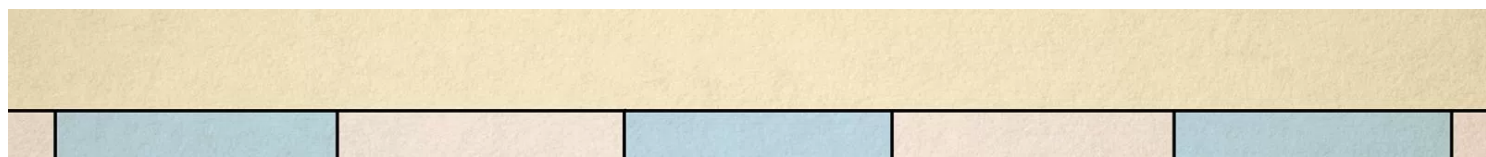

QUARTZ

SCHOOLS 2.0

Schools are finally teaching what kids need to be successful in life

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April 13, 2016



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📷 It's not all about STEM. (Fanqiao Wang)

[Research shows](#) that teaching kids things like perseverance and self-control can improve their health, academic achievement, and happiness in life.

But teaching character, or social and emotional learning, has proven dicey. The science was [sometimes squishy, the curriculum often felt driven](#) by those trying to set a moral agenda, and schools had too much else to do, like close the academic gap between high- and low-income kids, and the skills gap between [US kids and some of their global counterparts](#).

That's beginning to change.

[From Singapore and China to Britain](#), policymakers and educators are investing more time and money in scientific research on character. [California will start testing for character this fall](#); in 2015, for the first time, the OECD's Program for International Assessment, a widely-followed barometer of national educational attainment, [included a lengthy character assessment](#). The subject is even on the agenda at the upcoming G7 meeting in Japan.

The debate is no longer about whether character matters, but which traits—grit,

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undertaking: ask kids about their grit levels—how much do you persist with a task that is hard—and answers are bound to be tainted by lying, or just widely varying reference points (one person’s “working hard” is another’s person’s lazy). But educators and policymakers say it’s worth figuring out: the labor market does not need kids who test well as much as they need people who can solve problems, stay on task, and not be a jerk.

“Success in today’s world puts a higher premium on character qualities,” says Andreas Schleicher, [head of education and skills for the OECD](#). It’s still not what most schools focus on. “Most employers tell you how important collaborative skills are becoming at the workplace, and that is also what we are seeing in our data. But then you see still see most students sitting behind individual desks and learning to take their individual exam,” he said.

“That just does not add up.”

What’s character?

[Dave Levin, co-founder of KIPP](#), a US charter school network, has focused on character for a long time. He calls the combination of academics and character the “double helix” of education.

“There isn’t a moment in school where these two things aren’t happening together,” he said. “But we have come to see them separately.”

He offers this example: Your kid is reading a book. He gets to a hard part. What does he do? Does he close the book? Does he give up? Does he use “academic” strategies to figure out the words and meaning?

Of course academics play a role—if he can’t decode the words, he won’t get far. But

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[Daily Brief.](#)

KIPP schools have been issuing “[character growth cards](#)” (pdf) for years. Kids are measured on seven qualities and multiple behaviors, from self-control (“remained calm even when criticized or otherwise provoked”), gratitude (“showed appreciation for opportunities”), and grit (“finished whatever s/he began”).

But using the growth cards to figure out *how* to instill grit or optimism has proven challenging. In 2013, Levin teamed up with [Angela Duckworth, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania](#) and a MacArthur Genius, and Dominic Randolph, head of Riverdale Country Day School, to apply scientific methods to character research. [The Character Lab](#) is currently running five projects [to see which interventions work](#) best, including one called “gratitude as a trigger for self-improvement in adolescents” and another to improve curiosity.

She [explained their work to the Washington Post this way](#):

Typically, innovation happens when there’s a single teacher whose methods aren’t examined in a consistent way. I’m sure there are creative things going on and because we haven’t applied the scientific methods, we don’t know what those things are. I’d like to see teachers embracing the scientific methods so they can systematically measure things.

Duckworth is uniquely positioned for this task. When she was a teacher, she noticed that her smartest kids weren’t her most successful kids, and her less academically-able students often excelled. She wondered why. As part of her PhD in psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, she studied adults and kids in challenging situations. Which traits predict which cadets survive at West Point? Which kids wins high-stakes spelling bees? Which at-risk kids graduate from high school?

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for long-term goals,” [she explains in this Ted talk](#).
[Daily Brief](#).

Other countries are also moving toward a more scientific approach. In the UK, the Educational Endowment Foundation [is spending £1 million \(\\$1.4\) on randomized controlled trials](#) to test education strategies to develop characteristics like motivation, perseverance, and resilience. “It’s clear that teaching character and essential skills in schools has the potential to have a real impact on outcomes for pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged homes,” says Kevan Collins, chief executive of the group. But he admits, “we don’t know enough about the best ways to teach these attributes.”

Character matters

Character education is not new. But as research has [increasingly proven the importance](#) (pdf) of character qualities, countries and schools have had to incorporate the findings into curricula.

In 2011, Joseph A. Durlak and three other researchers [published the results of a meta-analysis](#) (pdf) of 213 school-based a social and emotional learning skills (SEL). SEL, or “soft skills” is another way of describing a group of skills that are not purely academic and include self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

The study looked at programs involving some 270,000 kindergarten through high school students. Compared to control groups, students taught SEL skills showed an 11 percentile-point gain in academic achievement. Perhaps more importantly, they also showed improvement in getting along, feeling engaged at school, and managing relationships better.

Those skills are important, the researchers found, because when students become

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According to one study, by high school (which starts at age 14), 40% to 60% of kids [are chronically disengaged from school](#).

Whatever the name, researchers are finding lots of personality traits, such as self-control and optimism, and a growth mindset—the belief that your effort matters, and intelligence is malleable, not fixed at birth—are [predictive of success in life](#), as defined by everything from life satisfaction to likelihood to graduate from university.

In 2015, the OECD [published “Skills for Social Progress: the Power of Social and Emotional Skills.”](#) It was the result of three years of research, and looked at longitudinal data from around the world on cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

“While everyone acknowledges the importance of social and emotional skills, there is often insufficient awareness of ‘what works’ to enhance these skills and efforts made to measure and foster them,” the researchers wrote.

It concluded that cognitive skills—as measured by literacy, academic achievement tests, and grades—can have a particularly strong effect on higher education attendance and employment. Raising levels of social and emotional skills—such as perseverance, self-esteem, and sociability—can have particularly strong effects on staying in college, being healthier, being bullied less, and reporting more happiness.

The question is, how to teach those.

Design matters

Schleicher spends a lot of time in schools around the world, and has for many years. His conclusion? Many countries place a strong emphasis on character in

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~~Only East~~ Asian countries, there's greater recognition for the importance in schools of character development," he said. "They see education as being about values, not just about getting a job."

Culture certainly plays a role: For some Asian families, getting poor grades is simply unacceptable. In Korea, **children do so much homework that the police** have to raid tutoring centers at night to get kids to go home.

"There's an element of culture, for sure," he said. "But the longer I work in the field, the more I conclude it's more an outcome of the design."

In Singapore, teachers don't start out with "What do I teach to my students?" he said. They ask, "What are the behaviors I want to achieve?" In Japan, if a child is arrested, the police call the teacher before the parent. In China, if a student is absent, teachers work hard to track that child down, eventually turning up in a student's home or a parent's workplace. He is quick to note that US teachers are less able to do this because they teach for more hours than their Asian counterparts.

Schleicher recently visited a boarding school in a rural area of China where all the students were the first in their family to receive an education. Their parents couldn't be the driving force in developing "character" because they were not around. He witnessed kids working hard with the teachers to maintain the school, and noted a strong sense of ownership and investment. The teachers told him they rejected the Western model of education of students as consumers of education. The value of education was learning math, but also taking care of your school and working with teachers.

"The kind of mutual respect was an outcome of how they work with the student," he said.

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Measurement problems

Daily Brief.

As the evidence mounts that character is important, schools in the US are focusing on how to test for it—a move Duckworth says is a huge mistake.

California will soon start testing kids on things like self-control and conscientiousness, measures that will be included in assessing a school's overall performance.

“I happen to think that it's not a good idea to repurpose measures designed for research and self-reflection into high-stakes accountability measures,” Duckworth said in an email. Levin agrees.

“We believe that you should improve the way character is discussed and measured in schools,” he said. “We don't think you should use it to evaluate kids, teachers or schools.”

Even character experts don't [agree on](#) which skills matter and the most effective ways to measure them. Many character assessments ask students to rate things such as how prepared they are for class, or whether they are hard workers. These things are highly subjective. Duckworth cited a [study of self-reported conscientiousness in 56 countries](#). The Koreans, Chinese, and Japanese rated themselves lowest, perhaps a reflection of culture more than preparedness. Kids lie, and context matters.

Schleicher agrees that the measures should not be used to rate teachers or judge schools. But he is adamant that measurement tools have improved, and countries need to collect data to determine how best to help their students.

“If we want to bring it on the radar screen, we need to measure it,” he said.

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The more things change the more they stay the same

Daily Brief.

In the industrial revolution, some argued against the introduction of public schools, asserting it was the responsibility of parents to offer those skills. Fortunately, the critics lost on that one.

This generation needs science to justify everything—from what we eat to how we love. Education is not exempt. As the evidence accumulates in favor of teaching for character and academics, priorities will have to accommodate for teaching more than advanced algebra.

“The science is much richer than it ever was,” says Levin. “We know more, so we have an obligation to incorporate what we know for kids.”

Schleicher makes a different case. “Everywhere you look, there is a perfect mismatch between university graduates who can’t find a job and employers saying they can’t find the people with the skills they need,” he said. When he examined this more closely, the problem was not just a gap in STEM skills, or income inequality. “The skills mismatch is about the character dimension.”

Problems are not getting easier to solve: Europe is paralyzed over a debate about migration; terrorism is on the rise, unemployment plagues many countries and industries are transforming overnight, requiring more skills and upending traditional educational practices. Testing well in math and science is necessary, but more is needed. Look no further than the US presidential debates, where some of the candidates [banter about their genitalia](#) and [disparage each other’s spouses](#) to see character in short supply: “They are insulting each other’s wives,” Levin says. “There’s no universe in which that would have happened a generation ago.”

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