

A Superior Indicator of Future Success

A Review of:

“Habits for Scholarship and Citizenship at Park “

Education 310
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Introduction

The American education system was introduced to standardized testing at the beginning of the twentieth century. Simultaneously, French psychologist Alfred Binet developed the world's first intelligence test, which aimed to produce results that could derive one's mental age as well as identify the "slow" learners.ⁱ The College Board chose Princeton psychology professor, Carl Brigham; to spearhead the design of a new, nationwide college exam that combined influential sections from the IQ test and current standardized tests.ⁱⁱ On June 23, 1926, the first SAT was given.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, standardized tests tend to only measure a fraction of what makes education meaningful because they solely emphasize and measure one's ability to memorize facts and be a "good" test-taker, rather than require a genuine understanding of the material and the skills needed for continued success.^{iv} For example, in her 2015 book, *THE TYRANNY OF THE MERITOCRACY*, Lani Guinier explains that even the makers' of the SAT claim that high scores on the SAT only correlate with first-year college grades.^v Furthermore, when discussing David Levin's experience as a founder of the KIPP Academy, Guinier notes that he observed that, "...the students who succeeded in college were not necessarily those who had tested well or excelled academically in KIPP."^{vi} These are just two of the many examples littered throughout Guinier's book that point to one salient conclusion. This conclusion, which is backed by leading scholars, writers, and researchers like, Carol Dweck, Paul Tough, Eric Mazur, Uri Treisman, and Angela Duckworth, is that standardized test scores, at all levels of education, are simply not a very good indicator of a student's future success in the classroom or in the real world.^{vii}

Our Focus

Given this understanding, it is clear that schools of all levels need to find more applicable and effective ways to evaluate their students. However, acknowledging the need for better, and more revealing, methods of assessment is only the first step. Therefore, this report will outline and analyze a particular program instituted by the Park School in Brookline, Massachusetts, in order to provide a tangible blueprint of an alternative form of assessment that could be used at schools throughout the country.

Park School Background

Park is an independent, coed, and non-profit day school, located less than five miles from Boston, in the town of Brookline, Massachusetts.^{viii} Founded in 1888, Park currently educates 560 students, ranging from Pre-Kindergarten to the Eighth Grade.^{ix} As outlined in their mission statement, Park prides itself on academic excellence and a nurturing environment that enables each member of their community to, “develop curiosity, express creativity, appreciate the values of hard work and discipline, and experience the joy of learning.”^x Lastly, Park is committed to developing a racially, ethnically, religiously, socio-economically, and culturally diverse community in which all perspectives are respected, and where all students can reach their full potential as both scholars and citizens.^{xi}

Habits for Scholarship and Citizenship at Park

In the fall of 2013, Park implemented a new form of student evaluation and feedback called “Habits for Scholarship and Citizenship at Park”. As explained in a letter

that the school sent to all parents in the summer of 2013, various administrators and teachers spent three years researching and exploring new ways in which “character strengths” as “predictors of success” were being thought about.^{xii} Through a primary focus on the research and scholarship being conducted and produced by Carol Dweck, Paul Tough, and Angela Duckworth, Park concluded,

“...that these performance-based character strengths are more like habits than innate traits and that when they are clearly defined, emphasized, and modeled intentionally, as well as understood in terms of what they actually look like in a school setting, they can be practiced and honed.”^{xiii}

Given this conclusion, Park created a checklist of these “performance-based character strengths” based on a list of predictors of success that was compiled by Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania, as well as words and concepts found in the school’s mission statement.^{xiv} Finally, Park has stressed that although the words themselves are important, the definitions that the school has given each word are more significant when it comes to how each word fits into, “...the context of being a student at Park School.”^{xv}

Words, Definitions, and Forms of Demonstration

Figure 1^{xvi}

Habits for Scholarship and Citizenship at Park

CURIOSITY	Curiosity is the desire to personally connect with learning. This begins with a sense of wonder; requires an open mind and a comfort with not yet knowing, and leads to learning for its own sake.
GRIT	Grit is having the discipline to persevere in the face of hard work or setbacks with the belief that success is possible.
GRATITUDE	Gratitude is looking outside of oneself, recognizing the value of relationships within our community, and showing appreciation through one's actions.
ZEST	Zest is an excitement for learning, which may be expressed overtly or quietly, that motivates oneself and inspires others.
PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY	Personal Responsibility is a student's commitment to developing effective work habits and taking charge of her/his actions and behaviors in order to meet the daily expectations of school life.

As pictured in figure one, Park selected the following five character strength words: “curiosity,” “grit,” “gratitude,” “zest,” and “personal responsibility.” In addition to simply identifying that these words are important predictors of success, Park also carefully defined each of the words in order to help parents, teachers, and students understand exactly what these words mean within the context of the school. However, abstract words and definitions can often leave many questions unanswered. This is why Park has stressed the importance of the word “demonstrate” when it comes to these five habits. In order to not only unpack the words, but to also explain what they look like in real life, Park had, and still has, each grade in the upper division, grades six through eight, thoroughly define ways

in which students in each particular grade can demonstrate these words in a school setting.^{xvii} Ensuring that students truly understand how these words can be physically and mentally exhibited, allows students' to fully grasp what is being asked of them. (Figure two shows the forms of demonstration that grades six, seven, and eight came up with for the word "Grit.")^{xviii}

Figure 2

GRADE VI GRIT

Grit is having the discipline to persevere in the face of hard work or setbacks with the belief that success is possible.

- Stay focused, show you care, and take your time to really do your work
- Be willing to get back up and try again when you make a mistake or when you need to revise your work
- Take challenges on purpose instead of going the easy way
- Find opportunities in challenges
- Believe that anything is possible with hard work

GRADE VII GRIT

Grit is having the discipline to persevere in the face of hard work or setbacks with the belief that success is possible.

- Make corrections on a lab, test, or homework to understand it even you weren't asked to do that
- Go to a teacher at TEACH for help after you have tried to figure it out on your own
- Concentrate on your work in class, at TEACH, and at home when you do your homework
- Don't take the easy path with a quick answer, but take the time to give enough details to show what you know
- Don't just look at someone else's paper – figure it out for yourself

GRADE VIII

GRIT

Grit is having the discipline to persevere in the face of hard work or setbacks with the belief that success is possible.

- Push yourself to not give up
- Complete all of your work – even if it is hard
- Look at everything one more time
- Ask questions or ask for help - even if no one else does
- Challenge yourself to go beyond your comfort zone

These examples illustrate that despite reaching mostly similar conclusions, each grade understood and imagined the same word slightly differently.^{xix} These differences not only reflect the notion that eighth graders should hold themselves to different standards than sixth graders, but also represent how students are evaluated on definitions that their grade has generated. This last concept involving evaluation can be understood in a similar way as allowing students to amend the rubric that a certain project is graded on. The following section will provide a more comprehensive discussion on the specific forms of teacher and student evaluation.

In addition to these student-generated definitions, Park administrators and teachers also collaborated to create a list of supporting words for each of the five main words. These supporting words, known as “umbrella terms,” were included to give students, teachers, and parents a better understanding of what each word means and entails in a real world setting. (Figure 3 is a copy of this “umbrella term” checklist.)^{xx} All in all, what is critical to acknowledge is that Park believes that it is vital for students to fully understand these five words and how they can be effectively demonstrated. Without this deeper understanding, and level of student involvement, this checklist could easily become far too abstract for students to successfully engage with.

Figure 3

Supporting Words for Character Strengths

CURIOSITY	GRIT	GRATITUDE	ZEST	PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY
Wonder	Resilience	Empathy	Fully engaged	Self-control
Creativity	Investment	Respect	Quiet delight	Self-awareness
Questioning	Perseverance	Appreciation	Joy of learning	Attentive
Open-minded	Practice	Support	Contagious enthusiasm	Disciplined worker
Mental agility	Persistence	Adaptability	Excitement	Organized
Desire to deepen understanding	Optimism in the face of setbacks	Flexibility	Illustrate interest and/or passion in written work	Honesty
Active listening	Hard work	Cooperation	Inspire others	Prompt
Ownership	Commitment	Collaboration	Pursue ideas energetically	Prepared
Intellectual risk-taking	Fortitude	Standing together	Focused small group leader	Participate
	Focus	Looking outside of yourself	Offer different perspective	
	Finishing		Lead by example	

Teacher and Student Evaluation

The final piece of this program is how students are evaluated, and evaluate themselves, in regard to this checklist and set of definitions. In order to evaluate students on these character strength words, teachers use the definitions created by the particular grade and the umbrella terms checklist to note whether a student demonstrates a given word, “Consistently”, “Often”, “Sometimes”, or “Not Currently.”^{xxi} Students in the upper division receive this type of feedback, which Park refers to as “narrative comments”, in all of their classes, including specials like gym and art, five times a year.^{xxii} In the seventh and eighth grades, students receive these “narrative comments” at the same time as they receive their standard letter grades, but the narrative comments are not a part of these letter grades.^{xxiii} In fact, when interviewing the head of the upper division, she informed me that Park makes a point of referring to these “narrative comments” as a type of “feedback” and not a “grade” as they have no official impact on a student’s grade.^{xxiv} In the sixth grade, students do not get letter grades, but instead just receive narrative comments five times a year. An administrator at the school explained that within these narrative comments, teachers are encouraged to point to a specific moment when a student demonstrated a character strength word, as well as mentioning how and where they could further exemplify certain habits.^{xxv} This type of constant, yet specific and constructive, feedback is meant to help students understand the correlation between positive narrative comments and future success in the upper division. Although Park does not keep, or cannot disclose, data on the relationship between narrative comments and grades, it is clear that they believe that demonstrating these habits will increase the likelihood that one is successful in any academic or real world setting.^{xxvi}

In addition to the narrative comments submitted by teachers, students also complete a self-reflection that asks them where and how they have demonstrated any, or all, of the five character strength habits.^{xxvii} After completing this open ended reflection, students work with their advisor to set goals for where and how they can more “intentionally” demonstrate each of the five words^{xxviii}. This reflection process allows students to think on more personal level, as well as to focus on any limitations, or weaknesses, that they or their teachers observed. All upper division students complete this reflection and goal setting form five times a year. (A copy of this form can be found below in Figure 4.)^{xxix} For seventh and eighth graders, these five appointments come directly after they receive a new set of grades in order to hopefully illuminate the connection between achieving their respective goals and receiving better grades.^{xxx} This timeline also allows students and their advisors to identify where a student needs to do a better job of demonstrating certain words, which enables them to generate more specific goals.

Figure 4

Habits for Scholarship and Citizenship at Park That I Have Demonstrated

Social Studies - English - Science - Math - Modern Language
 Art - Music - P.E./Athletics

Consider yourself as a learner and citizen at Park. Where have you demonstrated the following strengths? In which classes above have you actively exhibited one or more of Park's habits for scholarship and citizenship? Record a description of your observable action(s) beside one or more of the habits below:

<p>Curiosity: the desire to personally connect with learning. This begins with a sense of wonder, requires an open mind and a comfort with not yet knowing, and leads to learning for its own sake.</p>	
<p>Grit: having the discipline to persevere in the face of hard work or setbacks with the belief that success is possible.</p>	
<p>Gratitude: looking outside of yourself, recognizing the value of relationships within our community, and showing appreciation through your actions.</p>	
<p>Zest: an excitement for learning, which may be expressed overtly or quietly, that motivates you and inspires others.</p>	
<p>Personal Responsibility: commitment to developing effective work habits and taking charge of your actions and behaviors in order to meet the daily expectations of school life.</p>	

Goal Setting for Habits for Scholarship and Citizenship at Park

Social Studies - English - Science - Math -
 Modern Language
 Art - Music - P.E./Athletics

Consider yourself as a learner and citizen at Park. Where might you work more intentionally to demonstrate strength in the following habits? Record your goal next to one or more of the habits below:

<p>Curiosity: the desire to personally connect with learning. This begins with a sense of wonder, requires an open mind and a comfort with not yet knowing, and leads to learning for its own sake.</p>	
<p>Grit: having the discipline to persevere in the face of hard work or setbacks with the belief that success is possible.</p>	
<p>Gratitude: looking outside of yourself, recognizing the value of relationships within our community, and showing appreciation through your actions.</p>	s
<p>Zest: an excitement for learning, which may be expressed overtly or quietly, that motivates you and inspires others.</p>	
<p>Personal Responsibility: commitment to developing effective work habits and taking charge of your actions and behaviors in order to meet the daily expectations of school life.</p>	

Conclusion

In its current state, Park's "Habits for Scholarship and Citizenship at Park" is not an alternative to testing. First, the narrative comments and self-reflections have no official impact on a student's grade, and second, because Park is an independent school, they have no obligation to partake in the highly contested system of standardized testing that restricts the curriculum of so many public schools. Furthermore, we acknowledge that the use of high stakes tests to evaluate students, teachers, and districts is a form of assessment that cannot, and will not, be instantly abandoned anytime soon. Therefore, instead of demanding a complete, and unrealistic, overhaul of the current system of test based evaluation used at public elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the country, we believe that programs like, "Habits for Scholarship and Citizenship at Park" could serve as a valuable supplement to current forms of assessment used at any type, or level, of school. This recommendation is based off of the widely documented understanding that standardized testing is mostly a poor indicator of the skills needed to be successful.^{xxxii} Whereas programs modeled after "Habits for Scholarship and Citizenship at Park" would have the ability to teach students the importance of, and the ways to demonstrate, character strength habits like, "curiosity," "grit," "gratitude," "zest," and "personal responsibility," which have been found to be more accurate indicators of success in the classroom and the real world.^{xxxiii} These are the skills that people need, and therefore, these are the skills that need to be taught, and the ones that students need to be evaluated on. Even if these evaluations are kept separate from grades, and merely function as a supplement to standardized tests, they still provide students with a sense of the habits that are such a vital part of being a successful scholar and citizen in our globalized world.

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- ⁱ Lani Guinier, *THE TYRANNY OF THE MERITOCRACY: DEMOCRATIZING HIGHER EDUCATION IN AMERICA* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 15.
- ⁱⁱ Ibid, 16.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, 16-17.
- ^{iv} Shirley Steinberg, "Using Standards and High-Stakes Testing for Students" *Studies in the Postmodern Theory of Education* Vol. 425 (2012): 153.
- ^v Guinier, *THE TYRANNY OF THE MERITOCRACY: DEMOCRATIZING HIGHER EDUCATION IN AMERICA*, 13.
- ^{vi} Ibid, 103.
- ^{vii} Ibid, 96-106.
- ^{viii} "About Park" Accessed May 4, 2016, <http://www.parkschool.org/Page/About-Park>
- ^{ix} Ibid.
- ^x "History & Mission" Accessed May 4, 2016, <http://www.parkschool.org/Page/About-Park/History--Mission>
- ^{xi} Ibid.
- ^{xii} Alice Lucey, "Parent Letter", e-mail message to author, May 1, 2016.
- ^{xiii} Ibid.
- ^{xiv} Ibid.
- ^{xv} Ibid.
- ^{xvi} Alice Lucey, "Checklist and Definitions" email message to author, May 1, 2016.
- ^{xvii} Alice Lucey, "Parent Letter" e-mail message to author, May 1, 2016.
- ^{xviii} Alice Lucey, "Upper Division Definitions" email message to author, May 1, 2016.
- ^{xix} Ibid.
- ^{xx} Alice Lucey, "Umbrella Terms" email message to author, May 1, 2016.
- ^{xxi} Alice Lucey, "Parent Letter" email message to author, May 1, 2016.
- ^{xxii} Alice Lucey, "Student Feedback" email message to author, May 2, 2016.
- ^{xxiii} Ibid.
- ^{xxiv} Alice Lucey, phone interview with author, May 4, 2016.
- ^{xxv} Ibid.
- ^{xxvi} Ibid.
- ^{xxvii} Alice Lucey, "Student Self Reflection and Goals Form" email message to author, May 1, 2016.
- ^{xxviii} Ibid.
- ^{xxix} Ibid.
- ^{xxx} Ibid.
- ^{xxxi} Guinier, *THE TYRANNY OF THE MERITOCRACY: DEMOCRATIZING HIGHER EDUCATION IN AMERICA*, 96-106.
- ^{xxxii} Ibid, pg. 104.