

Chapter 2

“Formation” in Formation Revisited: Military Schools’ Distinct Advantage in “Forming” Young Adolescent Males

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ABSTRACT

Identity and conscience formation and character development in adolescent boys depends upon acquiring human capital via inductive observation, imitation, and experience. Sociality and social interaction are the common denominators of male adolescent identity formation, conscience formation, and character development. Military schools create and sustain developmentally advantageous environments for adolescent boys, and military systems are remarkably effective at facilitating the ideal pairings of “best” educational principles with “best” educational practices and messages for adolescent boys. Military schools are thus exceptionally effective in the formation of the identity and conscience and development of character in adolescent boys because they provide young men with precisely the right types of atmospheres and experiences that are ideally suited to their learning styles. Military schools also enjoy significant educational advantages that allow for developmental agency, facilitate the development of “soft” skills, and help adolescent boys flourish.

INTRODUCTION

Josiah Bunting writes, in *An Education for Our Time*, “I set the education of character and virtue at least as high among our obligations as the preparation of intellect for a lifetime of self-education” (Bunting 1998, 10-11). By “the education of character and virtue,” Bunting is referring to the process of *formation*, of forming the building blocks of a person’s very being upon which rests all else that one is and becomes. While many types of schools responded to John Dewey’s clarion call in the early 20th century for such emphasis, Dewey’s appeal resonated particularly deep within military schools based upon its

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timing and its substance. In the waning days of their post-Civil War popularity, military schools needed to augment their traditional role of transforming civilian students into military cadets by employing a somewhat harsh adversative approach in ways that would allow them to respond to the emerging Progressive era themes of efficiency, professionalization, scientific methods, and the expansion of secondary educational opportunities, especially high schools. It comes as little surprise, then, that Bunting was himself the product of a military school and that he wrote those words when he was leading one of the nation’s foremost military institutions. It also provides compelling evidence that he recognized and appreciated the value of military formations to “form” young men, to bring about “formation” in formation.

This remarkable capacity to bring about “formation while in formation” – referring to the formation of one’s identity and conscience, and development of character while operating within a military formation and structure – distinguish today’s military schools from the mainstream of secondary education and helps explain how and why they are uniquely suited to help contemporary adolescent boys grow, achieve, and succeed more effectively than most other types of schools. Military schools are so effective in the formation of one’s identity and conscience, and development of character because of their unique capacity to provide young men with precisely the right types of atmospheres and experiences that further their abilities to discover, acquire knowledge, act, and interact in environments that are safe, supportive, and conducive to the type of growth experienced by adolescent boys. This extraordinarily potent combination of ability, agency, and accountability helps young men learn, grow, develop, succeed, and discern the value of reverence and respect for themselves.

ADOLESCENCE – THE PERIOD OF FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT

To claim legitimately that military schools are particularly well-suited to form and develop adolescent boys, one must first understand adolescence as a distinct and remarkable period of formation and development. The term “adolescence” comes from the Greek root “ado,” meaning to direct and nourish, and refers to either the period or process of forming, growing, maturing, and ripening into a fully formed adult. Thus adolescence is the formative period and process of teens becoming fully formed adults. One authoritative study characterizes adolescence as follows:

Adolescence is the bridge between a childhood surrounded by networks of external support, and adulthood, in which these networks are partially supplanted by the internal checks and balances that enable the individual to make wise choices when beyond the reach of childhood’s protective cocoon (Benson 1993, 7).

This characterization reinforces the notion that adolescence is a period of formation, development, and transformation.

The main elements that are “forming, growing, maturing, and ripening” are identity, conscience, and character, all of which are fundamental aspects of one’s very being. These components also form the basis of one’s personal *human capital* – oriented on the acquisition of individual knowledge, skills, and abilities, and consisting of the intrapersonal skills of self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation – and are thus foundational and essential for reaching adulthood.

Human capital is inherently “poetic” in nature, in that it is intuitive, immediate to the knowing person, based upon human interaction and relationships, acquired by observation and experience, making

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