

SundayReview | OPINION

# Don't Grade Schools on Grit

By ANGELA DUCKWORTH MARCH 26, 2016

Philadelphia — THE Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once observed, “Intelligence plus character — that is the goal of true education.”

Evidence has now accumulated in support of King’s proposition: Attributes like self-control predict children’s success in school and beyond. Over the past few years, I’ve seen a groundswell of popular interest in character development.

As a social scientist researching the importance of character, I was heartened. It seemed that the narrow focus on standardized achievement test scores from the years I taught in public schools was giving way to a broader, more enlightened perspective.

These days, however, I worry I’ve contributed, inadvertently, to an idea I vigorously oppose: high-stakes character assessment. New federal legislation can be interpreted as encouraging states and schools to incorporate measures of character into their accountability systems. This year, nine California school districts will begin doing this.

Here’s how it all started. A decade ago, in my final year of graduate school, I met two educators, Dave Levin, of the KIPP charter school network, and Dominic Randolph, of Riverdale Country School. Though they served students at opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, both understood the importance of character development. They came to me because they wanted to provide feedback to kids on

character strengths. Feedback is fundamental, they reasoned, because it's hard to improve what you can't measure.

This wasn't entirely a new idea. Students have long received grades for behavior-related categories like citizenship or conduct. But an omnibus rating implies that character is singular when, in fact, it is plural.

In data collected on thousands of students from district, charter and independent schools, I've identified three correlated but distinct clusters of character strengths. One includes strengths like grit, self-control and optimism. They help you achieve your goals. The second includes social intelligence and gratitude; these strengths help you relate to, and help, other people. The third includes curiosity, open-mindedness and zest for learning, which enable independent thinking.

Still, separating character into specific strengths doesn't go far enough. As a teacher, I had a habit of entreating students to "use some self-control, please!" Such abstract exhortations rarely worked. My students didn't know what, specifically, I wanted them to do.

In designing what we called a **Character Growth Card** — a simple questionnaire that generates numeric scores for character strengths in a given marking period — Mr. Levin, Mr. Randolph and I hoped to provide students with feedback that pinpointed specific behaviors.

For instance, the character strength of self-control is assessed by questions about whether students "came to class prepared" and "allowed others to speak without interrupting"; gratitude, by items like "did something nice for someone else as a way of saying thank you." The frequency of these observed behaviors is estimated using a seven-point scale from "almost never" to "almost always."

Most students and parents said this feedback was useful. But it was still falling short. Getting feedback is one thing, and listening to it is another.

To encourage self-reflection, we asked students to rate themselves. Thinking you're "almost always" paying attention but seeing that your teachers say this happens only "sometimes" was often the wake-up call students needed.

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This model still has many shortcomings. Some teachers say students would benefit from more frequent feedback. Others have suggested that scores should be replaced by written narratives. Most important, we've discovered that feedback is insufficient. If a student struggles with "demonstrating self-control" or "helping others," for example, raising awareness of this problem isn't enough. That student needs strategies for what to do differently. His teachers and parents also need guidance in how to help him.

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Scientists and educators are working together to discover more effective ways of cultivating character. For example, research has shown that we can teach children the self-control strategy of setting goals and making plans, with measurable benefits for academic achievement. It's also possible to help children manage their emotions and to develop a "growth mind-set" about learning (that is, believing that their abilities are malleable rather than fixed).

This is exciting progress. A 2011 meta-analysis of more than 200 school-based programs found that teaching social and emotional skills can improve behavior and raise academic achievement, strong evidence that school is an important arena for the development of character.

But we're nowhere near ready — and perhaps never will be — to use feedback on character as a metric for judging the effectiveness of teachers and schools. We shouldn't be rewarding or punishing schools for how students perform on these measures.

MY concerns stem from intimate acquaintance with the limitations of the measures themselves.

One problem is reference bias: A judgment about whether you "came to class prepared" depends on your frame of reference. If you consider being prepared arriving before the bell rings, with your notebook open, last night's homework complete, and your full attention turned toward the day's lesson, you might rate yourself lower than a less prepared student with more lax standards.

For instance, in a study of self-reported conscientiousness in 56 countries, it was the Japanese, Chinese and Korean respondents who rated themselves lowest. The

authors of the study speculated that this reflected differences in cultural norms, rather than in actual behavior.

Comparisons between American schools often produce similarly paradoxical findings. In a study colleagues and I published last year, we found that eighth graders at high-performing charter schools gave themselves lower scores on conscientiousness, self-control and grit than their counterparts at district schools. This was perhaps because students at these charter schools held themselves to higher standards.

I also worry that tying external rewards and punishments to character assessment will create incentives for cheating. Policy makers who assume that giving educators and students more reasons to care about character can be only a good thing should take heed of research suggesting that extrinsic motivation can, in fact, displace intrinsic motivation. While carrots and sticks can bring about short-term changes in behavior, they often undermine interest in and responsibility for the behavior itself.

A couple of weeks ago, a colleague told me that she'd heard from a teacher in one of the California school districts adopting the new character test. The teacher was unsettled that questionnaires her students filled out about their grit and growth mind-set would contribute to an evaluation of her school's quality. I felt queasy. This was not at all my intent, and this is not at all a good idea.

Does character matter, and can character be developed? Science and experience unequivocally say yes. Can the practice of giving feedback to students on character be improved? Absolutely. Can scientists and educators work together to cultivate students' character? Without question.

Should we turn measures of character intended for research and self-discovery into high-stakes metrics for accountability? In my view, no.

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