

**The John Dewey Society  
and  
*The Journal of School & Society*  
announce:  
A Call for Public Scholarship**

**Issue #4: Hope and/or Grit: What is the future of  
character education?**

The John Dewey Society, founded in 1935, created *The Journal of School & Society* in order to meet one of its central aims: to support a vibrant public education system by fostering intelligent inquiry into problems pertaining to the place and function of education in social change, particularly among teachers, parents, and community activists.

**We invite all those interested in engaged public  
scholarship to contribute to this exciting venue!**

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At least since the rise of the Common School movement, American educators have agreed that an important part—if not the essential goal—of a public education entails the development of character.

John Dewey recognized this, writing in the very last passages of *Democracy & Education* that:

All education which develops power to share effectively in social life is moral. It forms a *character* which not only does the particular deed socially necessary but one which is interested in that continuous readjustment which is essential to growth.

He goes on to add that, “Interest in learning from *all* the contacts of life is *the* essential moral interest.”<sup>1</sup> There is perhaps no better rationale for the importance of character education: the ability to

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<sup>1</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916/1997), 360. Emphases added.

learn from all spheres of life the habits that will lead to a more just and beautiful society.

Over the past thirty years, the turn towards test-based accountability regimes and common academic standards eclipsed, to a certain degree, the focus on character. The emerging school marketplace initially led educational leaders to trumpet high test scores as the best guarantor of a quality education. They encouraged parents to vote with their feet—and some did.

But when educational leaders asked the next logical question—how do young children from such schools fair in college and career?—the situation became more complex. All of a sudden, character questions re-emerged, as it became clear that “success”—however we might define it—both requires and rewards perseverance as much as it does smarts.

Enter Paul Tough and the “new character education.” Tough’s writings reminded the public of the role of failure in learning and made a compelling case—at least to some—that schools should devote at least as much time to teaching the “soft skills” of grit, gratitude and zest as they do to academics.

Like a mighty wave, talk about grit suddenly seemed to flood public discussions about education (grit being the character trait that the public has largely come to equate with the new character education). Yet almost as quickly, a strong backlash emerged. Disparate voices, including such prominent educational leaders as Alfie Kohn and Tyrone Howard, asked hard questions:

- Does a focus on grit and other such character traits “blame the victim”? Does it imply that a boot-strapping mentality is the best and perhaps only way to overcome such social evils as poverty, racism, and ignorance?
- Does a focus on grit and other such character traits divorce the learner from what is learned and how it is learned? Is it the learner that needs changing, the curriculum, or the teacher and her methods?

- Does a focus on grit and other such character traits ignore questions of value? Are all goals equally worthy of persistent and gritty pursuit? What sort of life is worth living? What role should the school play in helping children develop a vision of the good life?

These are questions for which the new character education has struggled to provide a compelling answer.

In this issue of *The Journal of School & Society*, we are interested in the broad fate of the new character education. As concerned teachers, parents, and citizens, in what ways has a focus on traits such as grit empowered you and the children you work with? In what ways has it limited or harmed you and the children you work with? In what ways should schools interact with the discourse around the new character education?

We at the journal believe that the new character education will succeed only if it can provide a compelling vision of what a just and compassionate society looks like. That is, it is questions of shared value that must be addressed by our schools and society. To that end, we would like this issue to contrast the grit of the new character education with a reconstructed sense of democratic hope.

For Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy have suggested that it is, indeed, hope that we are really after. As they note:

at the heart of Dewey's theory of hope is what we call his ultimate, democratic hope: his goal of developing a more equitable, this-worldly existence that encourages all people to contribute their unique skills in service to the common-wealth. Alternatively put, Dewey's theory of hope rests upon the idea that this world, despite its precariousness and hazardous quality, is worthy of our piety and adoration rather than our scorn and disappointment.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille McCarthy. 2005. "The Morality and Politics of Hope: John Dewey and Positive Psychology in Dialogue". *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 41(3), 676.

In their work, Fishman and McCarthy put forward the idea that the advocates of grit<sup>3</sup> might have much to offer schools and families as they seek to reconstruct a viable character education for our times. That is, *if* they can overcome their hesitancy to inquire about questions of value and worth; *if* they can find ways to harmonize motivations for personal enrichment with the collective good; *if* they can conceptualize integrative rather than additive notions of growth; and *if* they can come to grips with the role that despair must necessarily play in lives lived in hope.

Hence, we invite contributions on hope as well as grit. As concerned teachers, parents, and citizens, what does hope mean for you and the communities in which you live and work? How is hope best cultivated within, alongside or apart from grit and other character traits?

Hope? Grit? What, then, is the future of character education?

### **How to Contribute to the Issue**

Unlike many academic journals, this publication actively seeks out both its contributors and its readership. Working in the spirit of Dewey, we seek to create the dialogic spaces and public engagement that we believe is sometimes missing from educational debate.

We view our work as broadly educative, in that we want to help connect practitioners in public dialogue. To do so, we work closely with educators and community activists to bring out their voices and stories. We also work closely with academics who wish to contribute their expertise and insight to the conversation.

### **Invited Pieces**

Work from educators and other communities members are welcome. This work may take either standard article form or may be submitted in alternative formats, such as a video interview or presentation. A grounding in scholarship is not necessary, although the author will want to situate their work clearly within the scope of the theme of the issue. Ordinarily, articles in this category will range from 2,000-5,000 words, although both longer and shorter submissions may be

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<sup>3</sup> That is, the field of positive psychology.

appropriate. Authors should expect to work closely with the editorial team to produce their submissions.

### **Peer-Reviewed Scholarly Articles**

Submissions for the peer-reviewed section of the journal are expected to conform to scholarly standards in their use of theory and empirical research to ground discussion of educational issues. Expected article length is ordinarily in the 5,000-8,000 word range, but both longer and shorter pieces can be considered. In addition to the Editors, articles in this category will be read by a minimum of two peer reviewers.

### **Submission Guidelines**

Please see [our journal website](#) for specifics. Submissions and inquiries should be emailed to Kyle Greenwalt, Editor of *The Journal of School & Society* and Associate Professor of Teacher Education at Michigan State University. Kyle's email is [greenwlt@msu.edu](mailto:greenwlt@msu.edu). Submissions should be received by October 1, 2016.