

Grit, Hope and the New Character Education

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Welcome to this Issue

Along with my associate editors, Jared Kemling of Southern Illinois University and Zane Wubbena of Texas State University, I am pleased to share with you this editorial team's current issue of *The Journal of School & Society*. We continue to thank the many members of the John Dewey Society who have supported us in this project.

The John Dewey Society was founded in 1935. While the ideas and topics that interested Dewey are shared by all in our organization, as an editorial team, more than anything else, we seek to work in the spirit of the great American philosopher—and in particular, with his commitment to the use of the method of conjoint experience and communication for the enrichment of democratic living. We seek to help communities of like-minded interest—understanding that term in its most Deweyan sense, as that which leads us on to our shared aims and ends—find themselves.

The Journal of School & Society aims to speak to all those interested in the place and function of education in a democratic society—to aca-

demics, certainly, but even more so to public school teachers, to parents, and to community activists—both young and old. To that end, we actively seek to highlight voices from diverse constituencies. We seek to be a journal of intelligent practice for creative and justice-oriented practitioners.

In this issue, with special creative assistance from Sarah Stitzlein—faculty member at the University of Cincinnati and co-direct the Center for Hope and Justice Education—we seek to explore the “new character education” that has swept over the country like a mighty wave. In the first section of the issue, we focus in particular on the affordances and limitations of grit—an idea that has come to define the public face of the current character education. Then, in the second section, we look to the idea of hope—understood here as a dynamic set of habits that are concomitants of truly educative experiences—as a counterbalance to static and measurable character traits that, at times, seem anchored in moral relativism and excessive individualism. Finally, in the third section, we see some examples of creative and tension-filled character education in action.

Our Contributors and their Experiences with the “New Character Education”

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.”¹ There is perhaps no better rationale for the importance of character education: the ability to 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.² While many schools remain wedded to math and reading test scores, others—most famously, the KIPP charter school network—are now increasingly focusing on the teaching and assessment of character traits as well. In short, our

current moment calls out for ever-more intelligent conversation around this timely topic. Our contributors to this issue do just that.

In our section on the affordances and limits of grit, **Karen Zaino** asks us to consider where we might find grit, given the many facets of her students and their lives. Indeed, she asks us to consider what many would consider the most unlikely of events: that Sam, a single teenage parent of a new child, might develop her character through discovering her calling as a mother.

Likewise, **Vicka Bell-Robinson** in her article about the “radical middle” of the new character education, provides a useful and elegantly simple test for the usefulness of the grit concept in any particular situation: if the situation is overly governed by a social injustice, talk of grit is, she argues, inherently unjust.

Finally, closing out our section on grit, we are fortunate to feature the work of an exciting new scholar, **Anindya Kundu**, who shares with us stories from his larger study on children in the New York City public school system who have achieved great things despite facing some of the most daunting life circumstances. Combining a focus on agency with grit, we see the importance of helping all adolescents experience the truly transformative potential of social relationships in their lives—relationships that model personal aspirations, social visions, and affirmations of one’s own roots.

Leading off our section on pragmatic hope, **Lori Foote and Sarah Stitzlein** clearly and powerfully help us to understand the way in which hope can be seen as a dynamic set of habits that leads students beyond rosy optimism. We see the potential schools might play in helping students to face not only the grittier realities of their current lives, but the moral and aesthetic possibilities of their futures.

Carmen James builds upon this foundation, showing us the way in which dynamic and intelligent habits might emerge out of the inter-

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

² Paul Tough, “What if the Secret to Success is Failure?”, *New York Times*, September 14, 2011, accessed November 4, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/18/magazine/what-if-the-secret-to-success-is-failure.html>.

play between experience and reflection—all the while reflecting on the inherent shortcomings of any character education that is overly didactic or mechanistic in character. **Gabriel Brown**, likewise, shows us the overlap between hope as understood by both pragmatist philosophy and positive psychology—suggesting that teachers could empower a generation of problem-solvers that have internalized the role that failure and obstacles will play in our pursuit of individual and social goods.

Two final pieces round out our section on hope. **Theodore Michael Christou** gives us a fascinating glimpse into the life and work of the great Canadian progressive educator, William Blatz, whose work in psychology led him to the understanding that security, rightly understood, could serve as the basis from which hope arises. **David Miltzer**, on the other hand, locates his understanding of hope in existential philosophy, urging us to help young people learn to find hope by avoiding the extremes of both fundamentalist notions of truth and complete moral relativism.

In our final section, we are fortunate to enter deeply into the “front lines” of intelligent character education in action. From **Becky L. Noël Smith**, we learn about how we, as teachers and parents, might gain greater moral clarity were we to more consistently attend to our “sympathetic data” and discuss, in a supportive community, the frustration that results when institutions stifle the very sources of our own moral reflection.

In a very special contribution from Quebec, **Anne-Marie Duclos** shares with us her success in helping teachers use Matthew Lipman’s Philosophy for Children’s program. As she rightly notes, opportunities for children to learn intelligent disagreement might counteract current trends in education towards neo-liberal ideas of accountability and efficiency.

Finally, in this issue, we are pleased to share the work of **Katie Fiorelli**, whose work in a community reading program finds ways to

empower parents and children through a fascinating blend of technologies—both new (cell-phones and #hashtags) and old (milk crates and books)!

John Dewey and Character

Ultimately, Dewey seemed to stand by a very “old-fashioned” notion of character: integrity. A person of integrity is usually thought of as someone who exhibits the traits of honesty and rectitude. These are no doubt important. But the more ancient sense of integrity is really what we are after: that which puts us in a state of wholeness or unity. What we are after is wholeheartedness.

Dewey argued that “were it not for the continued operation of all habits in every act, no such thing as character would exist. There would be simply a bundle, an untied bundle at that, of isolated acts. Character is the interpenetration of habits.”³ This might sound overly ambitious—as if our whole selves were to be present in everything we do. And indeed, as Dewey saw it, such an ambition is to be pursued: “The habit of walking is expressed in what a man sees when he keeps still, even in dreams.”⁴ In some sense, even our dreaming sustains as we move through the day.

Of course, the goal of complete interpenetration of habits will always remain just that: a goal. Character education, like all education, is interminable. A life-long process of becoming. “A weak, unstable, vacillating character is one in which different habits alternate with one another rather than embody one another.”⁵ Grit is important, no doubt. But so are other traits. Each must be taken up in the other, coordinated in a way of being in the world that is more skillful coping than routine application.

³ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: The Modern Library), 38.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

Teachers and parents might take their cue from Dewey by attending to the relationship between disposition and consequence. We understand the children in our care through their acts. But it is not so much the act itself that should concern us, but its consequences—taken in the broadest possible sense.

The most heroic deed may rebound upon character and incite the child to an enduring love of excitement or the need to be consistently praised. It may mean the child learns to refuse help out of the mistaken belief that heroes do things on their own. These are pedagogical conundrums from which no parent or teacher should excuse themselves.

Grit is good. But so is, as many of the contributors to this have noted, the ability to ask for help. To change course when the situation calls for it. To evaluate future goals in light of present circumstances. These are the character traits, as it turns out, of the democratic citizen. And they are only achieved through the habit of intelligent observation. Our pedagogical calling is to apply that observation to our own “speckled characters” and to help our children do likewise. This is a character education worth pursuing.