

Can Character Formation be Measured?

Andrew Ellison, Vice President, Academics

Great Hearts Academies

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Can character formation be measured? That is, can the effectiveness of schools in forming the firm and habitual disposition to practice moral virtues be objectively described and quantified using social science research? We might look in vain for reliable and sound examples of successful character formation measurement—but that would not necessarily mean that it is inherently impossible to do. It might just be complex and difficult, both in itself and in our present cultural circumstances, and that difficulty is what militates against the attempt.

It is exceedingly challenging to establish a viable, agreed-upon, public definition of character in our center-less, ultra-pluralistic, 21st century multi-culture; a variety of different paradigms of morality and community overlap and interact, often in fragments, and often without the involved parties knowing that they are approaching questions of ethics and community with fundamentally different assumptions and ideals (see MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 1-5). Thus, it can be easy to fall back upon the lowest common denominator reflex of the psychological, value-free approach that dominated thinking about character in American educational circles for decades. In this way of thinking, documented and critiqued by James Davison Hunter in “The Death of Character” (2000), what matters above all is an individual’s sense of self-worth and his/her emotional and psychological adjustment to others and to the world.

Setting aside the particular ideological or philosophical principles that are behind this disastrously vacuous perspective of ethics and character education, such a value-free, therapeutic-psychological understanding

of morality turns out to be expediently easy to teach, provided we jettison our common sense. All we have to do is engender positive feelings in children and scrupulously avoid saying or doing anything that might cause them to feel bad about themselves or their actions – and repeat this for years. William Damon wrote in 2005 about the not-atypical experience of a suburban mom who received a call from school informing her that her fifth grade son had been caught stealing, though the administrator was himself uncomfortable with such morally unambiguous and judgmental language:

“We are not calling this incident ‘stealing.’ That would just give your child a bad self-image. We’ve decided to call what your son did ‘unco-operative behavior’—and we’ll point out in no uncertain terms that he won’t be very popular with his friends if he keeps acting this way!”

Therapeutic self-esteem also turns out to be fairly easy to define and thus to measure, much easier than actual, objective moral habits or dispositions. All we have to do is administer social science metrics that inventory individuals’ reported feelings of self-worth, integrity, and personal satisfaction, and provided that we assume all respondents are honest and accurate, we can convince ourselves that we are gathering reliable, comprehensive, objective data on such subjective things.

But using subjective metrics of self-worth and life adjustment to measure actual “character” would be as unsound as measuring real academic achievement merely by surveying teachers’ and students’ feelings about their success, or quantifying our quarterly GDP

by assessing producers' and sellers' attitudes about the economy. Such assessments do tell us something, but they do not penetrate to the objective reality beneath the surface impressions.

Fortunately, the excesses of the value-free, life-adjustment approach of educators in the '60s and '70s have been more or less consciously rejected by public educators and parents alike, though its legacy lives on. By the '90s, a growing rejection of this old approach, and the proliferation of explicit "character education" programs, was in favor from the grassroots to the highest levels of public power. President Bill Clinton's explicit endorsement of the character education movement in his 1996 State of the Union address is perhaps its high-water mark.

By the time Hunter's "Death of Character" appeared in 2000, much had changed, and not just Clinton's public credibility in matters of character. Hunter's landmark book expressed both popular suspicion of, and a cogent critique of, both the form and content of explicit "character education" as it had come to be prevalent. Hunter's book reaffirmed the bankruptcy of the old value-neutral approach, while also calling the more recent, seemingly less neutral, stand-alone character education modules and other programs into question. The underlying problem, Hunter argued, is that the old, value-free approach and the then-voguish "Character Counts!" approach were both rooted in the same assumptions and methodologies of what he called the "jealous guild" of scientific psychology; they are at their root individualistic, abstract, value-neutral, and place a premium upon positive feelings of worth and well-being. Genuine character formation, in contrast, is communal, concrete, value laden, and has a constructive place for feelings of shame and guilt (Hunter 15). The background of American culture is also problematic; "intensely fragmented...framed by a diffuse therapeutic individualism, and an economy of saturated consumerism" (Hunter 155). In the postscript to his book, Hunter writes that "the reigning paradigm of moral understanding, therapeutic to the core, envelops virtually every effort to socialize the young, even those efforts that, in principle, oppose it" (Hunter 229, emphasis mine).

Against the temptation of total despair, Hunter suggests as a closing note that the solution to the problem of

forming moral character in the midst of 21st century disintegration might lie in "creating space...for different moral communities to flourish in public and private life" (Hunter 231). Since reconstitution of a shared public culture and morality is impossible, he calls for the establishment of diverse communities with:

a (shared) moral culture that is integrated and mutually reinforcing; where the social networks of adult authority are strong, unified, and consistent in articulating moral ideals and their attending virtues; and where adults maintain a "caring watchfulness" over all aspects of a young person's maturation...These are environments where intellectual and moral virtues are not only naturally interwoven in a distinctive moral ethos but embedded within the structure of communities. (Hunter 155)

In the 13 years since the publication of "Death of Character," the country has seen the flourishing of innovative public and private school models with precisely such an "integrated and mutually reinforcing" approach to both academic achievement and the formation of character. Public charter schools that fit in this framework, such as the universally admired KIPP schools, command public attention and occupy a small, yet totally unchallenged section of the public space in this country, to an extent that would have been hard to imagine 20 years ago. The growth of both public and private schools with a coherent, intense, and unambiguous approach to culture-building has been well documented by Samuel Casey Carter in both "No Excuses" (2000), which focused on high-poverty, high-achievement schools, and in the more recent "On Purpose" (2011), which highlighted a broader array of schools with high achievement, strong culture, and robust character formation.

We know better now than we did 20 years ago how character can be taught in schools – how it can be formed effectively through integrated, mutually reinforcing, comprehensive cultural and institutional practices. But the question remains for us, perhaps all the more urgently in the present results-driven educational environment: how can successful character formation be measured? Several obstacles present themselves.

First, there remains the methodological bias of the

social sciences towards the psychological and value-free. Social science research is very good at measuring how people say they feel about things, and it is excellent at quantifying the prevalence of behaviors. Less well-documented is its ability to measure, in its espoused, value-free way, value-laden matters of right and wrong, good and evil – the very stuff of character itself. Any meaningful study of character formation would have to be grounded upon objective, external standards of character, and not just in the self-identification and self-descriptions of its subjects.

Another problem remains, one rooted in the diversity of models of culture, morality, and character found in the very plurality of institutions and communities flourishing in our public space. These flourishing examples show us that character is always embedded in community, and communities are always particular. They have their own peculiar customs, habits, features, and traditions, many of which were once accidental, but are now second nature to the members of those communities. If left to themselves, such schools and communities could certainly devise metrics for character formation—but they would be of little use outside of their particular communities.

For example, it would be easy for KIPP to produce their own metric for assessing character development as they see it, grounded in the results-oriented, “no excuses” culture of their “Five Pillars.” Analogously, it would be natural for the Achievement First schools to assess their students’ character according to the prevalence and practice of their own distinctive REACH values, or for the Great Hearts Academies to utilize the “seven virtues” of its own K-5 program as its character metric. Different metrics for different communities, with different conceptions of the moral life—the very efficacy of such schools’ efforts to form character lies, in part, in the intensity and particularity of their own, distinctive principles and intentional practices, and that particularity does not always neatly translate across the boundaries that define them.

There are characteristics, however, that these distinctive, even idiosyncratic school models have in common. They are not just private, isolated islands of education and character formation, each resulting in a completely different moral ecosystem. There are common features of stronger and weaker school cultures, and a sound

approach to studying and measuring character formation should begin by identifying the features shared by strong communities.

Next, research should proceed to identify the specific features of character excellence as lived and embedded in those strong communities. These features are undoubtedly like the ancient Greek virtues catalogued and explained by Aristotle: courage, self-control, generosity, truthfulness, gentleness, friendliness, prudence, justice, and the like. While these virtues are ancient, they can still be found in the most culturally strong, intentional, character-forming schools in the country.

In “The Abolition of Man,” Christian author C.S. Lewis sketches the possible outlines of a conception of morality and character that could cut across a plurality of strong, distinct, separate, not-always-harmonious cultures and traditions:

This conception, in all its forms, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and Oriental alike, I shall henceforth refer to for brevity simply as “the Tao”...what is common to them all is something we cannot neglect. It is 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. (Lewis 31)

Figuring out a way to measure this moral Tao that is shared by Ancient Greeks, post-Edwardian Englishmen, and intentional, culturally-strong 21st century educators—that remains a task for principled educators and researchers. It’s too important not to try to measure.

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