

Grit: A Skeptical Look at the Latest Educational Fad (##)

GRIT A Skeptical Look at the Latest Educational Fad

By Alfie Kohn

This article is adapted from The Myth of the Spoiled Child, which contains references to the relevant research.

A new idea is hatched; it begins to spread; it catches on; it inspires a flurry of books and articles, conferences and seminars. And then it fades away. In the last couple of decades, this cycle has played out many times in our field. Yet no matter how many iterations we witness, it can be hard to recognize that the pattern applies to whatever idea is currently stirring up excitement – or to understand the limits of that idea.

Consider the current buzz about self-regulation: teaching students to exercise self-discipline and self-control, to defer gratification and acquire “grit.” To discipline children is to compel them to do what we want. But because we can’t always be there to hand out rewards or punishments as their behavior merits, some dream of figuring out a way to equip each child with a “built-in supervisor” (as two social scientists once put it) so he or she will follow the rules and keep working even when we’re not around. The most expedient arrangement for us, the people with the power, is to get children to discipline themselves – in other words, to be *self-disciplined*.

Proponents of this idea like to point out that cognitive ability isn’t the only factor that determines how children will fare in school and in life. That recognition got a boost with science writer Dan Goleman’s book *Emotional Intelligence* in 1996, which discussed the importance of self-awareness, altruism, personal motivation, empathy, and the ability to love and be loved. But a funny thing has happened to the message since then. When you hear about the limits of IQ these days, it’s usually in the context of a conservative narrative that emphasizes not altruism or empathy but a recycled version of the Protestant work ethic. The goal is to make sure kids will resist temptation, override their unconstructive impulses, put off doing what they enjoy in order to grind through whatever they’ve been told to do – and keep at it for as long as it takes.

Emblematic of this shift is Paul Tough’s 2012 book *How Children Succeed*, which opens with a declaration that what matters most for children are qualities like “persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence.” But that’s the last time the reader hears about curiosity or self-confidence. Neither of those words even appears in his index.

By contrast, there are lengthy entries for “self-control” and “grit,” which occupy Tough for much of the book.

“Grit” – the sort of self-discipline that’s required to make people persist at something over a long period of time – was popularized by Angela Duckworth, a University of Pennsylvania researcher, and the idea has met with mostly uncritical acclaim in our field. In fact, it’s treated as a fresh insight even though basically the same message has been drummed into us by Aesop’s fables, Benjamin Franklin’s aphorisms, and Christian denunciations of sloth.

Make no mistake: Duckworth is selling grit, not dispassionately investigating its effects. “As educators and parents,” she and her colleagues wrote in her very first paper on the topic, “we should encourage children to work not only with intensity but also with stamina.” She acknowledges that “grittier individuals, by staying the course, may sometimes miss out on new opportunities.” But she doesn’t see this as a problem. In fact, grit means doing “a particular thing in life and choos[ing] to give up a lot of other things in order to do it.” For example, she has no use for children who experiment with several musical instruments. “The kid who sticks with one instrument is demonstrating grit,” she says. “Maybe it’s more fun to try something new, but high levels of achievement require a certain single-mindedness.”

This is our first clue that Duckworth’s recommendations emerge not from evidence but from her personal belief that people should spend their time trying to improve at one thing rather than exploring, and becoming reasonably competent at, several things. If you happen to favor breadth and variety, Duckworth offers no reason why you should accept her preference for a life of specialization – or for the idea of grit, which is rooted in that preference.

And I think there are several other reasons why the idea merits our skepticism. First, while we’re encouraged to see grit, per se, as desirable, not everything is worth doing, let alone doing for extended periods. The amorality of the concept enables the immorality of some individuals who exemplify it. This would be a better world if people who were up to no good had less grit. To that extent, persistence is really just one of many attributes that can be useful for reaching a (good or bad) outcome, so it’s the choice of goal that ought to come first and count more.

Second, as with self-control more generally, grit can sometimes be inappropriate and unhealthy – even if the activity isn’t morally objectionable. I’m not denying that it sometimes pays to stick with something over the long haul; few of us want to see our students throw in the towel at the first sign of difficulty. But there are many occasions on which it doesn’t make sense to persist with a problem that resists solution, to continue at a task that no longer provides satisfaction. When people do keep going under these conditions, they may be displaying a refusal to disengage that’s both counterproductive (in terms of outcome) and pathological (in terms of motivation).

Anyone who talks about grit as an unalloyed good may need to be reminded of the proverbial Law of Holes: When you’re in one, stop digging. Gritty people sometimes exhibit “nonproductive persistence”; they try, try again even though the result may be either unremitting failure or “a costly or inefficient success that could have been easily surpassed by alternative courses of action,” as one group of psychologists explained. And the benefits of knowing when not to persist extend to the effects on the individual. Following a year-long study of adolescents, Canadian researchers Gregory Miller and Carsten Wrosch concluded that those “who can disengage from unattainable goals enjoy better well-being and experience fewer symptoms of everyday illness.”

Just as the effects of displaying unqualified grit may not always be optimal, the motives for doing so raise important psychological questions. A theorist who is focused only on measurable behaviors won’t bother to ask whether a student who persists does so because she loves what she’s doing or because of a desperate (and anxiety-provoking) need to prove her competence. As long as she doesn’t give up, we’re supposed to nod our approval. (Interestingly, people who are passionate about what they’re doing tend to need a lot less self-discipline to stick with it.)

To know when to pull the plug requires the capacity to adopt a long-term perspective as well as a measure of gumption. Because continuing to do what one has been doing often represents the path of least resistance, it can take guts to cut one’s losses and say *¡Basta!* And that’s as important a message to teach our students as the usefulness of perseverance. Or, to put it differently, what counts is the capacity to decide whether and when to persevere – or whether and when to exercise self-control, which can also be maladaptive in some circumstances. That’s very different from the message that perseverance or self-regulation is valuable in itself.

The main rationale for teaching children to be gritty is to promote academic achievement. That sounds like a worthy goal, but take a moment to reflect on other possible goals one might have – for example, helping them to lead a life that’s happy and fulfilling, morally admirable, creative, or characterized by psychological health. Any of those objectives would almost certainly lead to prescriptions quite different from “Do one thing and keep at it.”

Moreover, if you look closely at Duckworth’s research, the benefits she claims to have demonstrated turn out to be either circular or simply dubious. In one of her studies, she found that freshman cadets at West Point who scored high on her grit questionnaire (“I finish whatever I begin”) were less likely to quit during the grueling summer training program. But what does that prove, other than that people who are persistent persist?

Another pair of studies looked at an elite group of middle schoolers who qualified for the National Spelling Bee. Duckworth reported that they performed better in that competition if they were higher in grit, “whereas spellers higher in openness to experience – defined as preferring using their imagination, playing with ideas, and otherwise enjoying a complex mental life – perform[ed] worse.” She also found that the most effective preparation strategy was “solitary deliberate practice activities” rather than, say, reading books.

What’s striking here aren’t the findings themselves but the lesson Duckworth seems to derive from them. If enjoying a complex mental life (or reading for pleasure) interferes with performance in a one-shot contest to see who can spell more obscure words correctly – and if sufficient grittiness to spend time alone memorizing lists of words helps to achieve that goal – this is regarded as an argument in favor of grit. Presumably it also argues against having a complex mental life or engaging in “leisure reading.” (Ironically, even if we were interested in how well kids can spell – by which I mean (a) most kids, not just champion spellers, and (b) as judged by their actual writing rather than in the contrived format of a spelling bee – other research has found that reading, apart from its other benefits, is actually more effective than drill and practice. But to at least some proponents of grit, reading is less onerous, demands less self-discipline, and is therefore less admirable.)

The relevant issue again has more to do with ends than means. How important is it that kids who are exceptionally good spellers win more championships? Should we favor any strategy or personality feature that contributes to that objective – or to anything that could be described as “higher achievement” – regardless of what it involves and what it displaces? Duckworth is particularly interested to show that self-discipline and grit produce better grades. Her very first experiment found that teachers gave more A’s to students who tended to put off doing what they enjoy until they finished their homework. But suppose the students with the best grades were those who nodded and smiled at everything their teacher said. Would that argue for encouraging kids to become more obsequious? Or what if self-discipline on the part of adults was associated with more positive evaluations from their supervisors at work? We’d have to conclude that employees who did what their bosses wanted, regardless of whether it was satisfying or sensible, elicited a favorable verdict from those same bosses. But so what?

Good grades, in other words, are often just a sign of approval by the person with the power in a classroom. And even when they serve other functions, grades suffer from low levels of validity and reliability. Moreover, students who pursue higher grades tend to be less interested in what they’re learning, more likely to think in a superficial fashion (and less likely to retain information), and inclined to prefer the easiest possible task whenever they have a choice – because the goal isn’t to explore ideas but to do whatever is necessary to snag the A. Those who snag a lot of them seem, on average, to be overly conformist and not particularly creative.* So if students who are more self-disciplined or persistent get higher grades, that doesn’t make a case for grit so much as it points up the limitations of grades as an outcome measure.

Social psychologists sometimes use the term “fundamental attribution error” to describe a tendency to pay so much attention to character, personality, and individual responsibility that we overlook how profoundly the social environment affects what we do and who we are. This error has political implications: The more we focus on people’s persistence (or self-discipline more generally), the less likely we’ll be to question larger policies and institutions. Consider Paul Tough’s declaration that “there is no antipoverty tool we can provide for disadvantaged young people that will be more valuable than the character strengths—[such as] conscientiousness, grit, resilience, perseverance, and optimism.” Whose interests are served by the astonishing position that “no antipoverty tool” – presumably including Medicaid and public housing – is more valuable than an effort to train poor kids to persist at whatever they’ve been told to do?

The eagerness among educators to embrace concepts like grit and self-regulation can also be understood as an example of the fundamental attribution error. Driving the study of student performance conducted by Duckworth and her mentor Martin Seligman, for example, was their belief that underachievement isn’t explained by structural factors – social, economic, or even educational. Rather, they insisted it should be attributed to the students themselves and their “failure to exercise self-discipline.” *The entire conceptual edifice of grit is constructed on that individualistic premise*, one that remains popular for ideological reasons even though it’s been repeatedly debunked by research.

When students are tripped up by challenges, they may respond by tuning out, acting out, or dropping out. Often, however, they do so not because of a defect in their makeup (lack of stick-to-itiveness) but because of what and how they were taught. Perhaps those challenges – what they were asked to do – weren’t particularly engaging or relevant. Finger-wagging adults who exhort children to do their best sometimes don’t offer a persuasive reason for why a given task should be done at all, let alone done well. And when students throw up their hands after failing at something they were asked to do, it may be less because they lack grit than because they weren’t really “asked” to do it – they were told to do it. They had nothing to say about the content or context of the curriculum. And people of all ages are more likely to persevere when they have a chance to make decisions about the things that affect them.

The most impressive educational activists are those who struggle to move away from a system geared to memorizing facts and taking tests and move toward a system dedicated to exploring ideas. They’re committed to a collaborative approach to schooling that learners will find more engaging. By contrast, those enamored of grit look at the same status quo and ask: How can we get kids to put up with it?

Duckworth has insisted that grit allows people to meet their own goals, but the focus of her research, particularly with children, is on compliance: how to make students pay “attention to a teacher rather than daydreaming,” persist “on long-term assignments despite boredom and frustration,” choose “homework over TV,” and “behav[e] properly in class.” In her recent research, she created a task that’s deliberately boring, the point being to devise strategies so students will resist the temptation to do something more interesting instead. This is the mindset that underlies the campaign for grit and self-discipline, even if it isn’t always spelled out. Which is why it’s critical that those of us who don’t share Duckworth’s values – and are committed to changing the system rather than just making kids adapt to it – maintain a healthy skepticism about that campaign. While we’re at it, we might bring that same skepticism to bear when the next bandwagon rolls through town.

* For evidence, we need look no further than research Duckworth herself cites to prove that self-discipline predicts academic performance. One such study found that such performance “seemed as much a function of attention to details and the rules of the academic game as it was of intellectual talent.” High-achieving students “were not particularly interested in ideas or in cultural or aesthetic pursuits. Moreover, they were not particularly tolerant or empathic; however, they did seem stable, pragmatic, and task-oriented, and lived in harmony with the rules and conventions of society. Finally, relative to students in general, these superior achievers seemed somewhat stodgy and unoriginal.”

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