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How Should Character Education Be Assessed?

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Introduction

There is a growing international concern with character education – the inculcation of values and virtue -- accompanied by a concomitant interest in measuring the quality of programs dedicated to this purpose. In this paper I address this concern by distinguishing first between two aspects of education in character, one attuned to the transmission of predetermined values and virtues and the other concerned with the understanding and reinterpretation of existing norms in light of contemporary circumstances and alternative views. Then I differentiate between two conceptions of measurement in evaluation research, one associated with the determination of quantities useful for discovering causal or correlational links between inputs, processes, and outputs and the other with the assessment of qualities associated with understanding meanings, intentions, and purposes. Next I argue that education in character should seek a balance between these two aspects and that, while the one can be usefully assessed primarily in terms of measurement in the first sense, the other will also require measurement in the second sense. Assessing programs and procedures that promote virtue cannot be achieved by means of causal or correlational reasoning alone, in other words, since education in virtue entails a form of teleological reasoning that requires forms of understanding and judgment that generate new norms not merely reproduce old ones. The paper concludes with some

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practical guidelines for researchers concerning how to integrate these two sorts of measurement in the evaluation of character education properly conceived.

Two Aspects of Character Education

Although the terms morality and ethics are often used interchangeably in everyday speech, modern *moral* philosophy has been greatly concerned with judgments of moral obligation that emphasize such terms as right, wrong, just, unjust, permissible, forbidden, obligatory, and prohibited. These are *deontological* concepts, from the Greek for duty or what one must do. An earlier use of the term *ethics*, however, emphasized judgments of moral value concerned with such concepts as good, bad, admirable, deplorable, worthwhile, worthless, virtue, and vice. These are *aretaic* concepts, from the Greek for virtue or excellence (Frankena 1973). In general, whereas the term moral education often refers to the development of moral reasoning leading to a principled commitment to justice in the deontological sense (Kohlberg 1981), character education usually relates to the cultivation of values and virtue in the aretaic sense (Lickona 1992; Steutel and Carr 1999). In this paper I will use the terms interchangeably, but with preference to the aretaic perspective, since even a principled commitment to justice must be embedded in an articulate and defensible conception of the good (Murdoch 1970; Alexander 2005: 4, 17).

In this aretaic spirit Terence McLaughlin and J. Mark Halstead suggested that character education involves "a deliberate effort by schools, families, and communities to help young people understand, care about, and act upon core ethical values (McLaughlin and Halstead 1999: 132-63)." They distinguished between two ways of doing so. "Nonexpansive" conceptions of character education prefer direct teaching and the practice of predetermined traits to the development of moral

reasoning, in which the rationale is significantly limited and the qualities of character or virtues are viewed as fundamental or basic. "Expansive" conceptions of character education, on the other hand, ease these restrictions. They offer sophisticated and nuanced accounts of liberal democracy as part of their rationale for character education, promote emergent as well as fundamental or basic qualities of character and virtues, such as the requirements for democratic citizenship, and emphasize a role for reasoning in the cultivation of these attributes. (Alexander 2004: 374-75)

Non-expansive character education, in other words, might be thought of in terms of what Karl Popper (1963) once called closed societies that tend to prefer uniform monolithic conceptions of value and virtue and dogmatic ideals transmitted in a manner that prioritizes outcomes over process. The fact that youngsters come to believe and behave in a certain way is more important than how they come to do so. Expansive character education, on the other hand, is more closely related to what Popper called open societies that require the possibility of multiple values and visions and emergent or dynamic ideals that adapt to dialogue with alternative perspectives in order to foster the self-governance and recognize the free choice required of liberal democratic citizens (Alexander 2005: 3).

The difference between the two approaches can be further clarified by reference to a distinction I once drew between moral (or ethical) and amoral (or unethical) ideologies -- frameworks of belief and custom which inform or govern some aspect of our lives. Expansive character education tends to be concerned with initiation into moral (or ethical) ideologies which are comprised of visions of the good that address matters of value and virtue. These visions tend to be holistic in that they address significant portions of our lives, but not totalistic in that we may subscribe to a number of conceptions of the good, even those in tension with one another. They are

particularistic in that virtues and values are concrete expressions of distinctive cultures, but also pragmatic because they respond to experience and adapt to changes of time and place. They tend to be synthetic in that they are open to dialogue and prepared to learn from the ideas and values of competing traditions. Most importantly, they are ethical in that they embrace the conditions of human agency – that people have the freedom of will within reasonable limits to choose their beliefs and behaviors, the moral intelligence to tell the difference between better or worse according to some conception of these notions, and the capacity to err in belief and practice (Alexander 2001: 140-150; 2005: 4).

Nonexpansive character education, on the other and, tends to be concerned with amoral (or non-ethical) ideologies that tend to be holistic as well as totalistic -- they address the whole of life without allowing for a variety of visions; particularistic but not pragmatic, they are expressed in terms of concrete cultures but unwilling to adapt to changing times and places; non- or antisynthetic, they believe that they contain the whole truth and so have no need to learn from others; and resistant to ethical discourse, they deny the freedom, intelligence, or fallibility of human agents (Alexander 2005: 5).

This notion of human agency is essential to any genuine conception of character inculcation if it is to be counted as an instance of *education*. However we conceive the nature of knowledge or whatever we choose to include in the curriculum, we must suppose that the students we are educating and those charged with educating them are free to choose what and whether to learn, capable of understanding basic distinctions relevant to that learning, and equally capable of misunderstanding them. Were this not the case, it would make no sense to speak of education as engagement with worthwhile values and virtues, because it would be impossible to make sense of

what it could mean for something to be worthwhile. And since conceptions of curriculum may vary according to epistemological, political, moral, religious, and other ideological orientations, what conceptions of education must share in common – what makes them conceptions of education rather than of something else, say indoctrination -- is a commitment to human agency (Alexander 2005: 8).

The moral problem with indoctrination on this account is that it undercuts the conditions of human agency without which normative judgments are meaningless. If education entails nurturing the awareness of the moral potential inherent in each person, indoctrination involves undermining that potential by denying access to the conceptual and emotional tools necessary for its realization. Just as education is necessarily an ethical activity, indoctrination is inherently amoral because it undermines the conditions required for ethics and moral discourse to make sense. And this, of course, is why those who indoctrinate will tend to prefer the inculcation of amoral ideologies that are totalistic, that dictate rather than adapt to experience, that are resistant to engagement with alternative or competing orientations, and that deny the conditions of human agency. As a form of rule-conforming belief and behavior, indoctrination in amoral ideologies is concerned with predetermined outcomes, rather than with understanding, interpretation, and innovation. It seeks conformity of belief and behavior by means of pedagogy of uniformity in which a singular account of doctrine and practice prevails (Alexander 2005: 10).

To the extent that it embraces the conditions of human agency, therefore, expansive initiation into moral ideologies can be counted as a case of education. Conversely, to the extent that nonexpansive inculcation in values and virtues tends toward initiation into amoral ideologies alone, without engaging the freedom and intelligence of learners or acknowledging the potential fallibility of the traditions

being promoted, it is not really education at all, but rather a form of agency denying indoctrination. But the two are not as easily separable from one another as it may seem. It may be more appropriate to view them as aspects or dimensions of, rather than distinct approaches to, character education, that reflect extremes on a continuum between rigidity and conformity on the one side and reflection and openness on the other. To see why, it will be useful to turn to our second distinction.

Two Concepts of Measurement

It is also possible to differentiate between two concepts of measurement in education and evaluation research based on two distinct though sometimes overlapping ways in which the term is used. The first and perhaps most common use of the term entails determining the size, quantity, extent or amount of something by comparing it to a fixed unit or by establishing its position on a nominal, ordinal, interval, or ratio scale. This use of the term is often associated with a quest for statistical explanations achieved by means of an experimental, quasi experimental or nonexperimental research design in which a valid and reliable instrument of measurement is used to determine the extent to which one variable is dependent on another by applying it to a random sample of the population over which one wishes to generalize. One influential way of thinking about evaluating programs of character education, for example, draws on research designs of this sort in which input, process, and output are measured in order to determine correlational or in the best case causal relations between them. According to this logic, if we can establish which inputs and processes produce the highest levels of virtue among participants according to some reasonable criterion, we will be in a better position to determine which sorts of programs and procedures in character education engender the most desired results and

hence to establish standards of quality according to which programs of this kind can be assessed (Weiss 1972).

But there is also a second less common way in which the term measurement is sometimes used, for example, when we speak of taking the measure of a person, action, or object or of measurement as a synonym for evaluation. This sense of the term involves assessing the quality, worth, or merit of someone or something by judging him, her, or it against a normative ideal or standard of excellence or by estimating the position of the person or object in question on a continuum of greater or lesser significance, importance, or value. To be sure, merit is sometimes determined on the basis of quantity, such as in the assessment of academic or professional achievement; and the sort of value continuum mentioned here bears some similarity to an ordinal scale of measurement in which we consider the relative excellence of items in relation to one another. But this second use of them term is also associated with a quest for teleological explanations achieved by means of qualitative research designs that collects data through participant observation, in-depth interviews of key informants, and interpretation of material culture to understand the reasons behind or the norms that govern human activity, or the relative value or meanings that people attach to certain actions, objects, places, or processes (Patton 1980; 1990).

According to this qualitative logic, the assessment of character education programs would seek to understand the norms that have come to govern the lives of key informants who have participated in those programs and the processes by means of which those participants balance tensions between various values and virtues. This accounts for what might be called the descriptive aspect of qualitative assessment, in which we attempt to understand a cultural phenomenon from a insider's perspective

and translate that understanding into an outsider's viewpoint so that someone who has not participated in a program can gain a glimpse of what transpired and the ways it impacted on the moral life of participants. But there is also an evaluative aspect to qualitative assessment which calls us to formulate and defend judgments about the desirability of the norms and processes that have emerged in the course of a program according to standards embedded in a concept of the good. Both of these aspects of qualitative assessment require yet a third hermeneutic dimension which, in addition to interpretation of descriptive data and normative judgments from an articulate and reflexive researcher perspective, involves critical engagement with relevant sources of the moral traditions in question such as classical texts or sacred stories, to insure among other concerns an appropriate relation between the nonexpansive and expansive dimensions of character education as elaborated below (Eisner 1994: 226-34; Eisner 1998: 107-20; Alexander 2003: 12-15).

Aristotle (1994) referred to the sort of reasoning I have associated with the quantitative use of the term measurement as *techne* and to the type of inquiry I have associated with the qualitative use of the term as *episteme*. Whereas the one is concerned with mechanical relations between events, in which one pushes the other into existence, the other addresses purposive relations between them, in which ends or ideals pull events forward into existence. Both are part and parcel of what he called *Sophia* or theoretical knowledge. The acquisition of virtue, on the other hand, entails a form of wisdom that is practical not theoretical, according to Aristotle. He called it *Phronesis*. This practical process, which involves learning to strike a balance between extremes in order to conform one's will to certain ethical ideals, is teleological not merely causal or correlation. It pulls people to act in certain ways in order to achieve desired ends by teaching them to attribute meanings and purposes to

events and objects, even if antecedent variables may also push them to behave a particular manner (Taylor 1964; 1985: 15-57; Smith 2002: 35-41; Alexander 2006: 212). To the extent that education in character involves the acquisition of virtue according to Aristotle's use of the term, then, its proper assessment would need to involve measurement in the second in addition to the first sense. It requires understanding the qualitative not merely the quantitative merit of a person's actions, the worth of human conduct according to the relative value of the ends it seeks to attain, not only the extent to which those ends are in fact attained or the conditions that may influence the desire to do so.

This distinction is sometimes muddied by developments in the history of ideas that took place in the wake of Aristotle's belief that physical universe is governed but a divine intelligence, such that the first cause and the final end of existence are one and the same. In this view, all causal reasoning is dependent upon a more fundamental assessment of teleology (Smith 2002:36). When enlightenment skepticism demolished the philosophical theology upon which this attitude was based, the reasoning that remained central to the so-called modern scientific method, the "New Organon," as Francis Bacon (2002) called it, was primarily causal in nature, with teleology relegated to a variety of secondary sorts of explanations, such as functional descriptions of relations between bodily organs without reference to underlying biochemical causes. And as August Comte's nineteenth century doctrine of scientific positivism took hold by ensconcing the empiricism of early modern natural science in twentieth century social and behavioral science (Comte 1988), poplar use of terms such as measurement became increasingly narrowed to the first rather than the second sense. But Comte's extension of empiricism to the human sciences was dependent on Immanuel Kant's earlier insistence that causation is part of

the a priori structure of consciousness not things-in-themselves (Kant 1970; 2004). He asserted this position in response to David Hume's contention, using the very skeptical logical that demolished Aristotle's theology, that experimental conclusions are always contingent, never necessary, and so could always be otherwise (Hume 2007). And in so arguing, Kant opened door to a long line of philosophers from G. W. F. Hegel (1953; 1978) to Edmund Husserl (1960; 1967; 1970) to John Dewey (1938) to Alasdair MacIntyre (1984; 1989), among many others, that reasserted the intellectual significance of intentional, purposive, or teleological reasoning, at least in the human sciences. This neo-Aristotelian revival eschews Aristotle's rationalist theology. It is concerned with how reasons and purposes impact the governance of individual and collective life not the universe as a whole (Alexander 2008; 2014).

One especially compelling example of this renewed teleological thinking can be found in Michael Oakeshott's critique of rationalism in the study of human conduct (Oakeshott 1962:5-41). Oakeshott divided human life into two interrelated sorts of experiences. On the one side lies our encounter with the natural world of things, objects, events, and facts that can be conceived in terms of unambiguous and mechanical rules, universal laws, statistical generalizations, correlational relationships, and causal explanations. On the other side there is a self-created historical world of performances and occurrences -- activities that attribute meanings to the world around us concerning the sort of people we choose to be and events interpreted in light of those meanings. Accordingly, we can distinguish between two sorts of knowledge: one technical, focused on things, objects, and facts; the other practical, concerned with performances, occurrences, and meanings. The one entails techniques required to properly engage in such human activities as natural or social science that can be formulated in proposition, rules, principles, directions, and

maxims, whereas the other exists only in use and is shared or becomes common through traditions of practice not by means of formulated doctrines (Oakeshott 1962: 10-11; Alexander 2014:14-15).

Following this way of thinking, Oakeshott differentiated behavior from conduct. Behavior is associated with the world of techniques and objects, with conditioning and reactions to circumstances, with that which can be observed about what a person does disconnected from what she thinks or feels or intends. Conduct, on the other hand, is situated in the world of practice and meaning. It relates to wants rather than needs, to active recollections not mere passive memories, thinking and believing not just doing, understanding and interpreting instead of only recording, creating and innovating rather than simply imitating. Behavior, in other words, is mechanical, bound either by natural or behavioral laws or by preestablished human rules. Conduct, on the other hand, is intelligent, subject to multiple interpretations and capable of generating new norms (Oakeshott 1975:40-41; Alexander 2014:15).

Measurement in the quantitative sense, then, is an example of technical knowledge, since it is grounded in inflexible rational rules and focused primarily on observable human behavior. The ingredients of experimentation are intended to render a wholly mechanical account of how things, objects, facts, events, and behaviors are related to one another. Measurement in the qualitative sense, on the other hand, aims to illuminate practical knowledge of human conduct by rendering an understanding of the rich variety of performances, occurrences, and meanings -- manners, styles, tastes, customs, symbols, and stories – that are embedded in diverse, historically contingent, cultural traditions.

Although they are conceptually distinct from one another, Oakeshott insisted that these two kinds of knowledge are inseparable in practice. Many human activities require a high degree of technical knowledge. But this knowledge only acquires meaning in the context of concrete traditions of practice. What counts as great technique in one tradition may be scoffed at by another (Oakeshott 1962:9; Alexander 2014:16). And the only way one can distinguish between excellent and mediocre technique within a particular tradition is by acquiring good judgment, which entails the ability to comprehend and create meanings, not merely to recite facts or apply rules and principles (Oakeshott 1975:54; Alexander 2014: 16). In contrast to the idea that technical knowledge entails the standard against which all perspectives should be judged, the pursuit of knowledge on this view begins with acquiring an understanding of human conduct preserved in traditions of practice. Measurement in the quantitative sense came to dominate measurement in the qualitative sense only as a result of the hubris of the Enlightenment rationalists such as Bacon who falsely believed that practical knowledge was no knowledge at all and who failed to recognize that at least in the human sciences technique is but a summary of complex and contingent historical traditions of practice (Oakeshott 1962: 33; Alexander 2014:17).

Clearly the nonexpansive dimension of character education tends to prefer the production of fixed and rigid behaviors, whereas the expansive aspect aims to cultivate conduct embedded in traditions of practice. And although the former may be easily summarized in terms of thin technical generalizations communication concerning the latter will in all likelihood also require thick descriptions of particular concrete cases (Geertz 1973: 3-30; Walzer 1985). However, given the interconnectedness between the two, the question to be considered in the assessment of education in virtue and values is how not whether these two concepts of measurement might be most usefully employed. Addressing this query

requires an account of the proper relation between the expansive and nonexpansive dimensions of character education.

The Study of Character Education

In a well-known analysis, Thomas Green (1964; 1971) argued that training can be understood as the conditioning of habit-conforming behaviors, whereas teaching is a norm-regarding and norm-generating activity, because it calls for understanding, interpretation, and creativity. Oakeshott makes a similar point in his discussion of human conduct by distinguishing between the languages and the literatures of a tradition of practice. The one refers to its rules and habits, grammar and syntax, the other to the virtues, values, norms, and ideals that may be expressed and interpreted, transmitted and transformed, by means of those languages (Oakeshott 1989: 69; Alexander 2014:16-17). The expansive dimension of character education would appear to be related to Green's account of teaching, especially concerning the sort of subject matter that Oakeshott called the literatures of a tradition. Its nonexpansive aspect, on the other hand, appears to hue more closely to the attributes Green associated with training, again especially in what Oakeshott called the languages of a tradition. Of course, teaching often requires training. One must learn to add and subtract to prove mathematical theorems and to read and write in order to interpret or create literature (Alexander 2005:10-11). In this respect, the expansive side of character education can said to be dependent on prior learning from the nonexpansive side; one needs to acquire the mechanics of a tradition before becoming creative in it, to learn its languages before appreciating and enhancing its literatures.

In this view, character education in the fullest sense, in which nonexpansive training is transformed into expansive teaching, as education of any other kind, entails initiation into a number of diverse conversations about how to understand and

interpret the world in which we live; to appreciate a variety of literatures, not merely to speak the relevant languages; to master the subtle arts of argumentation from several perspectives, not only one or another partisan theory among a narrow array of possibilities (Oakeshott 1989: 69; Alexander 2008). On the other hand, when we merely train people to speak particular languages in matters that also call for teaching them the relevant literatures -- concerning, for example, the appreciation and creation of poetry, the understanding and application values, or the worship of God -- we restrict ourselves to the narrower nonexpansive side of character education that in the absence of its expansive partner tends toward indoctrination.

The study of character education, in this broad nonindoctrinary sense, cannot be reduced to the mere mechanics of instruction in inert facts and inflexible rules or the outcomes of policies designed to produce some or other predetermined technical result associated with mere measurement in the first sense; it requires an understanding of the cultural traditions in which these facts, rules, and policies are embedded, their values, aspirations, and conceptions of excellence, or in other words, measurement in the second sense. In short, qualitative understanding is a prerequisite for quantitative analysis in character education. Abstract rules alone cannot substitute for an appreciation of descriptive, evaluative, and hermeneutic subtleties embedded in the practices of teaching and learning values and virtues (Alexander 2014: 17).

Conclusion

How then should character education be assessed? Based on this analysis we can conclude that any such assessment should include the following ingredients:

(1) a qualitative research agenda that seeks to describe the cultural contexts of programs being assessed from the perspectives of insiders in a manner accessible to outsiders;

(2) an articulate and defensible conception of the good, ethical tradition, or moral ideology, that embraces the conditions of human agency and possess relevant and appropriate normative standards against which to evaluate the relative merit of the values and virtues being engaged in those program;

(3) a critical examination of the sources from which the conception of the good, ethical tradition, or moral ideology in question draws its normative authority, such as classical texts or sacred stories, to ensure among other considerations a proper balance between the nonexpansive and expansive dimensions of character education;

(4) and finally, an appropriate evaluation research design (experimental, quasi experimental, or nonexperimental) that utilizes valid and reliable instruments (measurement in the first sense) to examine among other factors which inputs and pedagogic processes yield the maximum desired behavioral outputs, given the concomitant qualitative analysis (measurement in the second sense) mentioned above.

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