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The virtue and values education centre. Establishing a research and transference centre for virtue and character education in Spain

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ABSTRACT

Amid the renewed international interest in values and moral education, virtue and character education are increasingly recognized as key approaches to fostering human flourishing. This paper examines the development and work of the Centro de Educación en Virtudes y Valores (CEV), a research and transfer centre for character education in Spain. While such centres have grown globally, this study asks: What are the key features of a research and transfer centre designed to promote character and virtue education across educational contexts, such as culturally specific environments like Spain.

The study uses a descriptive and exploratory case study approach. Data were collected using a mixed-methods design, including surveys, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of internal reports and programme evaluations. These methods enabled a triangulated understanding of the CEV's educational philosophy, programme implementation, and institutional impact. The first section explores the centre's anthropological foundations, educational rationale, and programme design. The second outlines the CEV's transfer efforts in universities and schools, including diagnostic tools and teacher training programmes.

Findings suggest that the CEV distinguishes itself through its neo-Aristotelian and Thomistic anthropological framework, emphasis on teacher flourishing and accompaniment, and its culturally adapted virtue taxonomy. Evaluations of its programmes show high satisfaction and impact among participants, reinforcing the value of sustained, relational, and context-sensitive character education. The paper concludes by identifying future lines of research, such as comparative studies with other character education research centres and the long-term impact of teacher formation on educational communities.

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1. Introducing the virtue and 'character turn' in education

Character education aims to promote human character development by cultivating positive traits known as 'virtues.' While both 'character' and 'virtue' are complex and multidimensional constructs, for the purpose of this section, we broadly understand character as the set of relatively stable psychological attributes or traits that contribute to competent moral agency (Berkowitz, 2011; Peterson & Kristjánsson, 2024; Pritchard, 1988)[1]. In this context, character refers to a person's ethical and moral qualities and how these inform their thinking, emotional responses, and overall behaviour. Character education encompasses educational practices in both formal and non-formal settings that support the development of character in children and adults.

Virtues can be conceptualized as stable dispositional clusters that contribute to effective functioning across various meaningful and distinct areas of human life (Arthur et al., 2017). Virtue and character education are considered a subset of moral education. Just as values education fosters learning 'in' or 'about' values, moral education aims to foster dimensions of human development relevant to the moral

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domain and cultivate morally grounded individuals. Character education, therefore, is a specific form of moral education focused, in this case, on the cultivation of positive character traits (virtues) associated with good character (Arthur et al., 2017). Indeed, character education can be rooted in various philosophical paradigms, one of which is virtue ethics. This paradigm advances particularist perspectives on virtue by emphasizing the moral agent and the intentional development of virtues or excellences in the context of what constitutes a good life, and the traits required to achieve it (Anscombe, 1958; Hursthouse, 1999; Macintyre, 1981).

Other approaches to education of moral character uphold universalist assertions centered on justice and rational deliberation or reasoning and focusing on determining the morally correct course of action in specific situations (e.g. Frankena, 1973; Hare, 1963; Kohlberg, 1981; Rawls, 1971). Moral behaviour is defined as that which aligns with rationally derived principles applicable to given contexts—though typically restricted to certain domains of life. Moral obligation is confined to what is expressible through universally moral principles (Kant, 2005), placing limited moral demands on individuals, thereby excluding many personal choices from moral consideration. Further proposals for moral character education try to integrate both the former approaches (Lapsley & Narváez, 2006). Moreover, since moral development, as the basis to advance in different models of moral education, is itself a multidimensional construct ranging from moral emotions, moral motivation, moral identity and diverse social elements, among others, it requires an integrated theoretical foundation.

Amid the renewed interest in moral and values education (Harmawati et al., 2022; Lovat et al., 2010; Nucci et al., 2024; Yacek et al., 2023), virtue and character education have emerged as compelling educational models that foster students' flourishing and civic responsibility. Yet, neo-Aristotelian approaches to character education have not gone without critique. Some scholars question their philosophical underpinnings or argue for broader ethical frameworks. For instance, Carr (2024) contends that focusing on character alone fails to capture the full scope of moral development, advocating instead for greater emphasis on moral qualities such as love, justice, and knowledge. From a developmental psychology perspective, critics argue that these models fall short of the 'principle of developmental adequacy', the requirement that moral theories align with empirical findings on human development (Lapsley, 2021). Others point to a misrepresentation of how virtue is cultivated, leading to doubts about the effectiveness of character programs (Kohn, 1997; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006).

Nonetheless, the rise of what has been termed the *character turn* (Arthur 2020a) signals a paradigm shift in education: one that re-centers the holistic moral development of students as a goal on par with intellectual and technical training. Advocates assert that formal education should not merely transmit knowledge or skills but intentionally cultivate virtues across all stages of schooling (Arthur, 2017). These virtues—such as honesty, compassion, perseverance, and practical wisdom—are essential for personal and communal flourishing, equipping students to make ethical decisions and lead meaningful lives (Kristjánsson, 2015). In this sense, character education is not just about shaping behaviour or improving academic outcomes but about forming individuals capable of navigating ethical complexity and contributing to the common good (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005).

In contrast, various moral education paradigms either challenge or bypass the role of virtue. Cognitive-developmental approaches (Kohlberg, 1981) focus on justice-based reasoning rather than character traits. Values clarification (Raths *et al*., 1978) promotes personal autonomy through subjective value exploration, rejecting universal virtues as overly prescriptive. Ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984) prioritize relational sensitivity over abstract virtue ideals. Critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 1988) situates moral education within struggles for social justice, often viewing virtues as ideological constructs. Consequentialist and deontological ethics, respectively, prioritize outcomes (Mill, 2009) and duties (Kant, 2005), sidelining virtue in favor of rule- or result-based reasoning. Postmodern critiques go further, arguing that appeals to virtue may mask culturally contingent norms or reinforce dominant power structures (Lyotard, 1984). These diverse frameworks underscore the pluralism of moral education and the ongoing debate over the role of virtue in fostering ethical development.

Character education can be more precisely defined as 'any form of holistic moral education focusing on the systematic development of virtues as stable traits of character, with the purpose of promoting human flourishing (qua objective wellbeing) and founded on some general virtue theory' (Watts & Kristjánsson, 2023, p. 172). As a subset of moral education, character education accommodates various

approaches to character development, each shaped by its foundational assumptions and educational practices. These include, for instance, positive education, which incarnates educationally positive psychology, including as well noncharacterological elements.

Under the VIA (Values in Action) it fosters moral development through and emphasis on 24-character strengths framed under six core virtues recognized across cultures and promote well-being in both personal and professional domains; (Peterson & Seligman, 2004); the Neo-Aristotelian character education model (Kristjánsson, 2015; see Section 2.1), underscores the development of virtues through practice, aimed at achieving flourishing, and integrating both emotional and rational dimensions, and reinforcing the role of community in fostering moral life; Confucian character education, which considers and reinforces a transcendent or spiritual side of moral development, facing abstract moral ideals (Yu, 2007); and both conservative (Lickona, 1991) and liberal US-style (Berkowitz, 2002) models (Peterson & Kristjánsson, 2024; Watts & Kristjánsson, 2023). The former, which historically pave the ground for a renewed attention to characteriological focus on education, projects moral development in a more behaviourist perspective (Peterson & Kristjánsson, 2024); the latter, understands character as a moral concept and pays special attention to the role of relationships, role modelling and motivation in character development.

While 'character' dominates educational discourse, some moral education approaches employ 'virtue' without relying on character education's developmental framework. For instance, care ethics emphasizes virtues like empathy and responsiveness in relationships but often resists stable character traits, favoring a context-sensitive, relational moral psychology (Held, 2006; Noddings, 1984). Similarly, virtue jurisprudence applies virtues like justice to legal theory without emphasizing character development (Macintyre, 1981). Civic republican education focuses on public virtues, such as courage or civic duty, to foster active citizenship, distinct from character education's holistic approach (Pettit, 1997). It is also worth noting that some frameworks, such as Berkowitz's, tend to emphasize the moral construct of 'character' rather than the philosophical language of 'virtue'. These frameworks use virtue language for normative guidance while diverging from character-based models, highlighting the pluralism of moral education.

Also, many schools speak of 'values education,' but what they implement often resembles virtue education. Educators frequently use both terms interchangeably, and the values promoted—like honesty or responsibility—are treated as stable character traits (Fernández Espinosa and López González, 2024, López González et al. 2024). This suggests that behind the language of values lies a practical commitment to cultivating virtues.

As its focus on virtue development reveals, character education draws upon ancient philosophical traditions, particularly Aristotelian virtue ethics. Aristotle asserts that the ultimate aim of education is human flourishing (eudaimonia), achieved by cultivating virtues as stable dispositions—such as phronesis (practical wisdom), temperance, and justice—that guide right action and sound judgment (1139a15–16; Hursthouse, 1999; Kristjánsson, 2020; Aristotle, 2004, 1103a15–18), jointly with other interrelated components such as contemplation and friendship. This tradition includes other major contributors, from Aquinas to MacIntyre. In After Virtue, Macintyre (1981) advocates a return to practices that cultivate moral virtues and shared moral frameworks necessary for meaningful communities. Contemporary virtue ethicists like Carr and Steutel (1999) and Kristjánsson (2015) have further developed practical applications of virtue ethics in modern education.

Beyond the concept of virtue itself, character education is grounded in other key constructs developed within virtue ethics, such as character and flourishing (Peterson & Kristjánsson, 2024).

Character education is experiencing an upswing in both research and educational practices. Data about this increasing research is explored in different studies, which shows a further global impact (Clement & Bollinger, 2016; Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025; Pattaro, 2016; Zhang, 2023 Walker et al., 2015). Data about global incrementation of research-based educational practices on virtue and character along different continents and countries (Birhan et al., 2021; MOES., 2022; Murestiyanto, 2017; Tang & Wang, 2021, Moller et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2013) and in different educational stages from schooling to universities (Brown et al., 2020; Mucinskas et al. 2025; Pike et al., 2021) is as well provided. In turn, this renewed interest is progressively influencing educational policies (Arthur et al., 2017, pp. 10–38; Arthur et al., 2015; Glanzer & Milson, 2006; Kim, 2023; O'Shaughnessy, 2020; OECD, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

The renewed interest in character education arises from various intersecting philosophical and historical developments. These include the revival of virtue ethics (Foot, 1997; Macintyre, 1981; McDowell & The

Hegeler Institute, 1979; Snow, 2018a), of which character education is often considered the educational expression (Kristjánsson, 2015; Steutel & Carr, 1999); the renewed focus on moral education; and especially, in this context, the decline of dominant models, such as Kohlbergian cognitivist approaches which focused almost exclusively on moral reasoning as the primary path to moral development (Carr, 1996; Peters, 1978; Vitz, 1994). Models with a more integrated view of moral development have progressively emerged, considering a more integrated approach encompassing the different sources of moral behaviour and their interaction (Kristjánsson 2015, pp. 124; Fernández González & Akrivou, 2024). The growth of positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), with its focus on character strengths, has also contributed to the momentum behind virtue and character education. At the same time, empirical research has challenged the situationist critique by demonstrating the role of character traits in moral behaviour (Fleeson et al., 2014). The emergence of 'flourishing' as a central concept in educational discourse (De Ruyter et al., 2022; Kristjánsson & VanderWeele, 2024b; OECD, 2024), with virtue education as a key pathway to flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017, 2020), further reinforces the relevance of character education.

In recent decades, global challenges—from ethical dilemmas in technology to rising social inequalities—have highlighted the need for education systems that cultivate moral character. While various educational approaches—such as social-emotional learning (Durlak et al., 2011), service learning (Billig, 2000), liberal arts education (Nussbaum, 2010), and global citizenship education (UNESCO, 2015)—also aim to foster ethical awareness, civic responsibility, and human flourishing, character education offers a complementary perspective. It focuses on the intentional development of moral and intellectual virtues as stable dispositions, integrated into both academic and relational dimensions of school life.

Empirical studies show that character development positively impacts academic success, well-being, and civic engagement (Jeynes, 2019; Park & Peterson, 2009; Snyder et al., 2012). Pioneering work by Arthur and Kristjánsson at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (JCCV) has linked character education to measurable outcomes, emphasizing the importance of integrating moral and intellectual virtues in schools and universities (Arthur et al., 2015; Kristjánsson, 2015).

The virtue and character turn invites educators to move beyond fragmented curricula toward integrated practices that embed character formation across disciplines and co-curricular activities (Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues,Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues 2022). These include curriculum design that incorporates civic and moral virtues, as well as intellectual virtues such as critical thinking and curiosity (Baehr, 2022; Kristjánsson, 2015). Character education also requires teachers to serve as role models of virtue growth—trying to embody the virtues they promote—and to foster a school culture of community, responsibility, and reflection (Nucci, 2001; Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues, Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues 2022). This involves not only modelling virtues through conduct, but also through testimony and exemplarity, which help make the moral life intelligible and aspirational to students (López González & Fernández, 2024).

Despite its appeal, character education faces certain challenges. Critics question the cultural universality of specific virtues and the risk of reducing character to measurable indicators. Virtues like honesty, courage, and compassion may be valued differently across cultures, raising concerns about the applicability of virtue education in diverse classrooms (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006). Additionally, assessing character development remains complex, with the danger of oversimplifying moral concepts (Nucci, 2001).

Early critiques of character education—that it is outdated, individualistic, or inherently indoctrinatory—have increasingly been rebutted by contemporary scholarships, which demonstrates virtue ethics' adaptability to secular, pluralistic educational environments (Kristjánsson et al., 2024). Still, integrating virtue education in diverse contexts requires balancing shared moral frameworks with respect for cultural differences (Kristjánsson, 2015). This balance is addressed by identifying core virtues—such as justice, honesty, and compassion—that have broad cross-cultural relevance, while working with local educators to adapt their meaning and application. A key part of this process is linguistic nuance. For example, *compassion* in English implies active, empathetic engagement, but in Spanish it is often confused with *lástima*, a more passive form of pity. Likewise, *character* in English refers to moral formation, whereas *carácter* in Spanish typically means temperament. These differences require not just translation but careful reframing of concepts to align with cultural and educational contexts (Wierzbicka, 1999). This informs the CEV's teacher formation programmes and resource design, ensuring that virtue education is both meaningful and locally grounded.

Despite its historically marginal position (Arthur, 2020b) and the diversity of its approaches, the 'character education turn' (Arthur, 2020a) has fostered a growing body of interdisciplinary research (Zhang, 2023), increasingly shaped by insights from moral philosophy, education, and psychology (Fowers et al., 2021; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Wright et al., 2021). This has fuelled a rise in educational practices and interventions, supported by international institutions committed to developing evidence-based approaches to character formation (Arthur, 2017, pp. 106–151). These initiatives are beginning to influence policy, particularly in the United States (Glanzer & Milson, 2006) and Europe, especially in the United Kingdom (Arthur, 2017, pp. 10–38; Arthur et al., 2015; O'Shaughnessy, 2020).

Until recently, character education had little presence in the Spanish educational context (Fuentes, 2018). However, this is changing with the emergence of new research groups and initiatives such as the CEV at Universidad Francisco de Vitoria (UFV), which is the focus of this paper.

This study adopts a descriptive and exploratory case study design, aiming to provide an in-depth understanding of the distinctive features, practices, and institutional development of the CEV. In line with case study methodology (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018), multiple sources of data were used to enable triangulation and strengthen the credibility of the findings. Primary data collection involved the administration of structured surveys and self-report questionnaires to programme participants and school leaders, semi-structured interviews with key informants—including teachers, university faculty, and CEV staff—and the systematic analysis of internal documents, programme reports, and evaluation forms. This mixed-methods approach allowed for a comprehensive view of how the CEV articulates its virtue-based educational model, its modes of implementation in diverse contexts, and the perceptions of those involved in its initiatives.

2. The Centro de Educación en Virtudes y Valores (virtue and values education Centre, CEV)

In this section, we provide a detailed account of the CEV, including its origins and rationale, the research it develops, and the justification for its virtue-based framework.

2.1. The genesis and the rationale of the CEV

The CEV was established to address the need for character education in Spain (Fuentes, 2018; Fuentes & Fernández, 2024) and, more broadly, in Spanish-speaking countries. This need is particularly acute in regions where moral education has historically been underemphasized, creating a gap in the integration of character education into mainstream curricula. While the Anglo-Saxon world has made significant advances in virtue-based models, Spain has faced systemic challenges in promoting moral and character development in educational settings (Fuentes, 2018; Fuentes & Fernández, 2024). The CEV seeks to address this gap by offering a comprehensive framework for integrating virtue and character education into both formal and informal learning environments.

The CEV has been inspired by the work of the JCCV, a key reference point for character education in the UK. In light of the JCCV's achievements, the CEV adapted and implemented a similar approach for Spain and Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America (Fernández & López, 2022), contextualizing the JCCV's research-based framework for culturally and educationally diverse environments. The CEV developed its own framework for character education, grounded in the principles and methodologies of the JCCV, with the aim of fostering virtue and moral development in both students and educators (see Section 2.3). In this process of adaptation, the CEV acknowledges the plurality of cultures within Spain and Latin America and aims to bridge both regions by proposing a shared framework that respects cultural particularities while advancing universal principles of human development.

The CEV primary goal is to promote the cultivation of character and virtue—not only within educational institutions, but also across professional and societal domains. This is reflected in its mission and vision. The CEV's mission is to promote values, virtue, and character education at both national and international levels, in collaboration with partner institutions. Its vision is to serve as an avant-garde laboratory that integrates research and educational practice in schools and universities, contributing to educational transformation through the flourishing of both teachers and students.

The CEV operates on the conviction that meaningful and effective character education requires teachers who are not only knowledgeable, but also personally committed to living virtuous lives. As Higgins (2011) affirms, 'restoring the flourishing of teachers to its central place is the first step in building a virtue ethics of teaching' (p. 10). Teachers must themselves be offered opportunities for personal and professional formation if they are to guide students toward flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2023a, 2023b). The CEV understands that the flourishing of teachers and students is mutually reinforcing and that realizing this vision requires confronting structural limitations in teacher training and challenging the dominant utilitarian paradigm in education, such as human capital theory (Fernández, 2023).

Both research and practice have demonstrated that student well-being is deeply connected to teacher well-being (Granville-Chapman et al., 2024). Consequently, the CEV places strong emphasis on supporting teachers through formation and mentoring, enabling them to embody the virtues they aim to cultivate in their students. Central to this formation is the idea that teachers must be not only role models but also moral witnesses. Conceiving teacher exemplarism as a form of testimony (López & Fernández, 2024), the CEV affirms that teachers, despite their imperfections, can bear witness to moral truths, directing students not only toward their own example but also toward the objective values they teach. This conception promotes moral education rooted in authenticity, where students are encouraged to reflectively engage with virtue and truth, and develop their own moral judgment.

The CEV framework reinforces this vision through a dedicated section on *Teachers as Character Educators*. Echoing the JCCV, it holds that a teacher's character and integrity are as crucial as subject knowledge or instructional skill. Acknowledging that many teachers feel morally unprepared or uncertain in this role, the framework stresses the need for targeted formation. In response, the CEV provides tools and programmes to help teachers cultivate virtue and lead with moral purpose. As it states, teachers are 'the key, the lever of good character education in schools—not only for the students' benefit, but also for their own, so they can fully realize their vocation' (Fernández & López 2022, pp. 21–22). This focus on teachers' moral and professional growth invites further empirical research and development.

The CEV is founded on the belief that education must be an intentional and transformative process oriented toward the holistic development of the person. Thus, it conceives education as going beyond the transmission of knowledge and technical skills. This commitment is reflected in the CEV's pedagogical model, which revolves around three core actions: seeing, thinking, and acting. These processes anchor character education in experiential and practical learning: developing the capacity to perceive reality with clarity and sensitivity (seeing), engage in critical and moral reflection (thinking), and act with virtue and purpose (acting). Through this model, the CEV promotes integrated human development (Fernández & López, 2022).

As noted in the Introduction, contemporary virtue and character education includes a range of theoretical and practical perspectives. The foundational philosophical framework that informs, though does not limit, the CEVs work is the Neo-Aristotelian model of character education—arguably the most widely developed and recognized. While this approach may have certain limitations, it offers strong appeal due to its philosophical coherence (Annas, 2011; Peterson & Kristjánsson, 2024; Sanderse, 2012), its emphasis on the continuum between personal and societal flourishing (Peterson, 2020), and its naturalistic grounding, which facilitates empirical research on character (Fowers et al., 2021; Salkever, 2005; Wright et al., 2021). Particularly relevant is the central role attributed to phronesis (practical wisdom) as a metavirtue that integrates the cognitive, emotional, volitional, and perceptive dimensions of moral life (Aristotle, 2004, 1140a 23–26; 1141b 13–16).

At the same time, the CEV incorporates developments beyond the Neo-Aristotelian paradigm to address its limitations—such as the lack of a clearly defined concept of purpose within flourishing (Peterson & Kristjánsson, 2024). Accordingly, both the CEVs research and its educational practice draw from complementary psychological frameworks rooted in Neo-Aristotelian moral psychology (Fowers et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2021).

While sharing the broad inspiration of Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics with other institutions, the CEV's interpretation presents distinctive emphases. Specifically, the CEV adopts an understanding of the human person as a relational and narrative being, marked by vulnerability, dependency, and the capacity for virtue. This vision draws from a Neo-Aristotelian and Thomistic anthropology, which goes beyond rational individualism to embrace an integrative model of human flourishing rooted in both

personal and communal dimensions (Kristjánsson, 2015, Pérez-Soba, 2023; Macintyre, 1981; Nussbaum, 2010). Such anthropology informs not only the CEV's virtue framework but also its contextual sensitivity to language, culture, and the affective dimensions of moral life (López González & Fernández, 2024). By acknowledging the moral significance of relationships, social embeddedness, and the formation of habits over time, the CEV emphasizes that character education must attend to both individual moral agency and the relational ecosystems that support or hinder virtue development (Arthur et al., 2017; Fernández Espinosa & López González, 2023).

Consistent with virtue ethics, the CEV highlights character formation's emotional and affective dimensions, which is one of the main appeals of the Neo-Aristotelian account. This emphasis responds to Aristotle's strong consideration throughout his ethical works that ethical virtue requires appropriate emotional responses (Aristotle, 2004, 1106b 18–23), a view echoed by contemporary virtue ethicists (Kristjánsson, 2018a, 2018b; Macintyre, 1981; Melina et al., 2007; Pérez-Soba, 2023; Sreenivasan, 2020). Although emotional salience of virtue is acknowledged and thoroughly researched, it is sometimes overlooked within virtue and character education programmes (Brooks et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2022a). For this reason, the CEVs work with schools and other institutions clearly highlights the emotional aspect intrinsic to virtue and character development. In its interventions, supported both by foundational and empirical research on virtue and character, specific virtues are developed alongside the emotions most closely related to them (see Section 2.1.1). This approach ensures that students not only understand what is good but also feel and engage with the good in transformative ways, supporting more holistic growth.

The CEV's virtue-based formation framework (see Section 2.3) also explores the relationship between virtues, values, and competencies. It affirms that many personal competencies—especially in educational contexts that emphasize competence-based learning—can serve as facilitators of virtue development (Fernández Espinosa & López González, 2024; López González et al., 2024). This framework aligns well with the educational language of Spanish-speaking higher education, enhancing the adaptability of character education to diverse institutional settings.

Finally, the CEV has developed a distinct virtue-based leadership model: Leadership of Positive Action. This construct defines leadership as a character trait oriented toward the common good (López González et al., 2024). It draws on the consideration that leadership involves more saliently some specific virtues. The expression of these virtues within the leadership domain assumes a unique character, shaped by the demands of guiding and inspiring others, in what leadership consists of. This model understands leadership as resembling a virtue itself[2], integrating the moral demands and responsibilities that leadership entails (López González et al., 2024).

In addition to drawing from the JCCV's conceptual framework, the CEV has produced a culturally grounded adaptation for the Spanish and Latin American context, anchored in three key ideas: (1) an anthropology and moral psychology in which virtue is oriented toward interpersonal connection and human communion; (2) an integrated reading of virtues and competencies, attuned to the dominance of competence-based education in Ibero-American systems[3]; and (3) a commitment to the transcendent dimension of the person, relevant across many educational traditions in the region (See Section 2.3). In Anglo-Saxon contexts, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, character education frameworks are typically implemented with significant institutional autonomy, reflecting a cultural emphasis on individualism and self-reliance, often described as a 'do-it-yourself' approach (Arthur et al., 2017; Hofstede, 2016). Schools in these regions frequently design and deliver programmes independently, tailoring initiatives like social-emotional learning or character development to local needs with minimal centralized oversight (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). In contrast, Ibero-American contexts, including Latin American countries and Spain, prioritize relational support and close accompaniment in character education, aligning with collectivist values that emphasize community, family, and teacher-student relationships (Basáñez, 2016; Vaillant, 2017). For example, educational reforms in Mexico and Colombia integrate civic and ethical competencies with strong teacher guidance and community involvement (Mateo Díaz & Lim, 2022). In response to these cultural needs, CEV implements direct transformation programmes in Ibero-American schools, providing personalized mentoring and systematic guidance to foster character development through relational and collaborative approaches.

This model is currently active in five schools in Latin America (Mexico, Argentina, and Chile) and three schools in Spain. While the documented impact on school ethos and pedagogical practice is currently

under analysis, preliminary evidence from programme evaluations and satisfaction surveys suggests positive outcomes. These experiences not only confirm the framework's practical applicability but also highlight the value of culturally responsive approaches to character education.

The features presented here in relation to the CEV's rationale are consistently reflected in its research agenda and educational practices.

2.2. The research of the CEV

The CEV promotes rigorous, interdisciplinary research on the complex nature of character and virtue, integrating perspectives from ethics, education, and psychology. Its research agenda encompasses both theoretical and empirical approaches and is deeply rooted in real-world educational settings. Inspired by leading international initiatives on virtue and character education (Arthur, 2017), the CEV aims to shape its research agenda in close collaboration with practitioners, identifying practice-relevant evidence needs and refining research questions accordingly. The objective is to produce research that informs policy, practice, and academic debate by critically exploring the role of virtue and character in individual and societal flourishing. Rather than assuming their impact, the CEV intends to investigate *how* and *under what conditions* virtue and character contribute to human development. This aligns with Anderson and Freebody (2013) idea of partnership research, fostering collaboration between researchers and practitioners.

The CEV hosts strategic events to share its findings and engage key actors in the field of character education[4]. This commitment is reflected in the composition of its research teams, which include both academics and non-academic professionals to ensure relevance and applicability across sectors.

Following the model of the JCCV, the CEV organizes its research across three core functions: (1) knowledge management—disseminating evidence on character and virtue in the public domain; (2) fostering connections between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers; and (3) developing future-oriented scenarios for knowledge exchange (Arthur, 2017; Ward et al., 2009).

The CEV's research is structured into several lines of inquiry. The first addresses the foundations of character and moral psychology, particularly the classification and interrelation of different types of virtues (see Section 2.3), with emphasis on specific virtues such as *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and love. It also explores the emotional dimension of virtue and moral development, an area integral to virtue ethics, as emotions, when properly habituated, enable virtuous action (Arnold, 1960, Vol. 1, pp. 169–200; Kristjánsson, 2007, pp. 145–162). This line of research, situated at the intersection of ethics, education, and psychology, contributes both conceptually and empirically to refining the CEV's framework. Emotional education, as pursued by the CEV, seeks to foster morally grounded emotional responses, countering the challenges of moral emotivism prevalent in contemporary socio-cultural environments (Arnett, 2000; Wood et al., 2018). In contrast to emotivism, which reduces moral judgments to subjective feelings (Macintyre, 1981, pp. 11–22), the CEV's approach integrates cognitive appraisals of emotions with rational deliberation and virtue cultivation, equipping children and youth to navigate complex moral landscapes through reflective and ethically informed emotional development. By educating desire through the integration of emotions with intelligence and will, the CEV fosters holistic moral formation, aligning emotional responses with virtuous behaviour (López González et al., 2025, pp. 3–5).

A second research line focuses on leadership education, particularly virtue- and character-based models. As stated, the CEV is currently developing its own construct—*Leadership of Positive Action*—which conceptualizes leadership as a character virtue aimed at the common good (López González et al., 2024). This model serves as the foundation for multiple training programmes and is supported by the 'Leadership Education' research group, which brings together scholars from UFV and other institutions.

A third emerging line explores virtue-based professional ethics. Virtue ethics provides a context in which professional roles are part of a good profession, considering this latter as involving engagement to human good and thus leading to a flourishing life (Oakley & Cocking, 2001, p. 74). This research line seeks to explore how professional roles can be shaped by virtue-centered ethical practices.

These lines of inquiry support a variety of applied research projects across different educational stages. These include a project on virtue and character education in university settings, primarily focused on interventions and programme design (see Section 3.1.1.); a cyber-wisdom project aimed at promoting

virtuous engagement with social media among adolescents; and a European study on the perspectives of teachers and parents regarding character education, conducted within the European Character and Virtue Association (ECVA).

The CEV collaborates closely with international institutions dedicated to character education, like the JCCV and the Oxford Character Project, ensuring ongoing exchange and collective development in the field.

2.3. The virtue ethics-based framework of the CEV

The CEV has developed its own virtue ethics-based framework to articulate its approach to character and virtue education[5]. The framework has been shaped by theoretical contributions and guidance from partner institutions, notably the JCCV and the Association for Character Education (ACE).

Designed to support educators at various stages, the framework outlines key elements of virtue education, including which virtues constitute good character, how they are cultivated, the role of teachers as character educators, and methods for assessing character development.

A central component of the framework is a typology of virtues developed by the centre. As with other institutions dedicated to virtue and character education, the CEV offers its own classification and justification of virtue types.

The classification of virtues and their interrelations is a well-established practice in contemporary virtue ethics (Upton, 2014). It draws from classical distinctions such as Plato's(2004) cardinal virtues (*Republic* IV, 426–435), Aristotle's division between moral and intellectual virtues, and modern categories like self- vs. other-regarding virtues (Von Wright, 1993), or global vs. local virtues (Upton, 2014). Drawing on a neo-Aristotelian perspective, moral virtues are stable character traits enabling appropriate action in morally significant specific domains, situations, or experiences (Aristotle 2004, 1103a15–18; 1106b22–23; 1109a20–b7). Intellectual virtues support discernment and sound judgment regarding actions and the pursuit of knowledge (Baehr, 2022; Zagzebski, 1996). Interestingly, Aristotle establishes such a division building upon the role and development of the different psychic powers that enable virtuous actions and thus engaging the different types of virtues to the development of their own psychic faculty or power. For instance, practical wisdom (*phrōnesis)*, which is an intellectual virtue, develops practical reasoning (Aristotle, 2004, 1139a 15-16; 1140b 26). Virtue ethicists recognize that broadening the catalogue of virtues can offer normative guidance in newly emerging fields—i.e. digital environments—as well as across diverse spheres of life (Snow, 2019), while expressing concerns about an unrestricted expansion of virtue lists. An unbounded proliferation of virtues may obscure virtues' identification, ultimately weakening their ability to serve as reliable guides for moral action (Russell, 2009).

It is challenging to determine what is more suitable for a virtue distinction. For instance, following our explanation, they can be distinguished by the domains in which they are practiced, or by the human capacities or powers they are intended to cultivate. Since each approach brings valuable perspectives and they are not mutually exclusive, the CEV's typology is grounded on integrative criteria on both approaches. The domain-based perspective illuminates how virtues manifest in specific contexts and inform their pedagogical application, whereas the faculty-based approach uncovers the psychological processes underpinning virtuous behaviour, thereby enabling a cross-contextual understanding. The CEV's virtue classification aims to provide a practical and pedagogically effective structure for virtue development. It seeks to provide a more effective and applicable approach to moral education. Given that many virtues are subtle and context-sensitive responses to particular moral spheres (Swanton, 2016), aligning the focus with these specific domains improves the depth and efficacy of virtue cultivation.

The framework identifies well-known virtue categories—moral, intellectual, civic, and performative strengths—frequently referenced in character education literature (Fernández & López, 2022). Civic virtues empower individuals for responsible engagement in public life (Peterson et al., 2021). Performative strengths complement these categories, reflecting action-oriented traits essential for achieving moral and civic ends.

Additionally, the CEV framework introduces further subcategories to refine virtue education practices while maintaining coherence with its virtue ethics foundation. These subcategories included in the framework are a subset of 'relational' and 'transcendent' virtues (López González & Rodríguez Barroso, 2025).

'Relational' virtues aim to support the education of human sociability (Aristotle, 2017, I, 2, 1252a 24–1253a 3). They are understood as virtuous responses to the normative demands arising from various types of relationships, ranging from highly individualized or intimate connections to broader social interactions (Um, 2021). Since the moral or normative demands vary across different types of relationships—such as friendship, familiar, organizational, or civic settings—these contexts involve distinct virtues or similar virtues expressed to varying degrees. Relational virtues, therefore, are essential for an individual to excel as a participant within each specific type of relationship[6]. These virtues are foundational for civic life but extend beyond it, grounding ethical participation in all forms of human association. Furthermore, highlighting relationality and its virtuous development underscores the ethical understanding that personal flourishing is intrinsically linked to others flourishing, mutually shaping each other's lives (Fowers, 2015). Virtues such as service and gratitude, considered relational in nature, are actively developed in CEV programmes, including those aimed at university students (see Section 3.1.1.). To the extent that we live and develop on these different types of relationships which demand similar or diverse virtues differently developed, their individualization can facilitate and refine their practice.

The CEV's framework identifies another subset of virtues referred to as 'transcendent virtues'. In the CEV's approach, transcendence is defined as awareness of being unconditionally part of something greater than oneself—whether a community, humanity, nature, or the Divine (Cloninger & Cloninger, 2022, p. 205)[7]. Transcendence reflects a meaningful receptivity to the world and a drive to seek significance beyond the self (Cottingham, 2012). Transcendence can manifest through both extraordinary and everyday experiences (Cottingham, 2012), imbuing ordinary events with depth and new meanings (Snow, 2018b). Transcendent virtues are the character traits that respond to and foster our capacity for self-transcendence, particularly in their relational expressions: they enable the virtuous development of these transcendent capacities and the cultivation of virtuous experiences of transcendence.

Certain virtues, such as hope—in its 'fundamental' or 'existential' form—are especially linked to these transcendent experiences, helping individuals to discover or create meaning in their lives (Snow, 2018a, 2018b, p. 39)[7]. Love, another virtue included in CEV educational practices, similarly exemplifies self-transcendence. The assumption of a subset of' transcendent 'virtues, on the one hand, promote, nurture, and allow for the virtuous experience of this kind of transcendent experiences, which are required for an enriched and extended flourishing pattern not only limited to virtue development (Kristjánsson, 2016); further, these virtues facilitate the suitable understanding, practice, and refinement of moral development that virtue promotes, which is developmental, growing progressively and accordingly with our human condition (Kraut, 2007; Swanton, 2016). Transcendent virtues, for instance, are relevant for promoting a sense of purpose required for moral development, for a right understanding of our unavoidable moral failures, or for the progress of our moral growth in different life stages. Transcendent virtues like hope are required for the efforts that moral development requires; or for confronting future life uncertainty (Snow, 2018a, 2018b).

By including these subcategories (see Figure 1), the CEV framework expands the conceptual and educational reach of virtue ethics, offering a comprehensive tool for cultivating character in diverse educational and cultural contexts.

3. From research to transference and educational practice

3.1. Virtue and character education in the university

Amid ongoing debates about the mission of universities (Kerr, 2001; Kiss & Euben, 2010), there is a growing recognition of their formative role. Increasingly, higher education institutions are articulating more holistic and socially engaged visions, emphasizing student flourishing and personal development

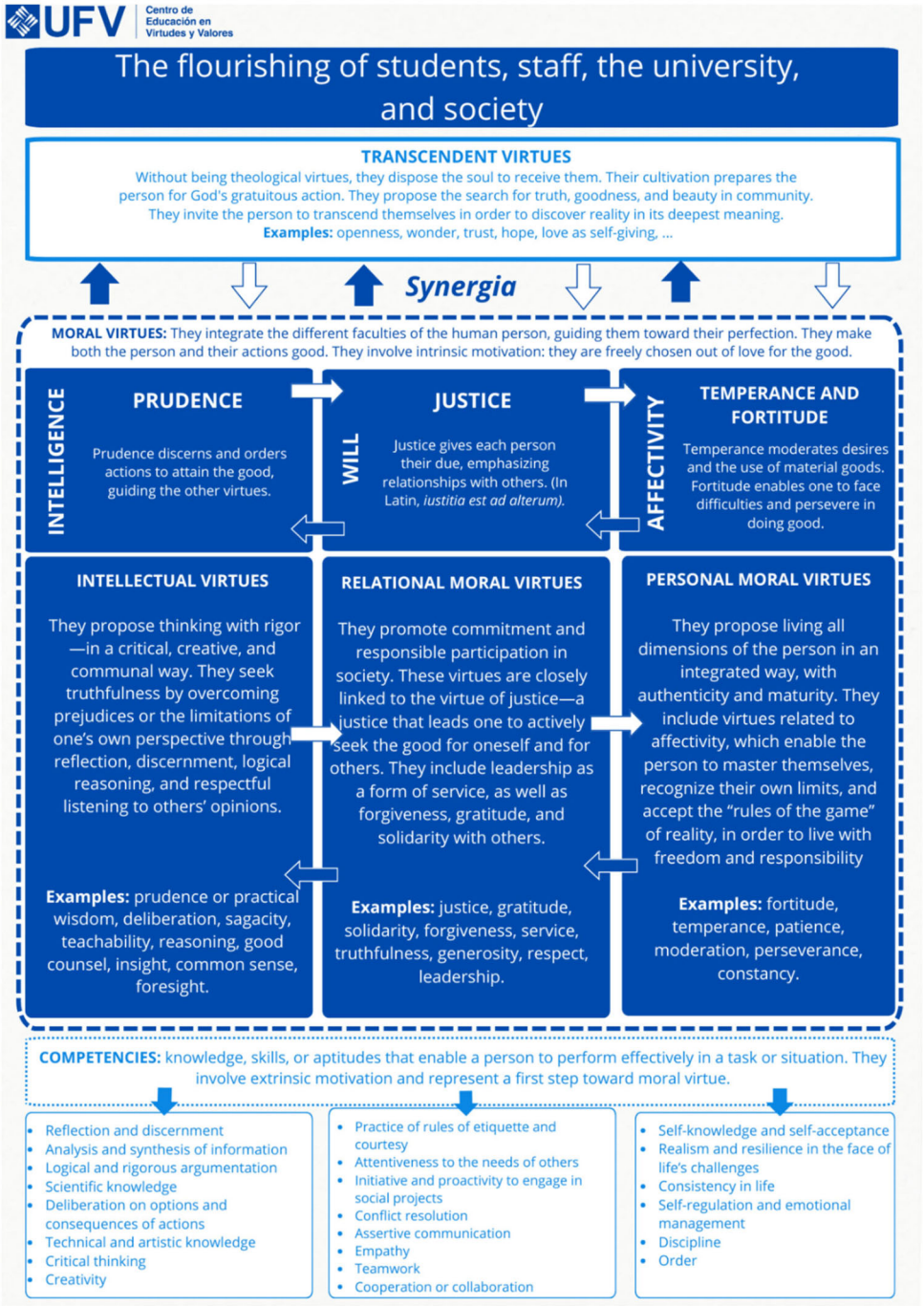

Figure 1. Types of virtues.
Source: Fernández and López (2022).

(Archer & Schuetze, 2019; Barden & Caleb, 2019; Jubilee Centre for Character Education, 2020, 2022). Within this evolving landscape, character and virtue education has gained prominence in many prestigious institutions (Brant et al., 2022, p. 6), aligning with the broader commitment to promote both individual and societal good (Arthur & Bohlin, 2005).

Several universities now offer research and educational programmes focused on character formation, including the Oxford Leadership Initiative (Brant et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2019) and Wake Forest's Programme for Leadership and Character (Lamb et al., 2022a). Frameworks such as *Character Education in Universities: A Framework for Flourishing* (2020) illustrate the shared belief that university-based virtue education equips students to navigate complex moral and social realities. In this context, the CEV has developed its own educational practices to foster character formation at UFV.

3.1.1. Programmes for university students

The main educational initiative of the CEV is the Leaders of Character Programme (LCP), designed for upper-level students across multiple faculties (Domingo & Fernández, 2025). This eleven-week seminar-based programme combines 90-minute weekly sessions, each centered on a specific virtue. The programme is currently active in most faculties of UFV[8].

The LCP focuses on the following virtues: practical wisdom, humility, temperance, resilience, gratitude, service, and hope. It begins with two initial sessions on purpose development, aimed at fostering identity, meaning, and well-being (Bronk, 2024). These virtues reflect the typology developed in the CEV's framework (see Section 2.3), encompassing intellectual (practical wisdom), moral (temperance, humility), relational (gratitude, service), transcendent (hope), and performative virtues (resilience).

In addition, the programme introduces 'virtues relevant to professions', tailored to specific disciplines. These virtues emerge from the ethical demands of professional practice. For instance, medicine fosters care and compassion (Oakley & Cocking, 2001; Pellegrino, 2007), law prioritizes justice (Longan et al., 2019), and communication emphasizes truthfulness and integrity. Accordingly, each faculty integrates aligned professional virtues alongside a core set of cross-disciplinary virtues.

The LCP adopts educational methodologies aligned with other leading character education programmes, including those at Wake Forest and Oxford. It incorporates the seven strategies outlined by Lamb et al. (2021, 2022b): habituation through practice; reflection on experience; engagement with virtuous exemplars; dialogue to enhance virtue literacy; situational awareness; use of moral reminders; and development of mutually accountable relationships. The rationale for using these strategies for virtue and character development responds above all to its successful implementation empirically supported in similar programmes (Brant et al., 2020; Lamb et al., 2021). The LCP shares these programmes that develop those strategies into a similar theoretical foundation, to which the strategies are aligned. A final reason is the partnership of the LCP with the Oxford Character Project, a research centre on virtue and character at the University of Oxford, whose programmes develop the seven strategies, too. Each strategy is embedded in every virtue session.

In line with the CEV's emphasis on the emotional dimension of virtue (Kristjánsson, 2018a, 2018b; see also Sections 1.2 and 1.3), these strategies were implemented in tandem with emotional education strategies aimed at fostering virtuous emotions. It has been already noted the virtue ethics emphasis on emotional education (Kristjánsson, 2018a, 2018b; see Sections 2.1 and 2.2). For our purpose in this section, we can reconsider that ethical virtue involves appropriate emotional responses (Aristotle, 2004, 1106b 18–23), and that every virtue is linked to a major or lesser extent to some set of emotions (Curzer, 1996). For example, hope regulates the emotional response, like proper fear and confidence, to the unexpected and the future (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1382a; *On Rhetoric* 1389a 28). Consistently each virtue included in the programme is addressed alongside its associated emotional patterns; for example, fear and confidence are explored in sessions on fortitude, resilience, and hope.

Each session includes structured activities designed to foster reflective practice and experiential learning—going beyond virtue literacy to support the actual cultivation of character[9].

While we outline the programme briefly here, its full design, foundational educational principles, and session descriptions are developed in detail in Domingo and Fernández (2025). Although an empirical study on the LCP is in progress and will be presented on a separate paper, it is grounded in the work of comparable virtue and character education initiatives that have demonstrated positive empirical impacts on student's moral development (Brant et al., 2020; Lamb et al., 2021). Sharing key philosophical and pedagogical principles with the LCP, these earlier programmes provide an evidence base that contributes to the shaping of its theoretical framework and instructional approach. This available evidence lends further credibility to the programme's underlying approach. A key objective of the research is to tailor these international models of virtue and character education to the context of Spanish higher education, where such efforts are still relatively uncommon.

The central hypothesis posits that students who complete the course will demonstrate marked improvements in the development of virtues, setting them apart from those in the control group. Initial comparisons of self-reported data collected before and after the course indicate statistically significant gains in key virtues and leadership abilities among participants. Although these findings are preliminary

and warrant further analysis, they are consistent with results from similar initiatives. Likewise, early qualitative data –while still in the initial stages– also suggests that the programme has a meaningful impact on both student's moral growth and their professional formation (Brant et al., 2020).

Although the LCP aligns with the assessment models employed by other university-based virtue and character education programmes—many of which have shown positive outcomes (Brant et al., 2020; Lamb et al., 2021b)—it also offers several unique contributions. Among these are the evaluation of a specific leadership construct, the application of customized virtue scales tailored to the programme's focus (given that target virtues differ across initiatives), and a pronounced emphasis on qualitative research. This qualitative component is enriched through an extensive series of semi-structured interviews with participants—an especially valuable method, as virtuous action is inherently shaped by intention, meaning, and purpose, dimensions most effectively explored through qualitative approaches (Alexander, 2016).

Beyond the LCP, the CEV supports other student-focused initiatives. A dedicated programme is currently being piloted in the Francisco University College (a student residence), combining reflective practice with workshops and communal activities such as hiking. In collaboration with the University's Educational Guidance Office, the CEV has also developed a plan to support students' academic flourishing by cultivating virtues like patience and perseverance.

3.1.2. Virtue and character education in the educational framework of the university

The work of the CEV is progressively shaping the formative architecture of UFV. This section outlines the integration of some of the educational initiatives developed by the CEV into the educational framework of the university, and especially regarding the LCP (see Section 3.1.1). The LCP has been integrated into the university's broader educational model through two key strategies: (1) aligning with the university's liberal education curriculum (especially in ethics), and (2) engaging faculty and stakeholders in the programme's development and delivery. Further, these efforts aim to ensure the programme's alignment with the institution's broader educational mission and values.

The university offers a broad-based Humanistic Formation curriculum that functions similarly to traditional liberal education. While not labeled as such, this curriculum includes anthropology, ethics, theology, and Great Books courses—offering students a well-rounded education that fosters civic responsibility and personal flourishing. Liberal education has a rich tradition of promoting holistic student development (Roche, 2010), and it is often regarded as 'structured learning that aims at human flourishing' (DeNicola, 2012, p. 37).

The integration of the LCP into this framework draws particularly on the university's ethics curriculum. According to De Ruyter and Schinkel (2017), ethics education in universities typically follows four main approaches: (1) academic ethics courses or modules, (2) professional ethics training, (3) the formation of academic citizenship, and (4) preparation for living a good life. While these approaches can be distinguished conceptually, in practice they often overlap. For example, professional ethics can contribute to preparing students for a good life, and the cultivation of academic citizenship may likewise promote flourishing. Even the intellectual development fostered through academic ethics modules can lead to deeper personal and moral growth (De Ruyter & Schinkel, 2017, pp. 127ff). At UFV, ethics courses primarily reflect the first model. The LCP, however, complements these by advancing the third and fourth approaches, and partially the second. The programme's contents, methodologies, and practices are specifically designed to bridge the gap between abstract ethical theory and the practical complexities of moral decision-making in students' personal and professional lives. In this respect, it aligns more closely with those broader educational aims.

This expansion reflects a broader trend in ethics education (Avci, 2017; Phillips-Garrett, 2021), recognizing that it can also address the more complex and often ambiguous transition from theoretical understanding and its skills to practical decision-making and choices students face in their lives. This cognitive bias, which ethical education naturally addresses, complements the type of ethical learning found in standard ethics modules (type 1). While those modules focus on what an ideal agent would do in hypothetical situations, this cognitive expansion adds another layer by reinforcing the understanding of moral and normative theories and analyzing moral dilemmas' (Phillips-Garrett, 2021). Further, increasing empirical evidence suggests that moral development involves more than the enhancement of reasoning skills,

and that other factors –i.e. emotions, drives– (Blasi, 1980; Hornsby, 2007; Schlaefli et al., 1985) involved in moral behaviour and development require complementary education.

Thus, the LCP complements ethics education offered by the university by individualizing this cognitive bias which embraces additional factors that contribute to moral development and flourishing. In other words, the *Leaders of Character Programme* complements existing ethics education by providing insights not only into the components of flourishing but also into how flourishing can be cultivated.

In terms of stakeholder involvement, the LCP has been co-developed with faculty experts across disciplines. For instance, sessions about virtues relevant to professions are authored and led by academics from the relevant faculties. Additionally, a research group on virtue ethics and professionalism has been established, currently involving around 20 faculty members from different schools who contribute both to the programme and its ongoing scholarly development.

The programme is currently being implemented at the university, with its impact on students actively under evaluation. It is being carried out across five different schools within the institution, each involving an experimental group of approximately 25 students. In total, around 100 students are participating in the initiative. The amount of about 25 students recruited, who apply voluntarily, is selected to foster a conducive atmosphere for dialogue and reflective discussion in the programme's sessions.

The CEV is also launching new initiatives for the virtue formation of university staff and faculty, with a progressive implementation plan across the institution.

3.2. Character education for schools

Teachers play a pivotal role in character education, serving as moral exemplars and facilitators of ethical development within the classroom. Their influence extends beyond academic instruction, shaping students' values, attitudes, and behaviours through daily interactions and modeled virtues (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011). Research emphasizes that teachers' own character strengths, such as integrity, empathy, and resilience, are critical for fostering a virtuous learning environment (Kristjánsson, 2023a, 2023b; Lickona, 1991). However, the effectiveness of teachers in this role hinges on their own moral development and institutional support, which enable them to navigate ethical dilemmas and embody the virtues they seek to instill (Arthur et al., 2015). Without targeted training and a supportive school culture, teachers may struggle to integrate character education meaningfully, underscoring the need for comprehensive professional development programmes like those offered by the CEV (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005).

3.2.1. The teachers in focus programme (TFP)

The CEV adopts a 360-degree approach to character education in schools through its TFP, a comprehensive teacher training initiative designed to equip educators with the tools to foster virtue-centered learning environments. This programme recognizes that well-prepared teachers are essential for the success of character education, yet educators often face complex moral dilemmas (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002), insufficient institutional support (Spilt et al., 2011), and a lack of shared moral language (OECD, 2020). Overcoming these barriers is critical to creating settings where both students and teachers can thrive.

Many teachers report feeling ill-equipped for ethical decision-making due to limited training in moral reasoning. Kristjánsson (2023a, 2023b) argues that character education should go beyond promoting good behaviour and instead engage teachers in deep moral reflection. Gaps in educator preparation leave teachers vulnerable to stress and decision fatigue, weakening their ability to serve as moral role models.

Administrative burdens and insufficient emotional support further contribute to burnout, diminishing their capacity to cultivate positive classroom environments (Collie et al., 2012; Spilt et al., 2011). The absence of a shared professional identity and moral vocabulary further complicates teachers' ability to model virtue effectively (Kristjánsson, 2015, 2023a, 2023b). Without a clear ethical framework, unresolved moral dilemmas can arise in their daily interactions with students. Addressing these challenges requires prioritizing teacher well-being and character development. Research highlights that strong teacher-student relationships, built on empathy and patience, provide the foundation for meaningful character formation (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Worth & Van den Brande, 2020).

Investing in comprehensive teacher training, as provided by the TFP, enhances educators' ability to navigate moral dilemmas and integrate virtue into their professional practice. As noted in Section 2.1, building a virtue ethics of teaching requires the flourishing of teachers themselves. Before guiding students in their moral growth, teachers must engage in their own reflective process, integrating personal and professional dimensions of their identity (Kristjánsson, 2023a, 2023b).

TFP addresses this need by involving both educators and school leadership teams in the character education process, promoting a holistic approach that emphasizes character caught, taught, sought, as well as teacher well-being and leadership (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues 2022; Fernández Espinosa & López González, 2023). Sustainable character education requires both institutional commitment and personal development, ensuring educators internalize and embody the virtues they aim to instill in students (Kristjánsson, 2023a).

3.2.1.1. Establishing a baseline. To assess a school's starting point in character education, the TFP employs a diagnostic tool was developed to evaluate character caught, taught, sought, as well as teacher well-being and leadership (Fernández, 2025 January). This tool consists of a cross-scale survey administered to teachers and school principals with Likert-type scale items (ranging from 1 to 6), where higher scores indicate a more favorable perception.

Teachers evaluate their experiences, while principals assess their self-perceived effectiveness and support provided to teachers. Survey results consistently highlight significant discrepancies between teachers' and principals' perspectives, particularly in areas such as institutional climate, leadership, and decision-making processes. Common gaps include differing views on collaboration, problem-solving support, and teacher consultation in administrative decisions (Fernández, 2025, January). These findings underscore the need for stronger communication and alignment between leadership teams and educators to enhance school culture and teacher well-being (OECD, 2020; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Research suggests that leadership practices incorporating teacher voice and shared decision-making contribute to a more positive school culture and improved teacher morale (Leithwood et al., 2008; Ronfeldt et al., 2013).

3.2.1.2. The need for teacher well-being and character development. While structural and procedural improvements are essential to strengthen school culture and support teacher well-being, research highlights a deeper need: character education among both teachers and school leaders. Educators must cultivate virtues such as empathy, fairness, resilience, and integrity to navigate the ethical and emotional complexities of their roles effectively (Arthur et al., 2015; Branson & Gross, 2014). Without intentional character development, educators may struggle to foster collaboration, trust, and engagement within their institutions (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Shields, 2011). Ethical leadership grounded in character virtues strengthens decision-making, professional relationships, and school climate (Lickona, 1991; Shields, 2011). By prioritizing character education, schools create an environment where both students and educators flourish, reinforcing a culture of respect, responsibility, and shared purpose (Arthur et al., 2015; Sergiovanni, 2005).

School leaders play a particularly crucial role, as their example sets the ethical tone for the entire institution. Research suggests that leaders who actively cultivate virtues such as humility, justice, and prudence are better equipped to address moral challenges, support their teams, and create a thriving institutional climate (Arthur et al., 2015; Branson & Gross, 2014; Shields, 2011). Leadership grounded in moral character is associated with higher levels of trust, collaboration, and ethical decision-making in schools (Begley, 2006; Starratt, 2005; Sun & Leithwood, 2015).

Similarly, teachers who receive character education training report higher levels of resilience, emotional well-being, and professional engagement, ultimately benefiting both themselves and their students (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; García-Carmona & Castillo-Gualda, 2023). Addressing teacher well-being, socioemotional competencies, and resilience is essential for improving working conditions, teaching practices, and overall educational quality (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Worth & Van den Brande, 2020).

3.2.1.3. Programme structure. The TFP tries to respond to these challenges with a structured approach to teacher development, emphasizing personal character growth as the foundation for effective character education. Its structure involves four phasal modules: a) a foundational course on personal character

development, including workshops to promote the teacher's cultivation of key virtues for their personal and professional life; b) reflection and practical application, by engaging teachers to personal and professional real-life applications of character-based principles; c) close accompaniment and one-on-one mentorship and d) follow-up and evaluation, which include periodic check-ins to assess how teachers integrate character.

3.2.1.4. Evaluation and impact assessment of the programme. To ensure the effectiveness and continuous improvement of its interventions, the CEV employs a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the TFP, combining quantitative metrics with rich qualitative feedback from participants. Across the in-person and online editions of the program, a total of 168 individuals have enrolled, including participants from Spain, Chile, Argentina, Mexico and Sweden. Quantitative data from post-course surveys show consistently high satisfaction: participants rated the usefulness of the training for their educational work at an average of 5.6 out of 6, and the overall quality of the training was rated similarly high. Practical components were especially valued, with respondents highlighting that 'the exercises helped consolidate the theoretical content and put it into practice.' Qualitative responses reinforce this impact; one participant noted, 'Character can be taught, and it's possible to do so from everyday educational practice', while another emphasized that the course was 'explicit and perfectly understandable even for those outside the field of education'. A school leader remarked, 'This is essential content for those in school and faculty leadership'.

International participants echoed similar sentiments, simply describing the course as 'I like all of it,' and appreciating the opportunity 'to reflect' Another one added: 'It brought me back to the origin of teaching, to its essence' while some other stated that they liked 'the different dimensions/channels of learning we were introduced to during the programme'. These evaluations substantiate the CEV 's contribution not only to participants' pedagogical development but also to broader institutional efforts to promote human flourishing.

4. Conclusions

The development of the CEV represents a contribution to the international character education landscape, particularly within the Spanish-speaking world, where structured approaches to virtue formation have historically been limited (Fuentes, 2018; Fuentes & Fernández, 2024). This paper has traced the CEV's theoretical foundations, institutional rationale, and operational strategies, emphasizing its distinctive synthesis of Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, contextualized educational practice, and interdisciplinary research.

Drawing inspiration from pioneering institutions, the CEV has developed a framework that integrates personalist moral psychology and anthropology, the emotional and transcendent dimensions of virtue, and a holistic understanding of competencies and character. This enables the Centre to serve as a hub for research and transference, engaging schools and universities through innovative, evidence-based programmes that promote moral and intellectual formation across the educational continuum. The CEV's initiatives—from the *Leaders of Character Program* (LCP) in higher education to the *Teacher Formation Program* (TFP) in schools—demonstrate that character education can be both philosophically rigorous and pedagogically practical. By equipping educators with the tools to foster virtue, the TFP exemplifies the CEV's commitment to sustainable, educator-driven character education.

These initiatives respond to contemporary educational challenges by placing human flourishing at the heart of institutional purpose (Annas, 2011; Kristjánsson, 2023a) and equipping educators and students with the virtues needed to navigate the moral complexities of modern life (Curren, 2017; Nussbaum, 2011). Moreover, the CEV's commitment to partnership research and the cultivation of morally grounded educational leadership positions it as a key actor in shaping practice. The deliberate integration of educators into the design and delivery of its programmes ensures contextual relevance and long-term sustainability. In doing so, the CEV addresses not only student education but also the ethical and emotional well-being of those entrusted with their formation.

While CEV's initiatives may show promise, this paper represents only an initial step in documenting its work. Challenges such as scaling programmes across diverse educational contexts, securing long-term

funding, and conducting robust research remain. Comparative studies with other character education research centres are needed to contextualize the CEV's approach, alongside dedicated research on teachers' experiences and long-term evaluations of programme impact. The model of *Leadership of Positive Action* deserves further elaboration in future work, particularly in relation to teacher formation and ethical leadership.

Future research could productively examine the broader impact of centres like the CEV dedicated to character and virtue education. Comparative studies could explore how such institutions assess their effectiveness, the frameworks and tools they employ for self-evaluation, and the criteria they use to define success—whether through changes in school culture, teacher formation, student outcomes, or community engagement. This line of inquiry would contribute to a growing field of research concerned with evaluating the institutional infrastructures supporting character education (Arthur et al., 2017; Lamb et al., 2021). Understanding how research centres define and measure their impact would provide valuable insights into the conditions necessary for the sustainable advancement of virtue-based education.

Limitations and strategies for international transferability

While the CEV's framework has proven effective within Spanish and Latin American educational contexts, its transference to other cultural or institutional environments presents certain limitations. These include differences in anthropological assumptions, varying degrees of receptivity to virtue-based education, and divergent institutional structures that may not support sustained teacher formation or character-centred leadership. Additionally, linguistic nuances and culturally embedded understandings of concepts such as 'character' and 'virtue', for example, may require careful contextual reframing (Wierzbicka, 1999). To address these challenges, future efforts to adapt the CEV model internationally should be guided by a dual strategy: first, preserving the philosophical core of the framework, particularly its emphasis on human flourishing, practical wisdom, and the moral centrality of educators, while allowing for flexible integration with local educational traditions and policy environments; and second, prioritizing participatory processes that involve local stakeholders in the co-construction of adapted programmes. This would ensure both cultural resonance and institutional sustainability. Comparative research with other character education centres across Europe, Africa, or Asia could further refine such adaptation processes and generate transferable insights into the conditions necessary for successful contextualisation.

As character and virtue education gains international momentum, the CEV's experience demonstrates that transformative educational change thrives when rooted in coherent philosophical principles, responsive to local contexts, and enacted through collaborative, reflective, and ethically engaged practice.

Notes

1. As is known, prolific attempts exist to define character in the context of moral development. Of course, each definitional attempt responds to different philosophical and psychological underpinnings about morality and moral development, while giving more emphasis to some involved constructs or others. To provide some more examples: (moral) character is 'engaging in morally relevant conduct or words, or refraining from certain conduct or words' (Wynne & Walberg, 1984); 'Good character consists of knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good—habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of action' (Lickona, 1991, p. 51); for Huitt (2004), moral character incorporates the underlying qualities of a person's moral or ethical knowledge, reasoning, values, and commitments that are routinely displayed in behaviour. The intended general definition we suggest synthetizes different and parallelled definitions to character. Pritchard (1988, p. 471) defines character as 'a complex set of relatively persistent qualities of the individual person, and the term has a definite positive connotation when it is used in discussions of moral education'; Berkowitz (2002, p. 48) conceptualizes character as 'an individual's set of psychological characteristics that affect that person's ability and inclination to function morally'.
2. For further details on the Leadership of Positive Action model see López González et al., 2024). Especially Section 4 is devoted to how leadership can be conceived as a virtue construct, from a virtue ethics approach. There are included some of the acknowledged virtue identifiers, such as being a stable disposition, guided by rational choice (phronesis), aimed at flourishing, or its development through education.
3. Over the past two decades, Ibero-American education systems have widely adopted competency-based education (CBE) frameworks, often aligning with OECD and UNESCO guidelines to enhance 21st-century skills (UNESCO-OREALC, 2016). These reforms prioritize measurable skills for economic productivity, sometimes

sidelining deeper moral and civic development (Vaillant, 2017). In Latin America, countries such as Chile, Mexico, and Colombia have integrated CBE into their national curricula, emphasizing skills for employability (Mateo Díaz & Lim, 2022). Similarly, Spain's LOMLOE (2020) has made key competencies, such as digital and social skills, central to its curriculum design (Eurydice, 2022).

4. For instance, the event on October 7, 2024 with the presence of the President of the School Council of the Community of Madrid.
5. The Virtue and Values Education Centre framework can be accessed both in English and Spanish in: https://www.ufv.es/virtue-and-values-education-centre/.
6. This categorization of 'relational virtues' is aligned with other virtue ethics distinctions. For instance, regarding the so called 'virtues of attachment', or 'other-regarding virtues' (Von Wright, 1993; Carr 19854–85). At the same time, as included in the Centre's framework, shows individual characteristics.
7. The conceptualization of transcendence we approach—particularly in defining the set of 'transcendent virtues'—promotes the understanding of transcendence through both theological/theistic and non-theistic perspectives (Cottingham, 2012).
8. As of the time of writing, the LCP is being implemented across five schools at Francisco de Vitoria University: the School of Law, Business, and Governance; the School of Communication; the School of Education and Psychology; the School of Experimental Sciences; and the School of Medicine. It is hoped that in the coming years, the programme will be extended to other faculties and schools of the university, many of which have expressed interest in developing the programmeme.
9. A comprehensive account of the programme, its educational foundations, and a detailed description of the sessions is available in Domingo and Fernández Espinosa (2025).

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