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

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

A new idea is hatched; it begins to spread; various conferences and seminars are held. A flurry of articles appears in the media. 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 is currently happening.

Consider the current buzz about self-regulation: teaching children 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.

Propositions of this idea like to point out that “if students who are more self-disciplined or persistent get higher grades, then 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.’”

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. But too often, “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, one could focus on teaching children to be more creative, to have a complex mental life, or characterized by exploration, curiosity, and engagement with the world around them.”

Aesop’s fables, Benjamin Franklin’s aphorisms, and Christian denunciations of sloth. How Children Succeed

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, one could focus on teaching children to be more curious, to have a complex mental life, or characterized by exploration, curiosity, and engagement with the world around them.

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 least difficult effort, it can take guts to cut one’s losses and say “stop.”

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 motives consider whether the evidence really supports the idea that it’s to our benefit to make children persist at something even though they’re not sure whether they’ll ever succeed.

To begin with, we’re encouraged to see grit as a good thing in and of itself. 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 persist extend to the effects on the individual. Following a year-long study of adolescents, Camara and her co-workers found that “deliberate practice leads to gains in skills; those children who invested the effort and time to practice doing something well during a given period of time” showed the most improvement.

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Everyone who talks about grit as an ingredient of success seems to assume that the more grit an individual possesses, the better. In reality, there are circumstances where it can be unwise to persevere, and self-discipline may have to be balanced by other virtues, like recognition of when to quit. This is why it’s so important to separate the general idea that persistence is good from the particular idea that grit means refusing to give up no matter what.

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“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 the educational establishment for decades. "And the idea is so compelling that what matters most in the present is not the kind of people one is, but the kind of things you can do...the capacity to reject short-term opportunities in favor of long-term goals...the capacity to keep trying 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."...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, one could focus on teaching children to be more curious, to have a complex mental life, or characterized by exploration, curiosity, and engagement with the world around them.

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