Through the Eyes of Character: The Knowledge is Power Program’s Character Education

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Among many of the educational discussions occurring across the nation is the nature of the achievement gap and possible solutions. While this has been discussed for a number of years, the new higher standards that the federal and state government have mandated has brought this conversation back to the forefront. One program that has received a large amount of attention is the Knowledge is Power Program which is commonly referred to as KIPP. The program was originally founded in 1994 as a charter school in Houston, Texas by Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, both graduates of the Teach For America program, as a charter school in Houston Texas (Mancini 2014). Eventually the program grew to incorporate a number of charter schools all under the KIPP foundation; today there are 162 schools in twenty states (Mancini 2014). The majority of these schools are middle schools and nationally, eighty-eight percent of their students qualify for the free or reduced lunch program and ninety-five percent of the student body is African American or Latino (Mancini 2014).

While this student body is not unique, KIPP’s goals and methods are. KIPP has gathered the most praise for their students’ academic achievements which have shown to be statistically significant (Clark Tuttle, Gill, Gleason, Knechtel, Nichols-Barrer, & Resch, 2013). In part, this can be attributed to the sixty percent more instructional time KIPP students receive compared to their non-KIPP middle school peers; this is accomplished through longer school days and a longer academic year (Macey, Decker, & Eckes, 2009). The school has an overall goal for their students to graduate college and tries to achieve this through their “five pillars” approach and a character education program; the five pillars are high expectations, choice and commitment, more time, the power to lead and a focus on results (Mancini 2014). In fact, many teachers attribute their
student’s success to high expectations paired with a consistent approach to discipline (Macey et al. 2009). This approach has had some success. Approximately forty-four percent of alumni have completed a bachelor degree while five and a half percent have earned an associate degree (Mancini 2014). This is above average for students with this background. However, it is below the school’s goal of perfect success rate.

This program does receive federal funding as a charter school and with its results, it is no surprise that a large number of students wish to attend. One of the benefits for these low income students is that KIPP is tuition free, however, when the number of applicants is greater than capacity, selection is done by a lottery system (Mancini 2014). KIPP’s structure of learning, however, attracts a certain type of family and student. In fact, attendance at KIPP does not increase a child’s expectations for their education; both lottery winners and nearly all non-winners believe that they will complete college (Clark et al. 2013).

As a general rule, this program tends to inspire intense and passionate advocates and critics. Many advocates point to the success KIPP has had in closing the achievement gap for these students and see it as a viable alternative to traditional public schools for these students to experience and achieve success. On the other hand, critics are wary of some of the more militarized aspects of KIPP that are displayed. One of the key items that is referenced is KIPP’s “Commitment to Success” contract, which states, “Failure to adhere to these commitments can cause me to lose various KIPP privileges and can lead to returning to my home school,” coupled with the commitment to “follow the teacher's directions” (KIPP Foundation, 2014). The commitment form, coupled with nationally high attrition rates, four closed KIPP schools, and three schools who had the “brand”
removed without explanation, contribute to the large amount of skepticism and concern found in its critics (Macey et al. 2009). A large concern that permeates criticisms and those interested in the program is the lack of independent research that has been done on KIPP (Henig 2008). As a result, it is difficult to find nuanced articles on KIPP. However, the program warrants more research into its methods, successes, and its shortcomings.

KIPP claims to be more than an academic environment. It readily advertises on its website how they focus on developing traits that can help students in, “...leading engaged, happy and successful live[s]” (Mancini 2014). It focuses readers on how their approach is based on Martin Seligman and Chris Petersen’s work and their partnership with Riverdale, a private high income school (Mancini 2014). However, there is not much elaboration or research on the success of their program.

Among the few distinct voices that speak about KIPP character education are Paul Tough, author of How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and Hidden Power of Character, and winner of the Guggenheim Fellowship for Social Sciences, Michael Rose. Their voices are representative of the opposing feelings towards KIPP’s character program. Paul Tough’s views are more aligned with the advocates of KIPP. One of the main differences he sees between the traditional high and low income students is the presence of a social safety net (Strauss, 2012). As a result, he sees the “character challenges” that both students face as more urgent for the low income student and that teaching students how to develop skills through character education can be beneficial (Strauss, 2012). On the other hand, Michael Rose eloquently echoes the concerns of KIPP’s critics. “[Michael Rose’s] worry is that we will embrace these essentially individual and technocratic fixes—mental conditioning for the poor—and abandon broader social policy
aimed at poverty itself” (Rose, 2013). KIPP, in its choice of student body and program, has placed itself in a difficult position. While they do not claim to be a solution to poverty, they will and are being evaluated from this lens.

KIPP is aware of the unique challenges their student body faces and designs its character education program around them. Their approach to character education is based around “seven keys” which are believing in the value of and modeling a given character strength, naming the strength, finding the strength in real life, feeling positive benefits of developing the strength, integrating the strength, encouraging the strength, and tracking the strength (Mancini 2014). KIPP embodies these seven keys by immersing students in this language (Strauss, 2012). The language of character development permeates the student’s education. Students are aware that they are being evaluated on character through the character growth card. Students are rated on 1-5 scale by their teachers (Sparks 2014).

As mentioned earlier, KIPP makes it clear that their character education program is based on Dr. Martin Seligman and Dr. Chris Petersen's work, who are considered the founders of positive psychology. In fact both Riverdale, KIPP’s partner school, and KIPP began to develop their character education program from the same work (Tough 2011). Coauthored by Dr. Seligman and Dr. Petersen, Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification is described as a “manual of the sanities” to help classify the “science of good character” (Tough 2011). Its concerns are both academic and practical. It seeks to create a manual with clearer-defined traits that need to meet the majority of ten criteria and believes that developing these traits can help individuals have a meaningful and happy life. After a survey of all societies that have a written language,
there are twenty four traits that were focused on; however this list is not considered
exhaustive and eventually they would like to include cultures that have only oral
language (Peterson, Seligman, 2004 p.34). The twenty four character strengths are
organized underneath six virtues. Interestingly, Seligman and Peterson are “comfortable
saying one is of good character if he or she displays but one or two of the strengths within
a virtue group” (Peterson et al., 2004 p.13). This underscores the fact that it is not the
good of the authors for individuals to obtain all of the character strengths listed in the
handbook. While the language of virtue is used, this book does not focus on the moral
aspects. One way to approach this book is to see the virtue as the umbrella or overarching
theme that connects the traits or character strengths.

Since this is the research that KIPP based their character education program on, it
is a natural place to start an inquiry. Their program was based on this work and the
collaboration between the founders of KIPP, the headmaster of Riverdale and, at that
time, a graduate student of Seligman, Dr. Duckworth. Their choices shaped the character
education that students receive at KIPP today and helped define the programs success and
shortcomings. It is in their choices that one can begin to understand KIPP’s motivation
and how the school values character education as another way to help students achieve
the goal of completing college. The character strengths KIPP’s program looks to develop
are curiosity, social intelligence, self control, gratitude, zest, and optimism. This is
essential for beginning to understand possible avenues for further research and evaluation
of KIPP’s character education program.

While there is very little research into KIPP’s character education program, an
independent study found that there were no impacts on eight measures of student
behavior such as how often students give teacher or parents a hard time or lie; furthermore they found that students who were offered admission to KIPP were more likely to act out in an undesirable manner; additionally, their students were no more likely than the control group to smoke, get high or break the law. (Clark et al. 2013). KIPP’s students, beyond completing more homework, did not increase their engagement or persistent (Clark et al. 2013). While further study is required before this is taken as an absolute truth, it is evidence that KIPP’s character education program needs to be investigated and possibly improved upon. KIPP’s character programs and its shortcomings may explain the independent study’s results.

While more research is needed, current evidence strongly suggests that KIPP chose specific language to help immerse students into a ‘will do’ environment and chose character strengths that are connected to success. Yet in their choices, including the school’s constant external reinforcement of character, it appears that they may have lost some of the nuances that would create a stronger impact on their students and created shortcomings in their program.

**Creation of A ‘Will Do’ Environment & The Growth Card**

To begin to understand KIPP’s character program, the context that the students are placed in is critical. A majority of KIPP teachers describe their teaching as “structured” and each of the KIPP schools have a clear system of consequences and rewards coupled with what the majority of teachers describe as a positive school environment (Macey et al. 2009). Students are ‘graded’ on each character strength on a character growth card. This includes the behaviors listed in the definition of each trait, a student’s self-evaluation, each teacher’s evaluation and the average of all teachers’
scores on a 1-5 scale (Character lab 2014)). The focus of KIPP is growth and KIPP students are surrounded by this language through receiving compliments and having character strengths integrated within their subjects (Mancini 2014). This creates a ‘will do’ environment that sets clear expectations with external reinforcers.

One of the overarching choices KIPP made in its character education program is the use of the label of character strength. Something both KIPP and the authors of *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, Seligman and Peterson, share is that they are classifying, or developing, character strengths not traits. Strength is seen as something that is an asset, a positive and most importantly something that can be obtained and developed. A trait is typically seen as something that is innately born with. KIPP uses character strength to implicitly reinforce the idea that these character strengths are attainable for its students. This is a reflection of the school’s environment and the school’s desire to measure. After all, one of KIPP’s seven steps to implementing character is to measure it (Mancini 2014).

But its existence plays into a current scientific debate: can individuals exposed to an external reinforcement internalize the reinforced behavior? KIPP’s model is based on the assumption that individuals can and there is some research that supports them. However, there is research to suggests that an overjustification effect exists and that when individuals receive an expected reward, their subsequent intrinsic interest is lower (Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973). Yet, it is important to remember that there is no peer reviewed study that examines if KIPP’s methods create the overjustification effect and the specific threshold of each individual's external reinforcement before it becomes overjustification is likely to be different. This debate on the overjustification effect is
occuring in research may be transpiring within students once they leave KIPP and may explain why some students struggle to maintain the same level of achievement. Thus, KIPP creates a ‘will do’ environment that relies on external reinforces to help students internalize the traits that KIPP believes will lead them to success.

**Curiosity - A Character Strength of Wisdom and Knowledge**

One of the character strengths that Seligman, Petersen and KIPP believe will help individuals live a good life is curiosity. This is a character strength that educators seek to instill in their students as it can help encourage and create lifetime learners. Beyond that, curiosity, novelty-seeking, and openness to experience have been associated with positive outcomes including positive affect, creativity, and perceived control (Peterson et al., 2004, p.135). While this is important for KIPP to inspire in its students to help them navigate college and life beyond its doors, there are more immediate benefits if they can instill it within their students. A meta-analysis showed that curiosity accounts for approximately ten percent in the variance of academic learning and performance suggesting that curious people tend to be higher achieving than those who do not display curiosity (Peterson et al., 2004 p. 135). As a result, it is not surprising that Seligman and Petersen classified this character strength under the virtue wisdom and knowledge.

However, just because KIPP and Seligman and Peterson used the same label for this strength does not mean that they are the same. Seligman and Peterson define curiosity and several generally perceived synonyms. Curiosity, according to Seligman and Peterson (2004), is defined as “.. one’s intrinsic interest in an ongoing experience.”(p.98). However, a majority of individuals have observed that others can be insatiably curious about one topic and nearly fall asleep in a different topic. This
phenomena is called specific curiosity and is formally defined as “...as an orientation towards investigation specific objects, events, and problems, to understand them better and be challenged by them” (Peterson et al., 2004 p.128). The definition that KIPP developed for curiosity as “... the search for information for its own sake. Active open-mindedness means exploring a wide range of relevant information when trying to draw a conclusion, including information that challenges our own initial assumptions. [Students should have been] eager to explore new things, asked questions to help s/he learn better, [and] took an active interest in learning” (Mancini 2014).

Within KIPP’s definition, they introduce yet another term, open mindedness, from Seligman and Peterson’s work. Before one can unpack KIPP’s definition of curiosity, their definition of open-mindedness is needed. Seligman and Peterson (2004) define open-mindedness as “...a higher personality dimension involving receptivity to novel fantasies, feelings, ideas and values”(p.126).

Two of the key aspects in Seligman and Petersons’ definition are curiosity’s intrinsic nature and focus on a current experience. When one observes KIPP’s definition, these words never appear. The only mention or implication to the internal nature of curiosity is KIPP’s reference to seeking information for “its own sake” (Mancini 2014). This move, on KIPP’s part, makes sense because a large emphasis of its program is on tracking and measuring growth. It is nearly impossible for one to measure an intrinsic trait in a school environment with accuracy. Instead, KIPP focuses the attention on open-mindedness. If one focuses on Seligman and Peterson’s definition of open mindedness and KIPP’s definition, the majority of the discrepancies disappear and their focuses align.
It becomes focused on introducing students to novel thoughts and information with the goal of increasing the students’ receptivity to them. While this strength can be indirectly observed in students, it does not align with KIPP’s desire to measure and quantify traits. Thus, the word “active” is added (Mancini 2014). All the traits listed in their definition can only be observed if a child is actively displaying open mindedness. In fact, many of the actions listed are in line with what a teacher could expect if a student was displaying, as defined by Seligman and Peterson, specific curiosity.

There is a critical distinction missing from KIPP’s definition. Seligman and Peterson spend considerable time covering the fact of whether specific curiosity exists. It is shown as something completely natural and normal. Yet, from what KIPP makes available to the public, there is no provision for this fact in their assessment of character. There are just the behaviors listed on the growth card (Character lab 2014). If this is true, it naturally leads to the assumption that students are expected to show traits of specific curiosity and open mindedness in all subjects. This lack of distinction, if it exists, is a large shortcoming within KIPP’s program, especially as it pertains to the growth card. While each teacher’s rating could distinguish if a child has specific curiosity, their overall score will be lower while one rating will be higher than the other. However, the goal of the growth card is student improvement, thus, if a student wishes to show growth and display curiosity, as defined by their school, in some cases they may need to display an active interest and interact with material in an artificially curious manner to progress.

To some degree, KIPP and its program are looking to develop and measure character strength that lacks longitude studies to prove it can be done (Peterson et al., 2004, p.137). Currently, research indicates that curiosity is developed from birth and is
influenced by the early years in an individual’s lifetime; without the longitudinal studies
to disprove or affirm, it appears that curiosity remains stable across the lifespan
(Peterson, Seligman, 2004, p.137). Despite the lack of research specific to the nature of
curiosity over a lifetime, it merits teaching and developing. Curiosity, specific curiosity,
and openness have been positively associated with problem solving ability, autonomy,
and self- esteem (Peterson et al., 2004, p.136-7). KIPP surrounds its student with this
language and integrates it into lessons. Thus, if they can expose their students to trying
their hand at curiosity and searching for more information, the students could reap the
benefits and possibly develop it. The fact that KIPP knew of this information on
curiosity’s research but chose the trait as one of its seven communicates that it is
important enough to merit trying to instill it in their program.

This character strength or knowledge of it can benefit students in their education.
KIPP focuses on seeking information in its definition, as opposed to experience, because
this is a central part of education. Information and understanding does not come to
students on a silver platter or through osmosis at night with their textbooks under a
pillow. It is something that needs to be sought. If students can internalize the behaviors
listed in KIPP’s definition it will benefit them in college. They will understand how to
seek more information and how display interest to their professors. Yet, the current
program lacks some of the nuances of Seligman and Petersen’s work.

KIPP is deliberate with their language choices as highlighted by the use of the
phrase character strengths. Thus, it can be hypothesized that KIPP chose to label this
strength as curiosity instead of open-mindedness because it is more effective in
communicating their message. In common language, open-mindedness is associated with
someone who is unprejudiced. If KIPP told students or prospective students who have yet to learn the definition that they would develop open mindedness, it implies that the students are closed-minded. For a school that relies on demand and focuses on positive gains, this implication is the opposite of their goals and would be detrimental to use.

Social Intelligence - A Character Strength of Humanity

Social intelligence is one of three reviewed ‘hot intelligences’ that work as a group to carry out abstract reasoning in the realm of hot information including “signals concerning motives, feelings, and other domains of direct relevance to an individual's well being and/or survival; the three hot intelligences are personal, social and emotional intelligence and are part of the virtue humanity” (Peterson et al., 2004,p.388 ). Yet in observation, it is difficult to discuss each hot intelligence in isolation and some behaviors are controlled by multiple intelligences. As a result, Seligman and Peterson also include emotional and personal intelligence as other names.

Researchers have classified some behaviors into their given hot intelligence. Specifically, social intelligence is seen as the ability to accurately assess one’s own motives, use social information to get others to cooperate, identify social dominance and sociopolitical relationships among individuals and groups, and to act wisely in a relationship (Peterson et al., 2004,p.338-9). Unfortunately for this discussion, the majority of research on social intelligence is focused on separating it from general intelligence due to the lack of information on its development (Peterson et al., 2004,p.346-7). Yet it is easy to see there are clear benefits to possessing good hot intelligences including social intelligence.
KIPP selected social intelligence as one of its seven traits it wishes to instill in its students. They define social intelligence as an “awareness of other people’s motives and feelings as well as using this understanding to navigate social situations appropriately.” Students who showed an ability to find solutions during conflicts with others, showed that they cared about the feelings of others and adapted to different social situations (Mancini 2014). In KIPP’s definition of social intelligence, there is a clear thread of Seligman and Peterson’s definition. Both agree that social intelligence is used to help determine others’ motivation; although for Dr. Seligman and Peterson’s definition, it is an implied aspect of using social information.

The most important difference between their two definitions is that when KIPP speaks of social intelligence, it is speaking about hot intelligences and Seligman and Peterson take time to distinguish the different hot intelligences despite their overlaps and intercorrelations. When KIPP speaks of social intelligence as being aware of others’ feelings, this aspect is the domain of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is attributed to being able to recognize emotion in others, the use of emotion in cognitive activities, understanding how it relates to relationships, and managing emotions (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 338). One of KIPP’s behaviors, “show[ing] caring for others feelings”, relates far more to emotional intelligence and the traits listed above than social intelligence (Mancini 2014). Another behavior KIPP expects of students is not in the domain of social intelligence. The ability to resolve conflict and find possible solutions, is an interplay of the hot intelligences. Certainly, one needs to understand one’s own goals and use social information to create cooperation between the conflicting parties. Yet there is a need in a conflict to understand both parties emotions, which is the domain
of emotional intelligence and one has to be able to assess their own performance, which is personal intelligence. Personal intelligence overlaps with social intelligence when it comes to understanding one’s own motivations and feelings but it is solely responsible for accurately assessing one’s own performance at tasks (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 338).

Unlike curiosity, hot intelligences have been researched and it is easy to expand one’s knowledge; for each intelligence one can focus on a specific area. The current model is to increase knowledge on social interaction for social intelligence, self-understanding for personal intelligence, and emotions for emotional intelligence (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 351). These skills are valuable for students and can help in their personal and future professional life. The majority of people associate being a people person as a huge positive. Yet there is a concerning aspect of KIPP’s chosen behaviors for social intelligence. The first behavior they list is finding solutions when a student is in a conflict (Mancini 2014). While this is a good skill, its emphasis promotes that students should get along with each other and resolve conflicts. On its face, this is a good thing to emphasize. However, its emphasis could discourage creativity, healthy skepticism, spontaneity and the constant promotion of positive psychology could negatively affect depressed or oppositional students (Peterson et al., 2004, p.351).

This emphasis may be one of the causes for the high attrition rate that critics of KIPP often point out. In fact, an evaluation of four Bay Area KIPP schools found that sixty percent of students that entered KIPP in 2003-2004 left before completing eighth grade (David, Grant, Guha, Lopez-Torkos, Woodworth, & Young 2006). KIPP later rebutted this aspect of the study in a Washington Post article stating that their attrition rates where similar to the public high school (Strauss 2011). Yet, another study found that
more boys than girls left KIPP and often tended to have lower scores compared with their peers who completed KIPP (Macey et al. 2009). Currently, there is a body of research that shows that women have a performance advantage over men on scales of emotional intelligences although no other research into cross gender has been done for the other hot intelligences (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 350). Of course, the reasons to leave KIPP are complex and individual. Without research, no concrete statement can be made. However, looking into the program, the emphasis on emotional intelligence and constant growth may play a role, especially in males, in leaving KIPP.

Whether or not social intelligence contributes to KIPP’s attrition rates, it was deemed important enough for students to know and is incorporated into its character education program. As shown earlier, KIPP uses its language deliberately. Seligman and Peterson listed two other choices for this character strength, emotional and personal intelligence, or KIPP could have called it hot intelligences. Hot intelligences is abstract and intelligences implies more than one, which means that KIPP would need to break it down into its components. This, mostly likely, did not fit with KIPP’s program because if the list became too long, it is hard to focus and seems overwhelming. Social intelligence, on the other hand, is something that many people have a knowledge of and could incorporate all the hot intelligences into one package. It would save the time and confusion of trying to train teachers and explain explicitly to students how to separate them and understand how they work together and overlap. Social, of the remaining perceived synonyms, is the only one that can carry multiple meanings. Personal narrows down the definition to a singular isolated area and it is a larger abstract jump, especially for middle schoolers, to include others. Emotional intelligence focuses on pure emotions
and can include an individual and others but it does not naturally lend itself to interactions of people, who are more than emotions. Social can naturally carry others because it possible to frame social interactions as an interplay between one’s self, others and the respective parties emotions. This grouping is far more digestible and shows hot intelligence relationships in an intuitive manner. Especially since KIPP’s main population is middle schoolers, social intelligence makes more sense and can be taught without overwhelming their students.

Similar to curiosity, KIPP’s choice in definition does lack some nuance that would be beneficial in the rating of students. The growth score, especially the scores done by individual teachers, is subjective. Teachers may value one aspect of the hot intelligence more than the other when it comes to rating. While the behaviors listed include a variety of the three intelligences, how does one distinguish what needs to be improved? The solution to this problem could be rather simple. Self-control is split into two distinct areas with traits underneath each. Social intelligence could be as well and would allow for students’ individual strengths in social intelligence to shine and easily define what needs to be improved. However, KIPP should ensure that their emphasis on social intelligence allows students to develop a sense of skepticism and teach students to voice their opinions without the fear of conflict.

**Self Control - A Character Strength of Temperance**

Seligman and Peterson have classified self regulation, or self control, as a part of the virtue temperance. Self regulation is defined in its exercise as “...the individual exerts control over his or her own response so as to pursue goals and live up to standards”; however, this is not a character strength that can be exhibited consistently because its use
and exerting it depletes its capacity (Peterson et al., 2004, p.442). Hence, one could see a small child behave like an angel in preschool but become a little monster at home. They’ve used up their store of self regulation and need time to rebuild it. There are a slew of benefits in using self regulation such as better personal adjustment, being a better relationship partner and in a study of thirty-two different traits on academic performance, self control was the only one that could predict grade point average; it appears that students with high self regulation appear to get better grades (Peterson et al., 2004, p.506-7). A large aspect of self regulation is altering one’s responses to internal and external stimuli, which is a huge part of humans survival instinct, since it is not beneficial to act on all stimuli (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 442). Given its the variety of backgrounds and lack of negatives that Seligman and Peterson found, it is no surprise KIPP is trying to instill this in their students.

KIPP labels this as self control, using one of Seligman and Peterson alternative names for self regulation, and defines it and several corresponding traits. “Self-control is the capacity to regulate thoughts, feelings, or behaviors when they conflict with valued goals. [In] School Work [students should have], came to class prepared, remembered and followed directions, got to work right away instead of waiting until the last minute and paid attention and resisted distractions. [In] Interpersonal [students should have], remained calm even when criticized or otherwise provoked, allowed others to speak without interrupting, was polite to adults and peers [and] kept temper in check” (Mancini 2014).

In terms of definitions, this is one of the closest matching definitions between the handbook and KIPP. Although KIPP focuses on goals and the definition focuses more
explicitly on conflicts; however, it is when the gut behavior or response is in conflict with
one's goals is where evidence of self regulation is found. The only distinction within the
two definitions is that KIPP paradoxically omits this standard when they list the standards
that students are expected to live up to. Also, KIPP implies that students are pursuing
goals while Seligman and Peterson explicitly state it as part of the process.

Once again, KIPP is very focused on observable manifestations of this trait and
focuses on school work and individuals being polite and avoiding conflict. As discussed
earlier, in social intelligence, this emphasis has some downsides. One lingering issue that
remains within KIPP’s character problem, is that it does not have any explicit and
publicly-released procedures for expressing disagreement or displeasure. If students are
to be successful, they need to do more than be polite and keep tempers in check. The best
communicators can also appropriately express their feelings including ones that are
typically associated as negative such as displeasure or anger. Focusing on pure
suppression of tempers and providing no outlet can be an unhealthy model for children to
learn, particularly since utopias are impossible and conflict is part of daily life. Many of
the successful people idolized in our current culture are skilled at expressing themselves
privately and publicly in appropriate manners.

One unusual choice that KIPP made is that they labeled this trait as self control as
opposed to self regulation. Interestingly, Seligman and Peterson, note that self control is
sometimes used as a synonym that focuses more on control impulses to behave in a moral
fashion (Peterson et al., 2004 p. 443). Yet, KIPP does not focus on impulses. This means
that the word control is a better reflection of their message than regulate. In the dictionary
they are listed as synonyms, yet the connotations are very different. Regulation is seen as
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process where an individual supervise and adjusts to a stimuli. Control is seen as when an individual, or group, exert power to directly influence something. KIPP looks to empower students and thus exert individual power, even over themselves, to reach goals as a natural extension. However, in choosing this as a trait that they intend to cultivate, it implies that their students lack control, or in other words, are impulsive. As some critics as mentioned, given KIPP’s population, this phrasing leaves a sour taste in their mouth. As Mike Rose (2013) points out, this rings of mid-nineteenth century’s sentiment towards the need to teach the poor “self control”, “discipline”, “earnestness” and “planning for the future”. This brings two valid points to the conversation on KIPP. The importance of their word choices is heightened due to their main population because these mid-nineteenth century views are frowned upon in the twenty-first century. It also calls into question what are appropriate traits to teach to students without slipping into generalities about the school’s main population? This question heavily applies to KIPP and currently the research is debatable.

Regardless, the choice to break away from Seligman and Peterson’s original label is intriguing as it reflects the views of the creators of the program. It is impossible to escape bias, so to accuse KIPP of such based on current information is incorrect. Their motivations and biases are not known and they clearly have high goals and expectations for their students. Furthermore, the creation of a possibly unintentional paradox is intriguing. In omitting living up to standards explicitly while listing standards to live up to, this causes one to feel as if their definition is incomplete. This rings true for students who are expected to internalize these traits.

Gratitude- A Character Strength of Transcendence
The majority of the words that stem from the Latin root gratia, gratitude, relate to kindness, generosity and the beauty of giving and are associated as positive characteristics; according to *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, gratitude is defined as the sense of “thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift be a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty” (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 554). Like many characteristics of humans, gratitude is not a one-dimensional trait. Gratitude is often broken into personal gratitude, which is thankfulness towards a specific person’s presence or actions, or transpersonal which is thankfulness to “God, a higher power or the cosmos” (Peterson et al., 2004, p.555). Within these types of gratitude there are three facets, span, frequency and intensity, that help explain the multiple ways gratitude manifest itself (Peterson et al., 2004, p.558).

Gratitude is considered a positive characteristic and has several points of consensus in research that may explain why KIPP selected it as part of their character education program. Research has shown that gratitude is linked to contentment, happiness, hope and is normally a pleasant event (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 557). These are clearly feelings contributing to a positive environment and feelings that KIPP would like to inspire in its students. On larger scale, gratitude has been found to be part of a “highly functional psychology apparatus” that aids in ensuring that people maintain obligations to others which are beneficial for society (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 557). Similar to other traits, gratitude tends to be stable across situations and time (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 555). KIPP’s middle schools are capitalizing on what little research has been done on the emergence of gratitude. According to a study, gratitude and its benefits do not regularly
appear until middle childhood (Peterson et al., 2004, p.563). Thus, the KIPP population is a good age developmentally to try to encourage the growth of gratitude.

As shown throughout this paper, there are some differences between KIPP’s and authors’, Seligman and Peterson, definition. KIPP’s definition is “Gratitude refers to appreciation for the benefits we receive from others and the desire to reciprocate with our own positive actions. [This should manifest itself in students having] recognized what other people did for them, showed appreciation for opportunities, expressed appreciation by saying thank you, and did something nice for someone else as a way of saying thank you” (Mancini 2014).

There a few places where KIPP departs from the original definition. Seligman and Peterson (2004) explicitly mention joy, use the phrase gifts, and include nature as a source (p.544). KIPP does not mention nature or joy and replaces gifts with benefits. This is an interesting choice because gifts are associated with giving without the expectations of reciprocation while benefits as associated with extra benefits attached to an obligation. KIPP also adds in the need to reciprocate positively. This addition explicitly adds the obligation piece that research has been show to benefit society. Yet this notion is nowhere in Seligman and Petersons’ definition. This addition reflects the KIPP philosophy of needing to see character strengths externalized in order to measure. However, this choice causes KIPP’s definition of nuance and the internal and personal nature of gratitude. Since KIPP students are rated on how they express gratitude, it calls into to question if KIPP’s program is creating a genuine source and understanding of character strength. In order to improve scores, students may have to force themselves to artificially express gratitude. Rather, their choices further cements KIPP’s program as
continually relying on external measures to rate and track an internal trait. However, there are ways to help students nurture a sense of gratitude that could be tracked while allowing students to more fully and independently express the character strength. One researched intervention that has shown success is a daily gratitude journal. As a result of keeping a journal, young adults reported higher levels of “alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness, and energy” (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 561). Since it is daily, it has the benefit of creating a habit and internalizing itself as a behavior. This is one of ultimate goals of KIPP, so it may benefit their program to allow more emphasis and incorporation of such a journal.

**Zest - A Character Strength of Courage**

Zest is one four synonyms listed in *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* for the character strength vitality. This state of being is considered optimal for humans and, often, if this state is lost, individuals will search for restorative contexts (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 287). Unlike some of the other traits that Seligman and Peterson define, this strength is as much a part of the cognitive experience is it physical; it is defined as a “dynamic aspect of well-being marked by the subjective experience of energy and aliveness” (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 209, 273). This dual property of vitality, belonging to both the individual’s cognitive and physical domains, explains the many contexts that one may seek to restore their vitality and a number of observable behaviors. For example, if one is feeling physically unwell, one may seek the aid of a doctor and homeopathic or prescription medicine. If one is feeling mentally unwell, they may seek a close counselor, psychiatrist, or a spiritual retreat.
KIPP has high expectations for their students which can not be met unless students are at their optimal capacity. Many of these students face monumental challenges in their goal to attend college. As KIPP founders saw throughout the program, before the character education program was designed and instituted, the students who made it through college were not always the ones that excelled academically at KIPP (Tough 2011). As many other have found, college success is not solely a matter of educational background or based off past academic achievements. There are other skills needed to succeed in college and many of them are character strengths. Yet for students to succeed in KIPP, where there is a “system of rewards and demerits” to teach academics and character, students need to be operating at their best, the optimal state of an individual of viability. Thus, it is not shocking to see that vitality made KIPP’s cut.

As mentioned earlier, KIPP selected a synonym for vitality and like many other character strengths, the definition compared to Seligman and Peterson is a little different. KIPP’s definition is “Zest, sometimes referred to as vitality, is an approach to life filled with excitement and energy. [Students who showed zest] actively participated, showed enthusiasm and approached new situations with excitement and energy (Mancini 2014).

Interestingly, this is the only definition that mentions other names for this character strength. This suggest that zest is a completely a new word to the students and including another name is an attempt to help them connect to something they already know. More notably, there is a huge departure from Seligman and Peterson’s definition. Nowhere in KIPP’s definition do they suggest or imply that this trait is a “.subjective experience..”
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(Peterson et al., 2004, p.273). Similar to other choices KIPP has made, subjective experience does not truly fit with the KIPP model of measuring. By definition, subjective is “relating to the way a person experiences things in his or her own mind” (Merriam-Webster n.d). There is no way for teachers to peer into a student’s mind to see their thought process or their interpretation of a situation. Rather, KIPP focused on zest being a character strength of displaying participation.

A negative that arises from KIPP’s system of rewards and demerits is that if a student feels as though they must act a certain way it could create an uneasy dynamic between students and teachers. Studies have shown that social context effects vitality and there is a body of “..experimental evidence that suggest controlling contexts can undermine subjective energy or vitality” (Peterson et al., 2004, p.287). In order for students to internalize this trait, KIPP needs to avoid unintentionally creating an atmosphere that undermines the subjective nature of vitality.

Furthermore, KIPP needs to avoid placing their students under too much pressure. Many theorists agree that “..repression, stress and conflict..” detract from one’s available energy. KIPP expects a lot from students in terms of energy and time. Unlike their non-KIPP peers, students at KIPP do not receive nearly as many breaks. As their Commitment to Excellence Contract, which all families must agree to in order for their student to go to KIPP, states students are in school Monday through Thursday from 7:25am-5:00pm, Fridays 7:25am-4:00pm, some Saturdays from 9:15am-1:00pm and attend summer school (KIPP Foundation, 2014). As discussed earlier, KIPP does have an attrition rate and this may be one of the sources of it. In 2013, eighty-eight percent of KIPP students returned (KIPP Foundation, 2013). However, this means that KIPP lost twenty-two percent of its
student body. Depending on how KIPP teachers structure homework, there may not be much time for KIPP students to relax and de-stress. An independent study found that KIPP students complete an average amount of two or more hours of homework per night (Clark et al. 2013). If one takes an average week, without a Saturday class, this means that KIPP students are spending forty-six and a half hours on academics. In other words, the students are working more than full time on an average week. When one takes into account Saturday school and summer school, they spend a larger portion of the year doing academics than their non-KIPP peers. This could explain why the study found that beyond the amount of homework done, students did not report any statistically significant impact on the seven other measures of engagement such as student effort, engagement or extracurricular activities (Clark et al. 2013 p.47). This can have negative impacts on their students and may contribute to them leaving KIPP. Furthermore, this could undermine the strength of vitality that KIPP is trying to impart on its students.

If KIPP does not give students time to grow and discover their own sense of vitality and learn how handle stress, this trait will not be internalized. This undermines the goal of KIPP’s character education program and vitality is an important strength to have students obtain and exhibit. After all, when students leave KIPP system of rewards, this strength must be subjective and internalized if students are to demonstrate and use it to its full advantage.

**Optimism - A Character Strength of Transcendence**

If there is one thing that people cling to in difficult situations, it is the hope that things will improve. Its a sign of optimism and is considered a desirable trait for humans. In fact, it is linked to host a benefits included lessened anxiety and depression,
improving social relationships and physical well being; in fact, there are benefits in several domains including academics, athletic, military, political and vocational (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 576). Peterson and Seligman (2004) primarily call this strength hope, however they list optimism, future-mindedness and future orientation as synonyms (pp. 570). Together hope and its synonyms are defined as “..represent[ing] a cognitive emotional and motivational stance towards the future” (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 570). In fact, both authors feel that there is a large overlap between hope and its synonyms, yet each word has a slight distinction; hope appears more emotional than the others, while optimism is based on expectations, and both future mindedness and future orientation articulate a theory about what an individual needs to do to get from point a to point b (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 570).

KIPP labels and teaches this character strength as optimism to its students. Given the benefits that hope has been linked to it is no surprise that this trait was selected for KIPP’s character education program. Furthermore, research found in Peterson and Seligman’s work indicates that there are deliberate interventions that can develop a student’s sense of optimism such as exposure to hopeful narratives (Peterson et. al., 2004, p. 580).KIPP defines optimism as “..the expectation that the future holds positive possibilities and the confidence that, with effort, these possibilities become likelihoods. [Students demonstrate this when they] believed that effort would improve his/her future [and] when bad things happened, s/he thought about things they could do to make it better next time. [Students also] stayed motivated, even when things didn’t go well and believed that s/he could improve on things they weren’t good at” (Mancini 2014).
Upon inspection, KIPP’s definition is relatively close to Peterson and Seligmans’ definition. KIPP maintained and embraced the motivational aspect found within in the handbook and took it one step further. While they do not mention emotions explicitly in their definition, they imply positive emotions through their word choice of positive possibilities. This relates to KIPP’s positive goal for their students to graduate college and this word choice reflects how they embed it within their program.

However, KIPP’s continual focus through its definition and its behavior is that it does not allow students room to grieve their failures or shortcomings. Regardless of how much one can believe in their success, a majority feel disappointment before they can analyze it to see how to improve the next time. While it is important for students to remain motivated when faced with challenges, KIPP also needs to teach where to renew when it begins to wane. Another concern is that KIPP does not appear to have a safe guard within their program for the documented downside to this strength is optimistic basis in risk perception; this can negatively affected ones ability to take preventative stances as they optimistically do not see the risk affecting them (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 577). Creating this safeguard may help their students in the long run as it will allow them to have optimism while minimizing its bias in risk analysis. This could translate to academic success and how student decide their priorities when they attend school.

The Divergence of KIPP and Peterson and Seligman’s handbook

While six out of seven character strengths can be found in Character Strengths and Virtues a Handbook and Classification, the seventh trait is not listed. KIPP selected grit as their last character strength. There is a large body of research that shows the importance of grit and it was labeled and discovered by Angela Duckworth. In her
research, she has found that grit is a better predictor of success than IQ tests or other measures; although it is unclear if it can be taught, many different programs across the nation have adopted it in hopes that it may since the benefits have such potential (Smith 2014). In a sense, grit can be simplified into perseverance toward a goal. As a result, grit can benefit individuals in a number of ways. Naturally, KIPP has included it in its program since it can benefit students in the short term and long term as they embark on the mission to graduate college. While this may be an important trait to impart upon its students, the movement away from the original body of research is intriguing.

Approximately one third of the traits that KIPP selected are classified in Peterson and Dr Seligman's work. Thus, KIPP did not run out character strengths to select from but, rather, made a conscious decision to not include any of the other strengths listed.

Interestingly, only five out of six character virtues are represented in KIPP’s program. The virtue not represented is justice, which is generally defined as the group of strengths that strengthen and build a healthy community; it includes traits such as active citizenship, fairness and leadership. (Peterson et al., 2004, p). The movement away from teaching citizenship is more than a step away from the virtue group of justice, it is a step away from the original ideology behind creating America’s public school system. If one looks at it from the lens of a social movement the education system was the result of the “..commonly held ideology of nation-building” (Meyer, Tyack, Nagel, & Gordon, 1979, p.592). At our core, America is a country of immigrants. Particularly as the American population exploded, school served as a place to create a common culture and develop the American identity. To this day, students are still taught the importance of voting and their various rights as Americans. Often, the importance of citizenship both in voting and
behavior is emphasize in public schools. Yet, it is not present or explicitly stated in KIPP’s character education program.

While it is impossible to know KIPP’s exact reasoning, there is a chance that including such traits could encourage more students to break aspects of the KIPP model that encourages student’s getting along. One aspect of Americans as a whole, is that they exercise their rights to disagree. KIPP’s model, as some critics point out, can paint a very clear and narrow picture of what their students should look like. In some cases, critics feel that KIPP’s traits emphasize a cheerfully compliant student. KIPP, like many other character education programs, tends to lose students who are “..autistics, introverts, pessimists, authority-questioners,[and] union organizers” (Osgood 2013). However, it is important to emphasize that this line of reasoning appears in the absence of having KIPP’s logic on its exclusion being public. KIPP’s movement away from the character strengths of justice, even if it is emphasized in other aspects of the school, does cement its place and reputation of being very different from its public counterparts.

Conclusion

KIPP’s website advertises how their program is based on Peterson and Seligman’s work. The book Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification is a large work that started KIPP founder’s David Levin’s interest in character and would lead to KIPP’s character education program. Eventually, KIPP would select 6 out of 24 character strengths from the handbook. In their selections and word choice, it is possible to see KIPP’s philosophy reflected. Their goal is for their students to graduate college and immerse themselves in a positive and ‘will do’ environment. The traits they selected form a picture of a student who is very positive,
well mannered and grateful. These are admirable traits that can lead to student success and their positive tones are no surprise as Peterson and Seligman’s work focuses on positive psychology.

Within Peterson and Seligman’s description of the various aspects of each strength, a good amount of time is focused ensuring that readers understand some of the distinctions in the manifestations of traits. For example, overall an individual may not be a curious person however, they may have an insatiable hunger for information in aeronautics. This person has specific curiosity although they may lack a strong sense of general curiosity. In some character definitions, KIPP has lost these nuances. This has created shortcomings within their program as it does not allow for some of the variations to shine. Embracing these variations and nuances could help create a stronger program that fully reaches all of their students and their personalities.

One of the biggest discrepancies between KIPP and Peterson and Seligman’s classification stems from KIPP’s desire to measure the behavior in their students. KIPP considers measuring a character trait as one of the seven essential steps to implementing a character program; especially for a progress oriented school, measuring becomes critical to determine if progress is being made. However, this caused KIPP to create extroverted behaviors so they observed them. In this choice, they unintentionally undermined several traits that are consider subjective or internal in nature. Given KIPP’s character growth cards and clear system of rewards and consequences, it places KIPP in a heated debate of if constant external reinforcement can allow for individuals to authentically internalize a behavior. This could explain why one study found that KIPP students did not see an increase in persistence or engagement beyond the fact that they did more homework per
night than their non-KIPP peers (Mathematica 2013). Their choices of traits and the constant emphasis on getting along with peers and positive outlook create a very tight box for their students to fit into and may in part explain the high attrition rates that plagues KIPP schools. This outlook may create a downfall that was mention in Peterson and Selgiman’s work, that an overly strong emphasis on getting along and positive psychology could discourage creativity, healthy skepticism, spontaneity and negatively affect depressed or oppositional students (Peterson et al., 2004, p.351). Unfortunately, there is a lack of independent research on KIPP, especially their character education program; further research is warranted to more fully explore their program to precisely discover any shortcomings along with their strengths.

However, KIPP’s character education program should not be demonized or defined by its shortcomings. It is designed to complement the school’s goal for their students. As shown throughout, KIPP is very successful at choosing language to promote their goal. Their choices are purposeful and help demonstrate their image. After all, it unrealistic to expect a program to develop all twenty four traits; even the handbook makes it clear that this is unrealistic for any human (Peterson et al., 2004 p.13). This is shown in the strengths that were selected and what was absent. Even KIPP’s choice not to include a trait from the virtue justice, which is typically in its public school counterparts, illustrates how KIPP views itself as different from other public schools.

Overall, more research is need to fully explore and understand KIPP and its character education program. KIPP excels at creating a ‘will do’ environment and tailoring their language to match the school’s goal and environment. However, KIPP’s choices may have caused them to lose some the of critical nuances found in Peterson
and Seligman’s work. In this loss and choice to provide constant external reinforcement of character, it appears that they have created shortcomings in their program. If their program was adjusted accordingly, it could create a strong impact and encourage students more fully.
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