

Teacher Blogs > Living in Dialogue

John Thompson: Should Schools Grade Students' Moral Character?

By Anthony Cody on September 20, 2011 11:15 AM

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Guest post by John Thompson. Part two of two.

Last week I read Paul Tough's New York Times Magazine article, "**What if the Secret to Success is Failure?**," about the approach being taken by the KIPP schools and others, inspired by the work of Martin Seligman. Two big issues came up for me. The first were some practical concerns, regarding what happens when public schools attempt to implement a "no excuses" model. The second were some larger philosophical questions about the moral lessons being taught, and the roles our schools play in this arena. **Yesterday's post** addresses the first set of issues. Today, part two addresses the second set.

Let's just say it is the 1990s and you are a young educator pioneering methods for overcoming poverty. You have developed a system of rewards and demerits designed to train middle school students not only in fractions and algebra but also in "perseverance and empathy." Wouldn't the next step be obvious? After all, once they move on, who will care about 8th grade test scores? Clearly, your students' future will be determined by their "grit," and resilience.

A system of rewards and punishment might be fine as a short term tactic, but then a teacher would then need to wean students off of its artificiality. Training kids to respond to external control might be a necessary evil, as long as you coax them towards self-control. Creating metrics to guide behavior falls under the category of "fake it until you can make it." But, your students must learn that merits and demerits cannot be more than a temporary expedient towards becoming an inner-directed adult. As teens move on to high school and beyond, they must put aside those childish things, develop an internal locus of control, build perseverance, and learn to learn.

Of course, KIPP co-founder Dave Levin saw it differently and the rest is history. To his credit, Levin did not buy the most reductionistic versions of data-driven accountability. He never claimed that teaching to a narrow portion of the brain to raise scores in bubble-in tests, rigorously keeping score, and demonstrating high expectations could be scaled up, transforming the entire nation's schools and ending poverty. He abjured the gamesmanship of other "reformers" who brazenly twisted numbers and claimed that neighborhood schools could replicate those results with an unflinching focus on classroom instruction. On the other hand, Levin has not been particularly vocal when "reformers" exaggerate his record in order to narrow the curriculum, create nonstop test prep, bash teachers, and undermine collective bargaining.

Also to his credit, Levin learned from his first students. In 1999, his 8th grade graduates produced the fifth-highest scores in New York City. He got 90% of them into selective high schools and 80% went to college. Even with that elite group, however, only 33% graduated from college. Levin realized that "the students who persisted in college were not necessarily the ones who had excelled academically at KIPP; they were the ones with exceptional character strengths, like optimism and persistence and social intelligence."

Paul Tough's New York Times Magazine "**What if the Secret of Success is Failure?**" brings us to the second phase of Levin's intellectual journey, and it is even more surprising. Tough tells the story of Levin, and the principal of the elite Riverside School, and their experiment with the psychology of success. Years of scientific research was combined into the "manual of the sanities." After a collaboration with psychologists who had studied patterns of behavior throughout history, they developed a list of seven character traits for success - zest, grit, self-control, social intelligence, gratitude, optimism and curiosity

The principal of the elite private school was equally committed to the goal of building moral character, but he rejected the idea of grading kids on it. "For Levin," writes Tough, "the next step was clear. Wouldn't it be cool, he mused, if each student graduated from school with not only a G.P.A. but also a C.P.A., for character-point average? And if you were a parent of a KIPP student, wouldn't you want to know how your son or daughter stacked up next to the rest of the class in character as well as in reading ability?"

Personally, I would not want to know how my child's moral character grade stacks up against other children's scores. In fact, the idea sounds creepy to me.

But I could support KIPP offering of "dual-purpose instruction." They deliberately work "explicit talk about character strengths" into every lesson. A KIPP dean lost me, however, when he said, "character conversations like that one isn't academic instruction at all, or even discipline; it's therapy." They use "self-talk" to understand and overcome unconscious fears and self-destructive habits. "The kids who succeed at KIPP are the ones who can C.B.T. themselves in the moment," the dean explained.

Tough then contrasts the way that the rich school and KIPP put this research to different uses. The elite school basically used the new psychological findings the way most educators would. It upgraded traditional teachings about moral character. KIPP, though, now seeks to

scale up "'performance character,' which includes values like effort, diligence and perseverance."

On one hand, my experience confirms the work of Levin, James Heckman, and others that socio-emotional skills are the key to success in school and beyond. On the other hand, as an inner city teacher, I have often worried that I was engaging in psychotherapy, on a wholesale level, without a license. Years of consulting with school counselors about our role in addressing child abuse, suicide alarms, and potentially deadly conflicts and illnesses have made me an adherent of the principle of "First, do no harm."

For example, whenever our school loses a student, counselors teach educators how to watch for signs of depression and other symptoms in their classmates. Recently, though, we have been warned against encouraging too much discussion by grieving students. We are briefed on the latest research on PTSD and on the dangers of dwelling on trauma, and thus urged to refer students to counselors while moving more quickly back into a routine. I am not qualified to judge our newer advice, any more than I am qualified to evaluate C.B.T. It would be the height of arrogance for me to ignore the medical experts. On the other hand, my classroom experience would not be grounds for hanging out a shingle as a medical professional.

I cannot conceive of a non-professional engineering a system of cognitive behavioral therapy, and imposing it on entire schools. Worse, consider the hubris of grading kids on a scale of one to five on 24 "character indicators" and using all of KIPP's marketing skills to acculturate (or indoctrinate?) kids into the system.

Tough thus reveals a complex quandary. In English Arts, we want students to probe the deepest of the human emotions. In social studies and Psychology, we want class discussions that wrestle with humanity's most profound conflicts. In football, we want to inculcate aggression and a "nose for the ball." In teaching students to be students, we must socialize them into the values, like delayed gratification and self-control, to be a success in life, as well as school. But do we have another "Pygmalion" here? And how precisely should adults aspire to control the maturation process? Do we really want amateur Cognitive Behavioral Therapists practicing on vulnerable teens?

And that brings us back to the question that prompted Levin's experiments. Levin sought to scale up his best instructional practices, and in doing so he pioneered a controversial, and controlling, commitment to metrics. Levin, and others, have expanded this quantitative process into an effort to engineer "a better teacher."

What do you think? Do we really want to mass design a better student? Should anyone, no matter how sincere, dare to grade people's moral character, much less train a better human being?

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I absolutely, 100% disagree that anyone has the right to grade another person's moral character. First, consider that what some consider to be immoral, others do not (e.g. sex before marriage). Therefore, a student may score low simply for holding different moral values. Moreover, how would you design a test that truly gauges another's moral worthiness? Would you not end up with some trying to game the system as they do with academic tests, thereby promoting the exact opposite? Third, instead of trying to "teach" these character values, wouldn't it be better to model them? In my experience, children are more deeply impressed and influenced by seeing their teachers and other adults trying to live an upright life than merely be being formally "taught" it. Additionally, wouldn't you also want more teachers who have personally overcome these sorts of issues to provide a role model for the kids?

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