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Anthony Seldon

Why the development of good character matters more than the passing of exams

The current focus in our school system is a single-minded drive to improve educational attainment. Yet education is much more than a mechanistic process which achieves its highest state with the maximisation of academic performance. Exam success is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for being an educated human being. As human beings, we are not machines but flesh and blood, with capacious minds, with bodies and emotions. We are organisms and our current mechanistic model of the purpose of education fails to rise to the heights and wonders of the organic model that young people across the land cry out for, as do their parents.

It is not enough for young people to emerge from school with a string of exam passes and for schools to pat themselves on the back, thinking that the box has been ticked and the 'job done'. This is only a part of the whole education journey. Families have a key role in the development of the finished product. So too do schools. Academic attainment and exam success can never be more than part of the story of the profound moral responsibility of schools to children, parents, society and the nation.

I would argue that schools that make children and their parents believe that exams are all-important are cynical and negligent. Worse, they are ignorant. Because school provides a once in a lifetime opportunity. That opportunity is all the more precious when young people come from disadvantaged home backgrounds, which do not provide the same chances for enrichment as those from more affluent backgrounds.

The work of education, as the linguistic root suggests, is to 'lead out'. Schools need to lead or draw out of young people all their talents and aptitudes. We cannot and must not define this task purely in terms of academic success. Not

the least because a focus on mere academic success often drains the lifeblood out of academic subjects, creating heavy and dull minds. As a headmaster, I know that what is not 'led out' of young people, what is not nurtured, by the age of 16 or 18 may remain dormant in that person for the rest of their lives.

Development of good character

At Wellington College, the fee-paying school in Berkshire which I head, and at Wellington Academy in Wiltshire, the state school we run in a relatively deprived rural area, we aim to 'draw out' a wealth of different qualities or intelligences from our young people. The development of good character lies at the heart of all that we do. We are not just trying to maximise the exam performance of our students, good though we are at that: we are seeking to maximise the chances of our young leading happy, successful and healthy lives. We are preparing them for university, with curious, disciplined and appreciative minds. We are preparing them for work, for family life and for society.

A focus merely on exams can all too easily lead to closed minds and leave the heart cold. A focus on character seeks to open their hearts and open their minds. The development of good character is more important than exam success because good character strengths are a greater predictor of success in university and in life than mere exam passes. But it is not at the expense of academic work. An emphasis on character will make academic learning more profound and also boost exam success.

At Wellington, our new character approach has five strands. In 2006, we began to teach wellbeing (popularly called 'happiness'), based on the University of Pennsylvania's resilience programme, founded by the 'father' of positive

psychology, Professor Martin Seligman. The programme consists of five one hour tutorial classes taken in years 10 and 11 which deploy typical dilemmas to develop character strength. Students explore what strengths they can draw on when making difficult but prudent decisions eg on being offered drugs. The process can be said to be Aristotelian in that it sees character and virtue as ends to be learned, developed and practised with mistakes not being deemed catastrophes, but rather being seen as positive options of learning.

Resilience training

Teaching of resilience is based on the stoic idea that 'man is troubled not by things, but by his opinion of them' (following Epictetus). Students begin to understand that their thinking patterns have a profound (though not total) impact upon their feelings and their behaviour. Resilience training helps people to tune in to their perception of situations and to learn to distinguish perception from fact.

Over time, students become more aware of thinking patterns that are not helpful, which causes them excessive anxiety and procrastination, or animosity with others, and they learn to challenge those patterns of thought with evidence so that they can gain a more accurate and flexible perspective.

In short, resilience training is about developing habits of mind that can help to avoid an unnecessary or unpleasant burden from emotion, and can help avoid thoughts and actions that, upon reflection, we might regret.

Core values

The school is grounded on five core values, selected by the students and the whole community: courage, integrity, kindness, respect and responsibility. The five values are regularly aired with students and adults to ensure that they become living signposts. We take role modelling immensely seriously. Teachers must not shout, must display real integrity, and show genuine respect for students, as must the students themselves for others across the community. All students learn how to be leaders, beginning with learning how to lead themselves, acquiring skills of organisation, self control and communication. Older pupils are given considerable

responsibility for younger, but they must exercise their power with kindness, not force. 'Kindness' awards for service to others, are regularly made, nominated by the community. We also have an extensive volunteering programme. Service, we remind ourselves, is not a week's trip abroad to help in a village school, but is a constant attitude of mind.

We try to follow the model of 'undefended leadership', as advocated by Simon P Walker, where we all open ourselves to constructive criticism, embrace it, and try to learn from it. Staff and students are taught coaching skills. Quiet listening is fundamental. Periods of 'stillness' increasingly punctuate the school day. I regularly ask all 1200 in school assembly to close their eyes and be totally still. I begin each weekly staff meeting on Monday break with a period of silence which allows everyone to collect themselves and let go of the baggage. Mindfulness is key to all we do.

Effective

How effective is all this character work? Wellington has seen its academic results soar in the five years after 2006, from 65% achieving As and Bs at A-level to 93%, with students of the same academic quality. Even if the emphasis on character resulted in only some of the improvement in results, one can certainly say that adopting a character and wellbeing focus has not been at the expense of academic results.

Smoking and drug use among our year 10 and 11 students are well below the national average, according to the 2012 SHEU survey.* Again other factors will be responsible, but the improvement in behaviour and atmosphere of the school has been palpable.

The school has become much calmer, kinder and more purposeful since this new approach has been adopted. This is all very well, you might say, for posh public schools, but what about state schools? Is character education transferable to the state sector?

Kings Science Academy

Kings Science Academy in Bradford, is an inner city school with a very mixed ethnic and social student population. It has become a national champion with its emphasis on character. Its motto is '*Mores et Scientia*'. '*Mores*' or 'character' is deliberately placed before

'*Scientia*', which is 'knowledge'. Students at Kings are told about the priority of developing a good character above all else, including their quest for knowledge. It has a unique 'Character Compass', which is ubiquitous around the school and which exhorts both students and staff to focus on developing 'positive, balanced and responsible character traits in all'.

The Character Compass has five points:

- Leadership, embracing hard work and resilience
- Critical Minds, which includes inquiry and possessing an open mind
- Spirituality, which includes humility, self awareness and gratitude
- Wisdom, which encompasses responsibility and intelligence; and finally
- Humanity, embracing respect, justice and love.

At the heart of the Kings Character Compass are three words:

- 'Articulate' supports the literacy agenda at the school, and encourages good conversation and manners, and discourages bad language and unkind remarks
- 'Peace' lies at the heart of the Compass. Kings argue that inner peace is the quality which will naturally arise if good character is being delivered
- 'Unity', which underlines the ambition for Kings' students to achieve academic success within the school and the transformation of families and communities outside it.

Seven times each day, the students stand behind their desks and chant the 'Character Promise' before they are seated: 'Character before knowledge'. They pledge to focus positively and constructively in the lesson, and to show visible respect to the teacher.

If students do not display the right character traits, a 'Character Development Card' is placed on their desk, beginning a chain of consequences that can lead them to the senior leadership team and attendance at a 'Responsible Character Workshop'.

Students who demonstrate success in the character compass can become 'Character Prefects', and are given a blue blazer, a gold tie, and special responsibility.

Form tutors are also 'Character Tutors' and very deliberately model the behaviours they want the students to present. They hold regular tutorials to discuss the progress of the students' understanding.

A 'Character Handbook' is given to all as a guide and reminder, and 'Character Rewards' are given to students who excel.

How effective is the Kings model? It is too early yet for there to be much evidence of empirical research, but what one can say is that parents like it, and Kings is now the second most oversubscribed school in Bradford with 1100 applications this year for 180 places.

Kings Langley, Hertfordshire

Kings Langley is a comprehensive school in Hertfordshire which in 2002 was placed in the bottom 3% of maintained schools nationally. Over the following ten years, the school has been utterly transformed.

In 2010 Ofsted praised it for outstanding attendance and for the wellbeing of its students. This year, they have been placed in the top 25% in the country at GCSE in virtually every category.

Headmaster Gary Lewis places the school's emphasis on character at the very heart of the transformation. Kings Langley follows the Penn Resilience Programme, which comes out of the positive psychology department at the University of Pennsylvania, where Martin Seligman is the leading figure.

Intensive staff training and modelling of character strengths and resilience is fundamental. Staff work alongside students on self-evaluation, and open themselves liberally to constructive criticism. Teachers have to reflect on whether they themselves are courteous and punctual, and on the quality of their teaching and marking.

They reflect on one of my favourite questions of all that I ask: '*Why did you first go into teaching?*' '*Are you the teacher you wanted to be when you first thought about teaching?*' Ah, that goes to the very heart, if answered honestly.

A rolling 'three week focus' helps keep everyone at Kings Langley fresh. For the three weeks leading up to Christmas, the focus for students and teachers was on holding doors open, and ensuring that thanks were offered on

each occasion. Eye contact has been another recent focus.

Lewis says a key part of his job as head is 'to provide obvious leadership', constantly modelling and insisting that the emphasis on character is lived deeply across the school.

I love looking at these precise examples. Having looked at two state secondaries, I now look at two state primaries.

King Solomon Academy

King Solomon Academy in London belongs to the dynamic ARK group, in which King Solomon has one of the most energising atmospheres I have ever witnessed in a school.

Character education lies at its heart. The distinguishing characteristic is perhaps the singular emphasis on high academic aspiration, with the school promising their pupils a place at an academically rigorous university and a successful life.

The school is clear that excellent exam grades are necessary. But so too is character and the confidence to make the students, a disproportionately high number who are on free school meals, believe that they have a right to achieve these aspirations.

From the moment children enter the school, teachers talk about university and graduation. Class names and year group names reinforce this by using university names.

Pupils are spoken to about their 'jobs' as learners and as scholars. Careers are regularly discussed. A smart uniform code underlines how they will be expected to dress.

Corporate identity is immensely strong, with most interactions and all transitions following set routines and behaviours. Working for the greater good is constantly underlined.

All pupils learn 'Philosophy for Children', used as a vehicle to help the young question life/themselves/others critically, to listen to others and how to manage disagreement.

Weekly celebration assemblies reward those who exemplify school values.

Pupils are offered a variety of prestigious positions, including being a school ambassador, a class ambassador or participating in the 'Learning Council'.

The school believes that its emphasis on character and values has already made a marked impact on good behaviour in and

outside class. Their evidence suggests that the pupils have imbued much of the culture of high aspirations, though it is too early yet to assess whether the dreams of high performance at university and beyond will be realised.

West Kidlington Primary School

West Kidlington Primary School in Oxfordshire is a national leader in values education, has featured on BBC television and gave evidence to Jim Rose in his review of the primary curriculum in 2009.

Good character, or 'having good values' as the school puts it, is the principal thrust and motivation of the school.

Values are described as 'beliefs that shape behaviour'. All adults working at the school are regularly asked the question 'What values do you expect of everyone at this school and what do they expect of you?'

Having good values are seen as utterly essential to any effective learning: the core values at West Kidlington are trust, respect, honesty, perseverance, peace and love.

School assemblies are the jewel in the crown. They have been rated as outstanding in every inspection since 2002, and attract visitors from across the world. Exploring and living values lie at the heart of each assembly. Pupils learn about putting values 'inside their hearts'.

Inspections regularly comment upon how profoundly values inform and shape the pupils' behaviour and morality. Secondary schools say they can recognise West Kidlington students because of the way that they behave.

Neil Hawkes, the longstanding head of the school until 1999, believes the key to any school becoming one where values underpin its entire structure is to have a strong head who can take stakeholders along with them.

He believes that with leadership any school can make the transition to a values school, but that no one should underestimate the resistance that will be met.

Kids Company

It is not only schools that benefit from a character approach. Kids Company was founded by Camila Batmanghelidjh in 1996 to support highly vulnerable inner city children. It now reaches 17,000 young people across

London, many of whom are highly deprived and damaged.

Vulnerable children who come to Kids Company have been exposed to parental neglect, relentless violence and abuse, and some are forced to work as drugs couriers and prostitutes.

Kids Company provides a caring family environment which allows the children and young people to rebuild their lives. Staff work tirelessly to build trust in those who come to them, and to develop self-esteem and character virtues.

Over time, the young begin to regain self-control and to communicate openly. They receive praise for their improved language, dress, punctuality and quality of work.

Self-esteem is built by exposing the young to experiences and giving them the opportunity to find out what their unique gifts to the community might be.

It plants the seed in the young that they are worth being cared for, and that they have to learn in time how to care for themselves.

Resilience is a core character quality for Kids Company and the staff measure it using Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire. The young are monitored closely by the adult staff, including their ability to function within laws and customs.

Kids Company achieves remarkable results. Its data shows that for 668 young people aged between 14 and 23, 97% return to education, employment or training.

199 were offered work experience by external organisations, a 197 reduced their substance abuse, and 80% of those who filled out the Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire showed an improvement in their emotional wellbeing.

US Charter Schools

Compelling evidence from US schools also points to the importance of character.

The story of the branch of 'Charter Schools' called 'KIPP' (i.e. 'Knowledge is Power Program') is now well known.

KIPP schools had been enormously successful in the 1990s, not the least with black and Hispanic children from low income families in New York and elsewhere, at winning admissions and indeed scholarships to top colleges.

But this tale of exams success lost its sheen when it was realised that only a fifth of those who graduated completed their four year college degree. David Levin, the co-founder of KIPP, was alarmed. He discovered that the research of Angela Duckworth, a psychologist showed that self control could be a more reliable predictor of student success than their IQ and exam scores.

Enter the appropriately named Paul Tough, whose book 'How Children Succeed' has now been published in the UK. Tough argues that research by economists, psychologists, neuroscientists and educators have all shown that the skills that a student requires see them successfully through university and beyond has less to do with IQ and more to do with personality traits.

Tough's conclusions that children who grow up in dysfunctional environments find it harder to concentrate, and this can be shown by malfunctions in the brain including the pre frontal cortex, are echoed by research by Kids Company.

Tough points to the need for highly-talented teachers and programmes to address the damage. But Kids Company shows that loving affirmation and mentoring can heal damaged brains and personalities.

Riverdale School

Dominic Randolph, head of the private school Riverdale in New York, was another to be fascinated by the failure of the KIPP students after they had gone to College. He teamed up with KIPP founder David Levin to probe the essence of resilience, and they whittled it down to seven qualities: self-control, grit, zest, social intelligence, optimism, gratitude and curiosity. They then set about making these the cornerstones of their respective schools' programmes.

The 'Character Growth Card' emerged after rigorous debate by students and staff at Riverdale and at KIPP Schools.

The seven qualities bear closer examination. Optimism stresses a refusal to let setbacks adversely affect one. Zest is about enthusiasm and active participation. Grit is about diligent work and the completion of tasks. Curiosity is about asking questions and independent thinking. Social Intelligence is about

adaptability, inclusion of others and finding resolution. Gratitude is not only about feeling, but expressing appreciation. Self-Control is about prioritising long-term gains above easy fixes.

Randolph deliberately teamed up with David Levin to show that the schools at the very opposite ends of the social scale can work together and produce a programme to the lasting benefit of their students.

Children at Riverdale have a report card which provides feedback on these seven strengths.

Teachers across all ages bring them into their lessons, whether they are teaching literature, history or mathematics, by seeking out practical illustrations of their importance and relevance.

Parents' evenings provide the opportunity for mothers and fathers to be informed about the strengths and their practical relevance in day-to-day living.

Teacher CPD is heavily focused on strengths. There is a real passion across the teaching staff to live the seven qualities.

Randolph believes that schools need to redefine the entire concept and measurement of success. Students need to be given feedback 'not just on whether they solved a mathematical equation, but on how well they approached the solving of the problem.'

'We have been too focused on the 'ends' of education and insufficiently on the means,' he says.

Riverdale evaluates the effectiveness of their character emphasis less by hard quantitative measurement than by its popularity with

stakeholders, and by the interest from the world of education.

The school confesses that it is too early for quantitative proof of the effectiveness of its character education, though it has secured funding for research which it believes will show demonstrably the impact of the approach.

I must make one mention, before I leave this discussion of schools, of the most remarkable one I have ever seen. Called the Conservatory Lab Charter School, it occupies one floor of a former office block in a rundown area of Boston. I have never seen children more proud of their school. Despite being non-selective, the school has a major focus on classical music. It has been hugely informed by the uplifting 'El Sistema' movement from Venezuela, which has produced the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra.

The secret of the school? Passion, unity of purpose, and highest expectations.

Prioritise character

Why then do I say that schools should prioritise character-building above exams? Because when we prioritise exams in the way that we have been doing, little or nothing will happen with character. But if we prioritise character, exam success will follow, and for the right reasons. The students will behave well in class. They will respect their teacher and each other. They will want to learn, rather than being made to learn. They will want to behave rather than being made to behave. They will probe beneath surface learning to the depths of subjects because they will be more reflective people.

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