“Character” has been used in American political discourse as a code word for arguing that if people are suffering – are poor, unemployed, or hooked on drugs or alcohol – it is because they have not been brought up properly and thus have a poor character, especially one that is short on self-government and controlling impulses. These people are assumed by conservative thinkers to come from broken homes. But people of good character can lift themselves up by their own boot straps, make their own opportunities. Look at small businesses, or startups.

In contrast, liberal thinkers emphasize the role of opportunity. They tend to hold that anti-social behavior tends to result from deficiencies in the social structure, or The System. If there were enough jobs, especially well-paying and meaningful jobs – careers – people would be motivated to work. If people had opportunities to be heard, and to participate, if they were “empowered,” they would conduct themselves with prosocial manners. All people can be “good” given half a chance, given the right kinds of opportunities.

Social scientists are likely to agree that both upbringing and social structure play a role in shaping behavior but differ in the relative weight they accord to these two sets of forces. They also note that the two factors are not fully independent of each other. And they point to complexities in both concepts. They note that Americans in general tend to favor equality of opportunities but not of results, but to get equality of opportunities a considerable measure of equality of results is needed. If people are accorded the same opportunities but start the competition with different levels of preparation and assets, those with less will fail even if the opportunities are equal. And what makes a good character, and how it is formed, is affected by culture, over which each person has only limited control.

One school of thought focuses on cultivating specific virtues. Particularly popular was the work of Michael Josephson, who laid out a curriculum focused on cultivating what he called “Six Pillars of Character.” These include trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Josephson noted that “[w]e might reasonably have eight or 10, or more. But most universal virtues fold easily into these six.” A considerable number of American schools dedicated a period of each school year to study one of these virtues – through recitation of poetry, reading of novels, and class discussions. Some schools increased the list. Others read a short statement about the virtue of the day during assembly or over the PA system.

I suggest that character education requires the development of two specific personality capabilities rather than acquiring specific values or virtues. These capabilities are self-discipline and empathy. Self-discipline (the ability to defer gratification is a major element of this psychological capability) is needed both in making ethical judgments and for performance
success. It is needed because families and schools and communities – places of worship included – cannot, even under the best conditions, expunge anti-social urges. We all have sexual and aggressive and selfish tendencies that push us to conduct ourselves in ways considered to be anti-social. Good students, citizens, and spouses – good people, people of character – differ from others in that they have acquired an ability to discern when such feelings swell in their chest and activate countervailing voices that enable them most times to restrain or deflect such anti-social urges.

Self-discipline (which builds much on deferring gratification) is also needed in order to persist, stick to tasks, concentrate, work hard, and achieve. This has been illustrated by the well-known studies about the differences in achievement between kids who could resist eating one marshmallow when they were promised two if they waited 15 minutes, and those who could not.

The second capability, empathy, significantly augments the first one. If students only acquired high levels of self-discipline, they might use their ability to dedicate themselves to projects that might harm others. Empathy, the ability to walk in another person’s shoes, to feel others’ pain and joy, guides students to activities that would enhance their lives without undermining those of others. Better yet, empathy allows students to enjoy helping and sharing with and caring for others. Without empathy, a person with strong self-discipline may merely become more accomplished in carrying out anti-social behavior.

The question of whether a school should engage in character education is an idle one: Schools cannot avoid influencing character. The only difference among schools is whether their character education efforts are unwitting or deliberately geared to an educational agenda, and what that agenda is.

Most importantly, experiences are more powerful educational agents when it comes to character formation than exhortations or even narratives. Among the key elements that affect pupil relevant experiences in school are the following:

1. Grades are the “wages” that are meted out to students for their work. The question for character building is whether students learn from their school experience that hard work pays off or if other messages are sent to them by the ways grades are meted out.

2. School sports are an important arena, too. Sports have been recognized since the first Olympics as a major tool for character building. The way school sports are conducted sends important messages, ranging from the notion that “It does not matter if you win or lose but how you play the game” to notions that “Winning is not the important thing, it is the only thing.” Learning to abide by rules, deal with authority, and with losing as well as winning are all skills more readily acquired in sports – if these are properly structured – than in math class.

3. Much attention has been paid to how schools deal with major discipline infractions, such as bringing guns to schools or assaulting teachers or fellow students. Similar attention also should be paid to the ways schools deal with small infractions.

In short, we may well need both opportunities and character to make for a good and high
performing society. However, opportunity will need to include some equality of results, not easy to attain. And character education must be based not on exhortation and recitation of virtues, but on developing two key psychological capabilities. Namely: self-discipline and empathy.

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