

Character Compass:
How Powerful School Culture Can Point Students Toward Success
Scott Seider
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It is becoming hard to read about current education reform efforts without seeing reference to ‘no excuses’ schools that emphasize the development of grit, perseverance, and self-discipline. This focus grows out of work by psychologists like Angela Duckworth and Martin Seligman (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Duckworth, A. L., Matthews, M. D., Peterson, C., & Kelly, D. R., 2007) who have demonstrated that these ‘performance character’ traits are more predictive of success in college than many measures (like IQ or the SAT) traditionally used to estimate academic success. Scott Seider, in *Character Compass* (2013), deepens and broadens this conversation by examining three high-performing charter schools that emphasize three different kinds of character: moral, performance, and civic. Through his characteristically artful weaving of quantitative, qualitative, and narrative data, Seider shows how these schools build success through the construction of a school culture and ethos that grows out of an emphasis on character.

Seider starts the book with narrative descriptions of school community meetings and a review of academic literature that he uses to build a theoretical framework around three distinct types of character: moral, performance, and civic. Moral character involves the development of

capacities for engaging in intersubjective and ethical dilemmas (e.g. respect for others). Performance character encompasses the development of capacities that enable excellence in personal achievement (e.g. perseverance in the face of challenge, grit, etc.). Civic character includes the development of capacities that are necessary for civic life (e.g. the ability to engage in discussion with others). While all of the schools that Seider examines put some emphasis on performance character, each school puts particular emphasis on one of these types of character: Boston Prep emphasizes moral character, Roxbury Prep emphasizes performance character, and Pacific Rim emphasizes civic character.

Seider and his team investigated character education in each school through a year-long, mixed-method study that consisted of a survey at the beginning and end of the year, observations, and interviews of faculty, students, and parents. Seider’s survey drew from a variety of reliable measures for studying character traits. Through this survey, he shows that each school had statistically significant impacts on the development of character traits that were central to its focus. For example, the students at Roxbury Prep, which focused on performance character, scored higher on measures of perseverance while students at Boston Prep, which had a

focus on moral character, scored higher on measures of integrity and empathy. While the effect sizes were small and the study only covered one year, other studies of character education have not demonstrated significant impacts (Ruby & Doolittle, 2010), making this finding an important contribution to the literature.

Seider uses his qualitative observations and interviews to identify and describe elements of school programming and culture that contributed to the results he finds. This work produces the most important finding in the book: success in character education is tied to school culture. Often, character education is implemented as a program imposed on top of a school culture. Unfortunately, a recent IES report on a comprehensive study of seven such programs found that these programs had little in the way of measurable impacts on students (Ruby & Doolittle, 2010). The emphasis on character in the schools Seider studies is central to the school's ethos. Therefore, Seider argues, the programming that emphasizes character is deeply contextualized and constructed to complement and support the particular culture and mission of the school. As Seider notes, "'copying and pasting' a character education program into a school's existing culture and practices is not likely to be successful" (2012, p. 220).

This does not mean that the schools Seider studied have no explicit instruction on character: Boston Prep teaches moral character in an ethics class, Roxbury Prep focuses on performance character in advisory, and students at Pacific Rim learn about

civic character in character education class. However, this explicit teaching is supported by much of what happens outside of those classes. Modeling by teachers, the use of a common language about character, and the recognition of students all play a role in supporting character development. For example, at Pacific Rim students are taught the concept of *kaizen*, which is a Japanese word meaning "striving for the betterment of a community." This word becomes a part of the common language in the school. As well, students are given room to challenge authority in the school, set the agenda for school meetings, and engage with social problems beyond the school's walls. As a senior in the school claims "It's just like you have [*kaizen*] in yourself already" (Seider 2012, p. 167). This builds on and provides a space to apply the explicit instruction from the character education class.

This finding has importance to both researchers and those seeking to construct robust character education programs in schools. For researchers this finding suggests a need for a different model for evaluating character education in schools – a need to look past evaluations of isolated programs and instead examine the lessons that the broader school culture teaches to students about character. For practitioners this finding indicates the importance of making character education central to conversations about the school's mission and culture rather than bringing in programs to impose on top of the current culture. If a school is committed to developing character, the effort must be entrenched in the culture and shared vocabulary about what it means to be a

member of that community.

While Seider's work does illustrate the importance of tying character education to school culture, the limits of a one-year study raise a number of questions about the process of character development across multiple years in a school and the potential for the character traits (and accompanying academic successes) that have been developed in these schools to transfer beyond a setting that strongly supports their development through cultural norms. Seider does cite some evidence of programmatic impacts beyond the school, but these come in the form of student self-reports and parental observations.

The book also largely avoids the important question of how the growing focus on performance character in education reform shapes with the development of civic and moral character. Both Seider (p. 33) and the respected Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner (who wrote the forward p. vii-viii) point out that performance character is morally and civically neutral – its goal is personal achievement and so can be used to either moral/civic or immoral/individualistic ends. Seider's work shows that academically successful schools can be built around moral and civic character, but we get little data or analysis to help us understand the implications of the growing emphasis on performance character or how an emphasis on moral and civic character are shaped by a simultaneous focus on performance character (as is the case at Boston Prep and Pacific Rim).

This is a critical book for anyone interested in character development in education – especially reformers who are focusing on

cultivating traits like grit and perseverance. While programs imposed on top of school culture seem to have little impact, Seider shows that impacts can occur when character development is central to the ethos of the school and grows out of the school's mission. Still, there is much work to be done – especially when it comes to understanding the consequences of the current focus on performance character and its impact on development of moral and civic character – the tension between forms of character that allow us to get things done and the forms of character that contribute to our ability to know what is right to do.

References

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