

The Downside of “Grit” (Commentary)

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What Really Happens When Kids Are Pushed to Be More Persistent?

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Cognitive ability isn’t the only factor that determines how children will fare in school, let alone in life. Drawing on a substantial body of research, science writer Dan Goleman reminded us of that fact almost twenty years ago in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, emphasizing the contribution of such attributes as 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 intelligence these days, it’s usually in the context of a conservative narrative that features not altruism or empathy but something that sounds

very much like the Protestant work ethic. More than smarts, we're told, what kids need to succeed is old-fashioned self-discipline and will power, persistence and the ability to defer gratification. They have to be able to resist temptation, 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 recent bestseller *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 he mentions curiosity or self-confidence; those words don't even appear in the index. It's self-control and grit that occupy Tough for much of the book.

Nor is this emphasis unique to Tough. "Grit" – defined by its most prominent proponent, Angela Duckworth, as "the tendency to sustain perseverance and passion for challenging long-term goals" – has been greeted with a degree of breathless enthusiasm unmatched since – well, since the last social science craze.

The hard-line inner-city charter school chain known as KIPP has integrated the idea of grit into its teacher training. So has the Lenox Academy for Gifted Middle School Students in Brooklyn, as NPR recently reported. Every school in one Houston-area school system will now "emphasize grit through a district-wide set of expectations and lessons," according to its website. ASCD, a prominent international education organization based in Alexandria, has just published a book called *Fostering Grit*.

Yet ironically, the heart of what's being disseminated is a notion drummed into us by Aesop's fables, Benjamin Franklin's aphorisms, Christian denunciations of sloth, and the 19th-century chant invented to make children do their homework: "If

at first you don't succeed, try, try again."

The problems with grit, however, go well beyond the fact that it's not exactly a fresh idea. On reflection the case for its value becomes steadily less convincing – and even downright troubling.

To begin with, not everything is worth doing, let alone doing for extended periods, and not everyone who works hard is pursuing something worthwhile. People who are up to no good often have grit to spare. Persistence is just one of many attributes that can sometimes be useful for reaching a (good or bad) outcome, so it's the choice of goal that ought to come first and count more.

Moreover, persistence can be counterproductive and even unhealthy. Often it just doesn't make sense to continue with a problem that resists solution or persist at a task that no longer provides satisfaction. Hence the proverbial Law of Holes: When you're in one, stop digging.

Gritty people sometimes exhibit what psychologists call "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 Dean McFarlin at the State University of New York and his colleagues put it in the *Journal of Personality*. Even if you don't crash and burn by staying the course, you may not fare nearly as well as if you had stopped, reassessed, and tried something else.

The benefits of knowing when *not* to persist extend not only to the outcomes of a decision but to the effects on the individual who made it. 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."

The *motives* for displaying grit also raise important psychological questions. What matters isn't just how long one persists, but why one does so. Proponents of grit rarely ask: Do kids love what they're doing? Or are they driven by a desperate (and anxiety-provoking) need to prove their competence? As long as they're pushing themselves, we're encouraged to nod our approval.

To know when to pull the plug requires the capacity to adopt a long-term perspective. Continuing to do what you've been doing often represents the path of least resistance, so it can take guts to cut your losses. That's as important a message to teach one's children as the usefulness of perseverance.

Doesn't grit enjoy empirical support, though? A review of the research cited to defend the notion raises a host of doubts. In one study conducted by Duckworth and her colleagues, freshman cadets at West Point who scored high on a grit questionnaire ("I finish whatever I begin") were less likely to quit during the grueling summer training program. But what does this prove other than that people who are persistent . . . persist?

Grit is usually justified as a way to boost academic achievement, which sounds commendable. But take a moment to reflect on other possible goals one might have for children – for example, 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 never give up."

Even the achievement claims seem less persuasive when you look closely. Are more A's given to students who report that they put off doing what they enjoy until they finish their homework (as one study found)? Sure. In other words, those who do what they've been told, regardless of whether it's satisfying or sensible, are rewarded by those who told them to do it.

Interestingly, earlier research, including a pair of studies Duckworth herself cites to show that self-discipline predicts academic performance, discovered that students with high grades tend to be more conformist than creative. If persistent students get higher grades, that may not make a case for grit so much as a case against using grades as a marker for success.

Another pair of studies, of an elite group of middle schoolers who qualified for the National Spelling Bee, found they performed better in that competition if they had more 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.”

What’s striking here isn’t the finding itself but the lesson derived from it. If enjoying a complex mental life interferes with performance in a one-shot contest to see who can spell more obscure words correctly, is that really an argument for grit?

But the problem isn’t just the weakness of the studies – it’s the fact that the case ultimately doesn’t rely on empirical evidence at all. Duckworth, for example, has no use for children who experiment with several musical instruments. “The kid who sticks with one instrument is demonstrating grit,” she told a reporter. “Maybe it’s more fun to try something new, but high levels of achievement require a certain single-mindedness.”

Her value judgment, in other words, is that children should spend their time trying to improve at one thing rather than exploring, and becoming reasonably competent at, several things. But for anyone who favors breadth and variety in life, no reason has been offered to prefer a life of specialization – or to endorse the idea of grit, which is rooted in that personal preference.

That's true for adults as well as children, by the way, but grit has been applied primarily to kids. Grit is sometimes sold as a tool to accomplish whatever goals one chooses, but in practice the focus is on training children to accomplish the goals imposed on them by adults.

Regardless of age, though, the concept isn't just philosophically conservative in its premises but also politically conservative in its consequences. The more we focus on levels of grit (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."

Really? No antipoverty tool – presumably including Medicaid and public housing – is more valuable than an effort to train poor kids to persist at whatever they're told to do? Whose interests are served by such a position?

In the field of education, meanwhile, some people are trying to replace a system geared to memorizing facts and taking tests with one dedicated to exploring ideas. They're committed to implementing a democratic, collaborative approach to schooling that learners will find more engaging than what they're offered now. But those enamored of grit look at the same status quo and ask: How can we get kids to put up with it?

Duckworth acknowledges that it's desirable for students to develop a long-term interest in what they're doing, but the main thrust of her work is that "hard things" are worth doing just because they're hard. Her goal is to figure out how to make students pay "attention to a teacher rather than daydreaming" and "behav[e] properly in class." And in her more recent research, she even created a task that's

deliberately boring, the point being to find strategies for resisting the temptation to do something more appealing instead.

Whether that uninteresting stuff is worth doing apparently doesn't matter. As long as kids keep at it.

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