


Character education is not enough to help poor kids

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The foster care system failed Sam miserably. There wasn't a nurturing household in his long string of placements. He grew up on his own, got into trouble with the law, kicked around in odd jobs, and found the community college where he turned his life around.

Sam is 25, a big guy with a full smile who cares deeply about education and leading a meaningful life. Though he was sleeping in his car for a semester, he's maintained strong grades, participates in student government, and works on campus as a tutor and in a summer program for middle school kids.

Sam's progress toward his associate degree has been stalled, however, because severe budget cuts forced his college to limit course offerings during the year and pretty much eliminate summer classes. Illness from when he was living in his car made it harder to concentrate – though he maintained a full load. And he had to miss classes when his car was impounded because of lapsed registration and parking tickets he couldn't pay. Still, as he puts it, nothing will stop him.

There is an emerging opinion about poverty and the achievement gap that holds that America can boost the academic success of poor people like Sam – and younger incarnations of Sam particularly – through psychological and educational interventions that will help them develop the qualities of personality or character needed to overcome their circumstances. These are qualities that Sam displays in abundance: perseverance, self control, and belief in one's ability.

No doubt these are powerful attributes, and they contribute mightily to a successful life, regardless of how old you are or where you sit on the socioeconomic ladder. But policymakers need to be careful not to assume that character education is the long-awaited key to helping the poor overcome the assaults of poverty. My worry is that we will embrace programs that are essentially individual and technocratic fixes – mental conditioning for the poor – and abandon broader social policy aimed at poverty itself.

Western cultural history – from Aristotle to the humanistic psychology of Abraham Maslow – affirms the qualities of persistence, self-discipline, and self-esteem, and they've been part of our folk wisdom about success since well before Dale Carnegie

made millions by promoting the power of positive thinking. But they've gained even greater luster through economic modeling, psychological studies, and the technological advances of neuroscience.

Because brain imaging allows researchers to see the frontal lobes light up when someone weighs a decision, the claims about the power of character development seem cutting edge. It is this aura of the new that contributes to a belief that we have found a potent treatment for the achievement gap.

A diverse group of players is championing this concentration on character, nicely summarized in an engaging new book by journalist Paul Tough, "How Children Succeed," and in a September 2012 airing of Public Radio International's popular show "This American Life."

Nobel Laureate in economics James Heckman advocates early childhood intervention programs that emphasize the development of character for poor kids. Charter schools like KIPP infuse character education throughout the school day. And a whole range of smaller extra-curricular and afterschool programs – from Chicago's OneGoal to a chess club in a public school in Brooklyn – focus their efforts on helping the children of the poor develop a range of mental strategies and shifts in perception aimed toward academic achievement.

I have worked with economically and educationally disadvantaged children and adults for 40 years and know the importance of efforts like these. They need to be funded and expanded, for poor kids carry big burdens and have absurdly limited access to any kind of school-related enrichment, especially as inequality widens.

But it is difficult for enrichment programs alone to lead to educational mobility. Children from poor communities need social policy that involves schools and enrichment programs, but also need programs to address the conditions that devastate students' lives: poor nutrition and healthcare, inadequate housing, parental unemployment, violent streets, and a dysfunctional immigration system. When we ignore these broader conditions, we turn an ungenerous scrutiny on the children themselves.

America has a longstanding shameful tendency of attributing all sorts of pathologies to the poor. Writing in the mid-19th century, the authors of a report from the Boston School Committee bemoaned the "undisciplined, uninstructed...inveterate forwardness and obstinacy" of their working-class and immigrant students. There was much talk in the Boston report and elsewhere about teaching the poor "self-control," "discipline," "earnestness," and "planning for the future." Sound familiar?

Given the political tenor of our time, we can easily fall into the trap of blaming the poor for their circumstances – attributing them to character deficiencies and championing

character development as the way out of their problems. There's as much variability among the poor as in any group, and we have to keep that fact squarely in our sights, for we tend toward one-dimensional generalities about poor people's character and motivation.

Sam could be the poster boy for the advocates of character education; he possesses exactly the qualities they are trying to engender in young students. But what happens to Sam if after his Herculean effort he leaves the college that has given his heretofore chaotic life structure and finds limited jobs, or none at all? What if he slams up against discrimination? What if he can't afford to leave a neighborhood that has weighed on him for years? What if he gets in an accident or gets sick?

Sam has been able to hold onto his dream with stunning tenacity, but what happens, in short, if the material world around him continues to threaten his drive and hope?

And beyond that, is it fair or moral that a young person in the United States should have to expend superhuman effort to complete a standard, even basic, education that will in the end benefit both him and society? The exertion required of Sam becomes another measure of inequality. He's traversing the achievement gap all right, but with a backpack full of lead and a head-splitting level of stress.

Given a political climate that is antagonistic toward the welfare state and has further shredded our already compromised safety net, psychological and educational interventions may be the only viable political response to poverty available. But can you imagine the outcry if, let's say, an old toxic dump was discovered near Scarsdale or Beverly Hills and the National Institutes of Health undertook a program to teach kids strategies to lessen the effects of the toxins but didn't do anything to address the toxic dump itself?

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We seem willing to accept remedies for the poor that we are not willing to accept for anyone else. We should use our science to figure out why that is so – and then develop the character and courage to fully address poverty when it is an unpopular cause.

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