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Heckman, J., Humphries, J. E., & Kautz, T. (Eds.) (2015). *The myth of achievement tests: The GED and the role of character in American life*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

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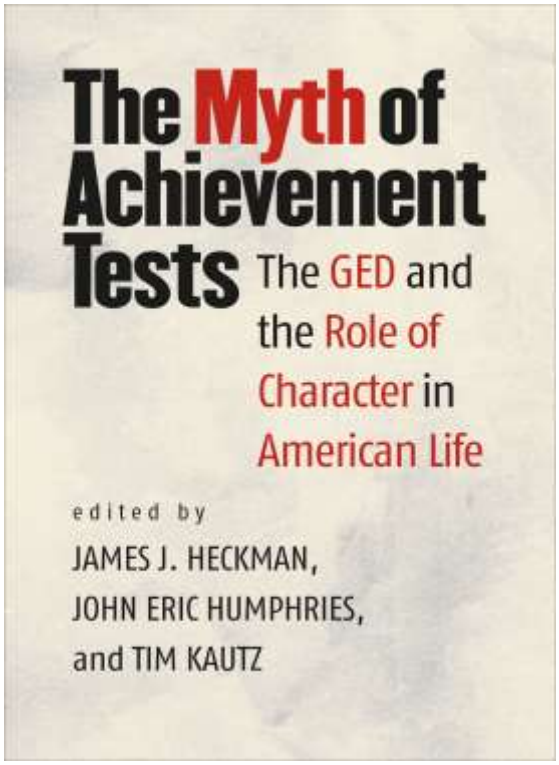
Reviewed by William L. Brown
Independent Consultant
United States



The thesis of this book can be summarized in one sentence: The General Education Development (GED) Test does not measure everything that students learn while earning a high school diploma. Although it does a reasonably good job of assessing academic knowledge and skills, the GED completely ignores other factors that the authors of this book claim are essential for preparing students for success in college or the workplace.

The authors are a professor in the University of Chicago Department of Economics, along with two PhD candidates in the Department. They provide a compendium of information about the GED, covering its history, its effects on the educational systems, and the outcomes of those who take the test. Although the provocative title implies that all achievement testing is a myth – which is sure to attract the attention of many who share the view that such testing is a waste of time at its best and total evil at its worst – I believe that this volume is, in actuality, an apology for restoring character education to our educational systems.

Brown, W. L. (2016, January 27). Review of *The Myth of Achievement Tests* by J. J. Heckman, J. E. Humphries, & T. Kautz (Eds.). *Education Review*, 23. http://edrev.asu.edu/index.php/ER/article/view/1904

The authors have assembled such a thorough data presentation that even the most skeptical reader should be convinced that GED testing has proven to be more destructive of education than productive. They used a variety of databases to weigh the impact of GED testing, and found it wanting. The analyses in this book are largely based on data from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth (NLSY), which are a set of surveys conducted by the US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, designed to gather information at multiple points in time on significant life events of several population samples of US citizens, especially their labor market activities.

For every student whose life is improved by taking the GED, there are many more who lose out as a result: "Less than 3% of all GED recipients earn a bachelor's degree by age 27, compared to over 20% for high school graduates." (p. 203) This is especially true of young men, whose hopes in the value of the GED generally prove to be misplaced. The authors note, "We find no causal effect of the GED for men." (p. 255)

Shortcomings of the GED

This book does a comprehensive job in support of implementing (or returning to) character education in American education. For those who think that this could open up schools to sectarian religious conflicts, the authors respond:

> Character education does not necessarily infringe on the liberties of students or families. Character education has moral components, which some conflate with religious values. Character skills are universally valued regardless of religious orientation, although churches, temples, and mosques produce character. Removing religion from schools does not require removing character education from the curriculum or preventing evaluation of the character of students. Virtually all parents want their children to be hard-working, honest, persistent, creative, curious, self-controlled, and excited by learning. Curricula that teach these skills in conjunction with cognition are promising ways to foster successful lives while maintaining the sanctity of the family and preserving the separation of church and state. (p. 8)

Of course, there is nothing in the GED that directly measures whether or not the examinee is hard-working, honest, persistent, creative, curious, self-controlled, and excited by learning. Perhaps, one might argue, the test measures such character traits indirectly; a student without these characteristics will not learn what is tested by the GED. A panoply of data, presented in the 400+ pages of this book, demonstrates otherwise. Overall, GED recipients perform well below students who have earned high school diplomas in a variety of ways:

> In general, female GED recipients who attend college perform better than other GED recipients, especially at older ages. Male GED recipients who attend some college do not perform much better than other GED recipients or dropouts. … The higher returns to females who obtain post-GED education is (sic) consistent with the literature that finds that community college tends to provide higher returns to females, even when they do not earn degrees. (pp. 207 and 210)

> [T]he GED recipients who earn degrees have higher present discounted values of earnings compared to dropouts. The GED recipients, however, earn much less than high school graduates, in part

> because they earn their degrees much later in life. … [E]ven the few GED recipients who obtain postsecondary degrees fare much worse than their high school graduate counterparts. (p. 220)

The GED Produces False Expectations

The GED began as a means for soldiers returning from World War II to prepare for college, since many did not have the opportunity to obtain high school diplomas. "The GED was first introduced in 1942 during World War II as a college entrance exam for wounded servicemen, and then at the war's end it was promoted as a substitute for states' previously issued 'wartime diplomas' for veterans returning to the states." (p. 58) Departments of corrections have also used the test as a means for inmates to further their educations. The authors note, "A Bureau of Justice Statistics report finds that, in 1997, 26% of all inmates earned a GED in prison. Moreover … the estimated percentage of GED credentials issued to the incarcerated has grown substantially over the last two decades. … The percent of GED credentials earned in correctional education programs grew from 6% in 1994 to nearly 14% in 2005." (p. 119)

Does the GED confer any added value to individuals who take the test? The data offer little evidence of any substantial benefit from passing the test (with the possible exception of women who left high school because of pregnancy who later took the GED). The authors note:

> … [F]ew GED recipients study more than 20 or 30 hours—far less than the thousand or so hours of time spent in school (never mind homework). For most GED recipients, it is unlikely that they acquire much knowledge by studying for the exam. (p. 179)

> (1) GED recipients perform much worse than high school graduates.
> (2) With the exception of employment and annual earnings of females in the NLSY surveys, on average, GED recipients perform at the level of dropouts. (p. 193)

By way of explanation for these outcomes, Conrad (1949) states:

> There are … fundamental questions regarding accreditation by examination which the authors of the *Tests of General Educational Development* have apparently failed to face. First, written examinations fail to cover adequately the laboratory of field experiences, which practically all good courses provide. Second, written examinations fail to cover such intangibles as the social and other benefits from class discussion, the favorable emotional orientation toward a subject-matter field created by an alert, stimulating instructor, and the moral and ethical values flowing from a qualified teacher successfully leading an interested classroom of students. To deny such intangibles is to deny most of the usefulness of face-to-face teaching. Finally, there is the question whether it is desirable to permit an A-student to "get by" with a barely passing performance on an academic examination, when he might well have done distinguished work, had he taken the course. (Conrad, 1949, p. 36)

Given that there is so little value acquired by completing the GED, why do so many students opt to take it? The authors report:

> A recent NCES study shows that many students view taking the GED credential as an attractive alternative

> to graduating from high school. It found that over 40% of the dropouts stated they did not complete high school because they "thought it would be easier to get a GED." This was the second most cited reason behind "missed too many school days" (43.5%). It also placed far above the reasons that are commonly believed to be the primary ones for dropping out of school, notably pregnancy (27.8%), work (27.8%), and marriage (6.8%). (pp. 295f)

Unfortunately, the very character skills that lead to success in earning a high school diploma are largely missing in those who choose to drop out of school and take the GED. Unless the message gets across that the GED is not a suitable substitute for completing high school, millions of students will continue to elect to drop out of school because they believe they have a valid option in the GED.

The Value of Character Education

The authors see much to commend character education, and essentially no reasons not to add it to the K-12 curriculum:

> Character skills are universally valued across all cultures and societies. Recognition of the importance of skills other than raw intelligence is deeply embedded in folk wisdom. Children everywhere are taught character-building stories like *The Tortoise and the Hare* and *The Little Engine That Could.* Even the enthusiastic creators of the early IQ tests, such as Alfred Binet, Charles Spearman, and Edward Webb, recognized the importance of character skills beyond cognition in predicting academic success. (p. 341)
>
> Effective policies to promote skills straddle the missions of cabinet agencies and draw on the wisdom of many academic disciplines. They require broad thinking. Both cognition and character are important ingredients of successful lives. They are malleable to different degrees at different stages of the life cycle. They cross-fertilize each other. (p. 342)
>
> Skill development is a dynamic process. For example, boosting character skills early in life increases the benefits of education later in life: more persistent students learn more. The levels of cognitive and character skills at any age depend on levels of those skills at younger ages and earlier investments. (p. 343)
>
> Some modern schools have shown how it is possible to integrate character education into schools. The Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) is a group of public charter schools that are designed to improve educational outcomes for low-income families. … [T]he first wave of KIPP students excelled at taking achievement tests but dropped out of college at disappointingly high rates. In response, KIPP schools started to emphasize character skills, "grit, self-control, social intelligence (including self-advocacy), zest, optimism, and gratitude, that enable students to stick with college even in the face of considerable obstacles (The KIPP Foundation, 2011). Their motto is *Work hard. Be nice.* (p. 411)

This new emphasis on character skills in KIPP schools appears to have paid off. In the KIPP Foundation's most recent report, "As of spring 2015, 45 percent of KIPP students have earned a four-year college degree after finishing eighth grade at a KIPP middle school ten or more years ago. This is above the national average for all students (34 percent), and five times the rate of the

average student from a low-income community (9 percent." (KIPP Foundation, 2015)

> Character matters. It is an essential ingredient of successful lives. It can be measured. It can be fostered. Families, schools, and communities are major producers of character. There are effective programs that develop character and can supplement challenged schools and families. (p. 431)

Most educators seek to bring about social justice through their teaching. Ultimately, greater social justice and equality would be achieved by producing outcomes among all students that lead to success in postsecondary education or in the workplace. The authors present a powerful case for achieving these outcomes by infusing character education into the K-12 curriculum. No amount of emphasis upon self-esteem or political correctness will produce graduates who are hard-working, honest, persistent, creative, curious, self-controlled, and excited by learning. We ignore this reality at our peril as a prosperous civilization.

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About the Reviewer

William L. Brown
Independent Consultant
United States
bbcllc@sbcglobal.net

Dr. William L. Brown provides research and evaluation services for several educational agencies. Prior to retiring from full-time employment, he served five years as Coordinator of Test Development for Michigan's Office of Educational Assessment and Accountability, leading the development of the Elementary and Middle School Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) tests, the Michigan components of the Michigan Merit Examination, and the Secondary Credit Assessments. Previously, he served seven years as Director of Institutional Research and Assessment at Lansing Community College and five years as Director of Research, Evaluation and Assessment at Minneapolis Public Schools. In the early 1990s, he was Coordinator of Test Administration for MEAP, and served on the Michigan Educational Research Association Board. He has degrees from the University of Michigan (B.S. in Aerospace Engineering), Eastern Michigan University (M.A. in Classroom Teaching) and Michigan State University (PhD in Measurement and Quantitative Methods).

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