice or virtue—and write about a time when they displayed the same virtue or character flaw.

Our goal in the Narnian Virtues curriculum is to foster character development in the full sense: knowledge, feeling, and behavior—“head, heart, and hand.” We want students to understand the virtues displayed in the stories; care about these virtues (admire them, want to possess them, be repelled by their opposing vices); and, finally, act upon them with increasing consistency in their own lives, both inside and outside of school.

That meant we had a three-fold educational challenge: Through interactive discussion of the novels and corresponding class activities, we needed to: (1) instruct students in what the virtues are; (2) inspire them to want to possess and practice these virtues; and (3) guide them in translating their understanding and desire into effective strategies for applying the virtues in their behavior.

I’m more aware of when I’m showing fortitude and determination. I can use them in my life more because now I know what they are.

—12-year-old boy

To try to achieve depth of impact, we asked every student to choose, from the 12 Narnian virtues, the 3 virtues in which they “most wanted to improve.” Then, in their journals, students were to write out a specific plan for improving in each of their chosen virtues and, over the weeks of the project, record their efforts and progress.

As children took responsibility for their own character growth in this way, the teacher encouraged them to persevere in
1. **Wisdom.** The habit of making good judgments; discerning what is true and good and choosing the best course of action. We need courage to change what we can, the patience to endure what we cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference.

2. **Love.** The habit of acting selflessly for the good of another, without seeking recognition or reward; willingness to sacrifice for another; being kind, caring, generous, and loyal. There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for another.

3. **Fortitude.** The habit of doing what is right in the face of difficulty; the mental and emotional strength to handle hardship, overcome obstacles, and endure suffering; showing confidence, courage, patience, perseverance, endurance, or resilience in challenging circumstances. They would need fortitude to endure the difficult journey ahead.

4. **Courage.** The habit of overcoming fear when confronting physical danger or facing social pressure to do what’s wrong. Moral courage—standing up for what’s right when it’s unpopular to do so—is rarer than bravery in battle.

5. **Self-Control.** The habit of controlling one’s desires, emotions, and impulses; being able to resist temptation; waiting longer for something better. In the absence of self-control, our desires control us.

6. **Justice.** The habit of treating all persons with respect and fairness; giving people what they are due; not playing favorites. A good ruler governs with justice toward all.

7. **Forgiveness.** The habit of letting go of angry feelings toward another person, even while holding wrongdoers accountable for their actions. Many people find forgiveness difficult when someone has hurt them deeply. She forgave his crime but felt he should still suffer a just punishment.

8. **Gratitude.** The habit of feeling and expressing thanks. Gratitude leads us to count our blessings.

9. **Humility.** The habit of being aware of our strengths and weaknesses; admitting and correcting flaws and failures; being free from pride and arrogance. Without humility, we remain blind to our faults.

10. **Integrity.** The habit of sticking to our moral values; following our conscience; being honest with ourselves and others. As a leader with integrity, he listened to the voice of conscience, not the voice of the crowd.

11. **Hard Work.** The habit of making a strong or determined effort to get a job done or achieve a goal. Nothing worthwhile was ever accomplished without a lot of hard work.

12. **Curiosity.** The habit of being inquisitive; wanting to learn or know something. Curiosity is the mark of an active mind.
their efforts, understanding that the quest for character is a humbling journey, one which we are all traveling:

No one is perfect. We all make mistakes; we all often act in ways that don’t reflect our best self. Developing good character means trying to be our best self more of the time. Most of us possess these virtues to some degree. Our challenge is to make progress—to practice the virtues more consistently, acknowledge when we don’t, and keep on trying to improve. Everyone’s character is a work in progress.

Evidence of Student Growth

In their workbooks and journals, and in interviews and focus groups, a number of students provided evidence that they were taking this challenge to heart:

My friends don’t really respect people and it’s like peer pressure—they’re trying to push me into it. Usually I would go with it, but when we started the virtues, I knew wisdom meant, like, right or wrong—and now I have to think, “Is it right or is it wrong?”

—12-year-old boy

This project has taught us what kind of person we are. It’s actually helped us to realize what we do.

—11-year-old boy

I never used to read at home. But after we read this book together, I took it home and read it. It was different, wasn’t it?

—11-year-old girl

Parents as Partners

Just as C. S. Lewis has been overlooked in character education, so have parents.

The family is the first school of virtue. Parents have the potential to be the most important influence on their children’s character development. Marvin Berkowitz and John Gryce, in their article “Fostering Goodness” in the Journal of Moral Education, emphasize the crucial role parents play in developing the “building blocks of morality.” Good parenting, they maintain, can be taught and learned.

Because parents are so important, character educators are increasingly calling for greater collaboration with parents. James Arthur, director of the UK’s Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, states:

Character education should be viewed as a joint responsibility. It is more effective when teachers and parents talk the same language of virtue to children.

In the pilot project, students’ journals included space for parents’ or guardians’ comments. One mother wrote:

This project has been a good opportunity for my daughter to reflect on the virtues and vices in the books she is studying but also on how they relate to her own character traits.

In principle, the character education movement has always recognized the importance of parents. In practice, however, the character education initiatives of schools have often neglected to involve parents in a meaningful way.

Schools often ask, “How do you reach unengaged parents?” Our answer is, “If you can’t get the parents to the program, get the program to the parents.” (See Tom Lickona’s Character Matters for ways schools have done this.) To get the Narnian Virtues curriculum to the parents, we are designing “family homework,” activities that students will do with their parents at home.

Character education researchers to date have not attempted to assess the extent to which involving parents makes a measurable difference in student character outcomes. In our project, we will compare students whose parents work with them at home on project-related activities, with students in other schools that are not implementing parent involvement.

We hope our school-parent partnership in the Narnian Virtues project will encourage—in the UK, the US, and other countries—a greater emphasis on the role of parents in character education. School-home collaboration is especially important in contexts where, by choice or circumstance, parents do not normally show strong involvement in their child’s education. The importance of parents spending time with their children, actively engaged in their interests and activities, has been emphasized by the Parenting Matters report of the UK’s Centre Forum.

Wisdom of C.S. Lewis

In reading great literature, I become a thousand men and yet remain myself.

If you don’t read good books, you will read bad ones.

Don’t waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did.

Right actions done for the wrong reason do not help to build the internal quality of character called a virtue.

Project co-director Tom Lickona with Jo Wray, Head Teacher at Featherstone Academy, one of the UK’s Narnian Virtues schools.

The Next Stage of the Project

We are currently seeking schools to join us in the expansion of the Narnian Virtues project from 200 students in the pilot year to 5,000 during the upcoming 3-year phase (fall 2016-2018). (See Invitation, p. 8.) We have five goals: (1) to demonstrate how to integrate Narnian Virtues into a school’s regular English classes; (2) to refine the curriculum through continued field-testing; (3) to continue to study the impact of Narnian Virtues on students’ understanding and behavioral application of the virtues; (4) to assess the extent to which involving parents improves students’ acquisition of the virtues; and (5) to include as implementation sites, high-need schools where parent involvement and educational outcomes have been historically low.
"Oh — oh — oh!" sobbed Mr Tumnus, "I'm crying because I'm such a bad Faun."

"I don't think you're a bad Faun at all," said Lucy. "I think you are a very good Faun. You are the nicest Faun I've ever met."

"Oh — oh — oh — you wouldn't say that if you knew," replied Mr Tumnus between his sobs.

"No, I'm a bad Faun. I don't suppose there ever was a worse Faun since the beginning of the world."

"But what have you done?" asked Lucy.

"My old father, now," said Mr Tumnus; "that's his picture over the mantelpiece. He would never have done a thing like this."

"A thing like what?" said Lucy.

"Like what I've done," said the Faun. "Taken service under the White Witch. That's what I am. I'm in the pay of the White Witch."

"The White Witch? Who is she?"

"Why, it is she that has got all Narnia under her thumb. It's she that makes it always winter. Always winter and never Christmas; think of that!"

"How awful!" said Lucy. "But what does she pay you for?"

"That's the worst of it," said Mr Tumnus with a deep groan. "I'm a kidnapper for her, that's what I am. Look at me. Daughter of Eve. Would you believe that I'm the sort of Faun to meet a poor innocent child in the wood, one that had never done me any harm, and pretend to be friendly with it, and invite it home to my cave, all for the sake of lulling it asleep and then handing it over to the White Witch?"

"No," said Lucy. "I'm sure you wouldn't do anything of the sort."

"But I have," said the Faun.
We all know we should be kind, honest, and hardworking. We also know we should be grateful, forgiving, and self-controlled.

We even know the people we need to forgive, where we need more self-control, and what we should be grateful for. But—if we’re being honest with ourselves—whether we actually work to develop such virtues in our lives is another matter.

Sometimes we even know how we could improve in a particular character quality but still don’t do it. In that case, the problem is not the skill but the will. So, the question is, how do we motivate ourselves to be better?

**How Books Build Character**

One way we learn about the virtues—and develop the desire to practice them—is through good books (and good movies). In his book on education, *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis wrote:

*We learn the rule of decent behavior from parents and teachers, and friends and books.*

You might think it curious that he included “books” among the sources of good character. How does reading books help us become better persons? Consider fiction. How can our character and behavior improve in the real world by reading about characters who don’t actually exist?

The clue might be in a wardrobe. It might even be found in C.S. Lewis’ own wardrobe. We can call it “Jack’s wardrobe” because his friends and family used to call him “Jack.”

The very wardrobe Jack had in his attic bedroom as a boy in Belfast, Ireland now resides in the foyer of the Wade Center, 20 miles west of Chicago, Illinois, where the archives of Lewis’ letters and personal library are housed.

The management of the Wade Center, with a wink and a smile, have put a sign on the wardrobe’s door saying that they accept no responsibility whatsoever for your children if they go inside the wardrobe …

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the Pevensie children, who first entered Narnia through the wardrobe, lived in two worlds. They spent time in Narnia and time in England. Yet every one of us lives in two worlds. We all live in a “primary world” (where we eat, shop, exercise, go to school, etc.) but most of us also live in a “secondary world” of the imagination. Some of us spend more time there than others.

As I write at the table by the bay window in my Victorian office at the University of Leeds, I look out on the School of English, where Lewis’ friend and *Lord of the Rings* author, J.R.R. Tolkien, was Professor of English before moving to Oxford.

According to Tolkien, “A secondary world contains an ‘inner consistency of reality’ so that what you find inside is ‘true’ in that it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside.”

It is the shuttling back and forth between our primary world and the secondary world of imagination that enables us to learn and grow in ways we couldn’t if we remained in our primary world. A story enables us to see truths about a fictional character that then help us see ourselves afresh with a greater degree of honesty.

**Entering through the Right Door**

Given the importance of stories and the world of imagination, we might ask ourselves if we’re making enough use of good literature in character education.

*The Chronicles of Narnia* are “good books” in that they provide a moral “secondary world” where virtuous action is commended to us.

Having to deal with the challenges they face in Narnia is a character-building experience for Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy. They have to work hard and persevere as they seek to liberate the inhabitants of the land of Narnia and do the right (rather than the easy) thing.

Perhaps it shouldn’t surprise us that Jack, an Oxford don and a classical scholar, would have the door of his wardrobe swing open on its hinge, as it does, to allow the children to enter Narnia.

He would have been aware that the Latin for “hinge” is the word “cardo,” from which we get the word “cardinal” as in the “cardinal virtues” (prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice).

That’s why the Narnian virtues (which encompass the cardinal virtues) are so important for children and young people today. The door into the world of Narnia opens on the “hinge” of the cardinal virtues. Our whole moral life depends on them. Our existence as human beings hangs on them.

The *Narnian Virtues* character education curriculum offers the opportunity to develop good character—through the right door.

Welcome to Jack’s wardrobe.
Assessing Program Impact
What Our Research Found
Tom Lickona, SUNY Cortland, USA

How did our Narnian Virtues curriculum impact students’ character? To find out, we used both quantitative and qualitative assessments.

Our first quantitative survey was designed by University of Warwick Professor Leslie Francis, a project co-investigator, and was administered at the start and end of the 6-week pilot. It had two parts:

1. Knowledge Index of Narnian Character Virtues. This tested students’ ability to recognize each of the 12 Narnian virtues by correctly selecting, from six statements describing different behaviors, the three behaviors that were examples of a specified Narnian virtue, e.g., fortitude.

2. The Narnian Character Virtues Scales. These items asked students to rate, on a 5-point, agree-disagree Likert scale, the extent to which each of the 12 Narnian virtues “describes me.” For example, the items for the virtue of courage were:

- I do not let fear stand in my way.
- I stay calm in the face of danger.
- I do what I think is right, even when others make fun of me.
- I refuse to panic when things look bad.
- I do not let other people’s anger stand in my way.

Self-ratings on items like these were taken as one indication of the degree to which students were applying the Narnian virtues.

The Narnian Virtues Questionnaire was a shorter questionnaire but more demanding in that it required students to generate responses to open-ended “thinking questions” such as:

- What is a virtue?
- What is a vice?
- Why is it important to develop good character?
- Choose a virtue and explain how a person might develop that virtue.
- Define each of the 12 Narnian virtues.

Quantitative Results: Growth in Virtue Understanding

On the Knowledge Index of Narnian Character Virtues, which assessed ability to correctly identify the behaviors that expressed a particular virtue, the pre- and post-test mean scores showed a modest, statistically significant increase.

More impressive evidence of improved student understanding of the virtues came from the Narnian Virtues Questionnaire with its open-ended questions. For every class at all four grade levels, there was a substantial increase in students’ understanding; an average gain of 15.9 points out of a possible score of 50. There was, however, no statistically significant change in responses on the Narnian Character Virtues Scales, which assessed students’ self-ratings of the extent to which the 12 virtues described them.

Qualitative Results: Behavior Change

Our qualitative data confirmed our quantitative findings that students grew in their understanding of the Narnian virtues. These data also revealed greater behavioral application of the virtues than had been evident from students’ self-ratings on the Narnian Character Virtues Scales. The workbooks, journals, and focus groups indicated that at least some students were making a serious effort to apply the virtues in their own lives.

Two examples:

I have shown courage when being asked to do bad things and said no, even if I get called a wimp for not doing what everyone else does. (girl, age 12)

It’s helped me because I used to be very deceitful with my homework and my brother. (boy, age 11)

Students’ journals also revealed a striking similarity in what they chose as the 3 virtues they most wanted to improve in. At every grade level—4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th—self-control was first. Children appear to correctly intuit how important self-control is in the life of character—and how difficult it is to achieve. In their bestselling 2011 book, Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength, psychologist Roy Baumeister and science writer John Tierney observe that many character-related problems are failures of self-control: compulsive spending and borrowing, impulsive violence, underachievement in school, procrastination at work, alcohol and drug abuse, unhealthy diet, and explosive anger. In a recent global survey, when people were asked to rank their character failings, lack of self-control topped the list.

We view our Narnia students’ choice of self-control as the virtue most in need of their attention, as being evidence of their self-knowledge. It also shows the wisdom of continuing to have children select the virtues on which they most wish to focus their self-improvement efforts.

Tom Lickona directs the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs (USA) and co-directs the Narnian Virtues project. His books include Educating for Character and Raising Good Children.
In 2012, I was having dinner with Professor Mark Pike (M.Pike@education.leeds.ac.uk) is Dean of the School of Education at the University of Leeds, England; author of Mere Education: C.S. Lewis as Teacher for Our Time (also available in Dutch); and director of the Narnian Virtues project. The Center for the 4th and 5th Rs is a partner on the project. Tom Lickona interviewed Mark Pike about his work.

How did you get interested in C.S. Lewis?

Mark Pike: I read Chronicles of Narnia for the first time to our children as bedtime stories. Before that I had read Lewis’ book on education, The Abolition of Man, which was of interest to me because I’d been a high school English teacher for ten years.

How did you come to write your own book on Lewis’ thinking about education?

MP: In 2012, I was having dinner with Michael Ward, who wrote Planet Narnia. I mentioned that people often think of Lewis as a children’s author but don’t recognize him as a great educator who helps us think clearly about the aims of schooling in our own time. Michael agreed that there should be a book that calls attention to Lewis’ contributions to education. Mere Education pulls together his ideas on education from about 30 of his books. (For Lewis’ ideas on character education, read Ch. I of Mere Education here.)

So before character education became a movement in the U.S., Lewis was writing about it?

MP: Absolutely—but people are only just realizing that. In The Abolition of Man, Lewis puts his gift for visual imagery to good use in writing about “men without chests.” He draws a picture for us of a man, a product of the schooling system he saw in England, with a sunken chest and a huge head. For Lewis, human beings had a head (a brain) and a stomach (appetites), but between the two is a chest (character). He believed schools were not educating the chest. He should have known because he taught 18-year-olds when they came up to Oxford University to be his students. In his view, the chest had wasted away due to a lack of exercise. This explains his book’s unusual title, The Abolition of Man. He believed that the neglect of good character leads to the end of our humanity.

Can you give an example of that from one of the Narnia novels?

MP: In The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, Eustace starts out as a thoroughly obnoxious boy. He is argumentative, surly, self-centred, ungrateful, and lazy. Will Poulter plays the part in the movie brilliantly. As a result of all these vices, especially his greed for gold, Eustace actually turns into a dragon. He has a reptilian skin and even scares himself when he sees his reflection. He starts to appreciate what he has lost and just wants to be friends with his cousins and enjoy human companionship. Eventually, Aslan rescues him. After his ‘unDragoning,’ we read:

It would be nearly true to say that “from that time forth Eustace was a different boy.” To be strictly accurate, he began to be a different boy. He had relapses. There were still many days when he could be very tiresome. But the cure had begun.

That’s a basic principle in character education—we improve gradually with effort and practice. We’re all a work in progress.

MP: One of the most memorable character learning moments from our Narnian Virtues curriculum project is the episode of Edmund and the Turkish Delight. In England, we always have Turkish Delight at Christmas. But the Turkish Delight in the story is enchanted by the White Witch and highly addictive. Edmund will do just about anything to get more—even betraying his own siblings.

We asked middle schoolers in our project, “What is your Turkish Delight?” A response that emerged repeatedly in students’ journals was the use of mobile phones, particularly at night and, as a result, not getting enough sleep. These students were able to identify the lack of self-control exhibited by a character in the novel and then to recognize it in their own lives as stemming from peer pressure to be online and socially available at all times. One 12-year-old girl said:

When I admitted my Internet addiction to my mum, she limited my time online for a week. It was the right thing to do. Before, I was so worried I forgot to eat.

Student responses like this have prompted us to work more closely with parents in the next phase of our research.

What else stands out from these novels?

MP: There is an important social justice dimension. In The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, Peter and Susan begin by thinking only of themselves and their family—they just want to rescue their brother Edmund and get back home. But they end up accepting the challenge of battling against injustice and liberating the inhabitants of Narnia from the Witch’s tyranny so they can thrive and prosper.

Lewis’ Narnia novels depict a universe where moral choices shape events and character. There are lessons here for us all.

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