

Always on My Grind: Passion and Perseverance Among Low-Income Youth

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Daniel⁶ appears to be a case study in what happens when young people fail to develop grit: he has missed 31 days this school year and has been late to school on 17 other occasions. Daniel is in my advanced English class, but he never hands in his papers on time; in fact, the last paper he turned in was not only late, it was plagiarized. After starting the rigorous International Baccalaureate program last year, Daniel dropped it as a senior, saying it was just too much for him.

About to graduate, Daniel has no clear career path. Two years ago, he was into welding, but now he's planning to attend the local university with an undeclared major. His main hobbies are smoking weed and rapping. He has never joined an extracurricular activity at our high school.

But Daniel would probably be surprised—not to mention insulted—if someone told him he lacked passion or perseverance, the two defining qualities of grit—as theorized by psychologist Angela Duckworth. Daniel has spent the last two years of high school working full time at White Castle—as in, sixty hours a week. (He was promoted to manager last fall.)

Daniel works because he is single-handedly supporting his disabled mother. He also works alongside a producer to help him record his songs. He has uploaded 26 tracks to

SoundCloud and four videos to Youtube. He works because he will be paying his own way through college. Daniel spends his time working and recording. And yes, he missed 31 days of school, and sure, he dropped the IB program, but he also graduated 16th in his class and

So which Daniel do we evaluate when we evaluate his grit? The Daniel who skips school, doesn't have a clear career path, and gets busted for smoking weed every few months? Or the Daniel who maintained his stellar grades while working full time and devoting himself to his family and his passion, his music?

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* * *

Daniel and other former students frequently find me on social media once they graduate, and their pages share a common thread. Amidst the friendly banter, romantic drama, moody selfies, and silly photos, the word "grind" comes up over and over again:

*Grind mode mentality
keep grindin
Rise & grind if I want to shine*

⁶ All names have been changed

practice tomorrow time to grind
Studio, school, work #onmygrind⁷

Though originally associated with money-making, “grind” is used by my students to refer to any number of activities to which they’ve committed: work, school, sports, music, building a family.

In my first few years teaching at this low-income urban high school, I was surprised to read these passionate posts. *Grind mode?*

These were students whom I had to threaten and cajole to complete a single worksheet during a reading class. How could they perceive themselves as hardworking? How did they stand a chance with any complex task if they failed to complete even the simplest assignment?

The answer was a long time coming, for me, but it was there all along, buried in the question.

I was measuring my students’ perseverance based on their willingness to complete a worksheet that even I found boring and demeaning. *They* were measuring their perseverance based on their willingness to work hard for the people they cared about and the lives they envisioned for themselves.

I saw my students as students alone, as people whose psychological qualities and intellectual abilities could be understood solely and entirely based on the habits, behaviors, and attitudes they demonstrated in an educational context—in a single educational context—that is, my English class.

Similarly, Angela Duckworth’s original definition of grit was located in very specific intellectual and physical contexts.⁸ She has studied

military recruits at West Point, high schoolers, Spelling Bee champions, and athletes, and she has found, over and over again, that grit is the quality that distinguishes those who succeed from those who do not. Achievement, Duckworth argues, is a product of one’s “passion and perseverance” in the face of a long-term goal like winning the National Spelling Bee or completing a difficult military obstacle course known as the Beast.

In fact, none of us can be measured by our performance in a single context. Our best selves—our deepest passions, our strongest efforts— are revealed in any number of individual circumstances and challenges.

Duckworth’s studies were the origin of what is sometimes referred to as the “grit narrative”—the idea that success is not a matter of talent or environmental factors, but of particular social-emotional qualities that can be developed in very specific ways.

Whereas Duckworth’s original theory was grounded in her own research, the grit narrative has taken on a life of its own in popular media. The grit narrative exploded across the country, potentially taking Duckworth’s ideas beyond their original scope. In the words of Peter Gow, where he expresses his skepticism toward the idea, the grit narrative is founded on the notion that “anyone can succeed if they just work hard enough, try hard enough, keep their nose to the grindstone and endure whatever travails life throws at them.”⁹ An emphasis on qualities such as resilience, perseverance, and self-regulation, according to the grit narrative,

⁷ Sources include Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter; actual quotes have been fictionalized or paraphrased.

⁸ Duckworth, A. L., C. Peterson, M. D. Matthews and D. R. Kelly. "Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92 (2007): 1087-1101.

⁹ Gow, P. "What's dangerous about the grit narrative, and how to fix it." *Education Week*. www.edweek.org. (retrieved October 29, 2016).

will lead to greater success in school, sports, and other activities.

But the grit narrative is premised on the notion that grit is an independent trait, not a trait that varies depending on the context and activity at hand. In fact, none of us can be measured by our performance in a single context. Our best selves—our deepest passions, our strongest efforts—are revealed in any number of individual circumstances and challenges.

Daniel's commitment to his rap might lack the prestige of military achievement, but it is no less important to him, no less deserving of passion and perseverance.

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Like Daniel, Sam is a former student, but her academic performance in high school was decidedly lackluster. She graduated with a 2.6 GPA and multiple failing grades on her final report card. Sam's troubles in school were not only academic; her discipline record was quite lengthy, including references to skipping, fighting, and regularly disrupting class. Many of these behaviors were rooted in a traumatic childhood: her mother was addicted to heroin; her father died early; and Sam herself spent years in the foster care system before being reunited with her mother.

Although Sam enrolled in the nearest public university, planning to study nursing, she dropped out after a few weeks—this in spite of the fact that she had no other responsibilities and no lack of funding. She then enrolled in and dropped out of the local community college. By the winter after graduation, it seemed to me that Sam had no dream, no plan, and no future.

Sam's story is the kind that critics tell to highlight the problems inherent in the grit narrative. These critics argue that grit overemphasizes individual qualities at the expense of theorizing—and attempting to eradicate—

important structural injustices. Grit blames the student for what is really a problem rooted in context.

These writers and theorists point out that students do not lack grit because of an individual deficiency; they lack grit because of a complex web of social and economic policies and their accompanying psychological impacts. Mike Rose (2015) pointed out that, while grit may be an important quality, “if as a society we are not also working to improve the educational and economic realities these young people face, then we are engaging in a cruel hoax, building aspiration and determination for a world that will not fulfill either.”¹⁰

In Sam's case, her erratic, failed attempts to attend college are not founded in personal flaws; rather, they are the result of her poverty and her traumatic past. Rose and other critics imply that Sam's problems cannot be fixed through character education; rather, Sam and those like her will find their lives bettered through changed socio-economic policies, an increased social safety net, and better mental health and substance abuse treatment. Sam may, indeed, lack grit, but it's not her fault—or so these critics suggest.

Ethan Ris, for instance, pointed out that “poor children...are not the ones who need to be taught grit... they are the ones who have historically taught it to the rest of us.”

While this argument locates the failure to develop grit in the environment, rather than the

¹⁰ Rose, M. "Why teaching kids to have grit isn't always a good thing." *The Washington Post*. www.washingtonpost.com. (retrieved October 29, 2016).

individual, another argument against the grit narrative points out that low-income students actually *do* demonstrate grit.

These writers claim that poverty-stricken students show their grit simply by surviving in such an obstacle-ridden community. Going to school via three busses is grit-in-action; doing homework when you are also caring for three younger siblings is grit-in-action; making dinner when your mother is disabled is grit-in-action. Ethan Ris, for instance, pointed out that “poor children...are not the ones who need to be taught grit... they are the ones who have historically taught it to the rest of us.”

But Sam has become a different person with the birth of her son, Leo. She quit smoking, found a steady job, and provides Leo with love and stability—a model mother. Sam has located her passion and the will to persevere; she simply located them as a teenage mother.

These points—about the importance of context and about the perseverance demonstrated in survival—are relevant and significant. Contexts simply must be taken into account. However, these arguments ultimately still rely on a deficit view¹¹ of low-income youth, however subtly: Low-income youth *lack grit* because of structural factors. Alternately, low-income youth *demonstrate grit*—through their coping skills, their survival mechanisms.

Arguments against the grit narrative—whether blaming a youth’s lack of grit on structural or psychological elements, or, more likely, a combination of both—ultimately presume that grit is either inaccessible to low-income

youth or accessible only through the act of overcoming economic and social obstacles. But this view overlooks the fact that my students do, in fact, harbor deep passions and clear goals.

These narratives fail to acknowledge that low-income youth have passions that they pursue; they have goals; they persevere. Their passions are simply under-theorized. It is the role of education to help enact such theorization.

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For months, I worried about Sam as she drifted from job to job. When she announced nearly a year after graduation that she was pregnant, I ceased to worry, and began to panic. I thought her life was over.

But Sam has become a different person with the birth of her son, Leo. She quit smoking, found a steady job, and provides Leo with love and stability—a model mother. Sam has located her passion and the will to persevere; she simply located them as a teenage mother.

Certainly, her life will be challenging, and access to sex education and birth control are serious issues in Sam’s community. But it does Sam a disservice to deny the genuine love she has for her son and the powerful efforts she has made to raise him in a happy, stable home. Sam is not merely “surviving” poverty; she is dedicating herself to her passion, her son.

Move into our new place on the 26th, Sam posted on Facebook not long ago. *Hard work pays off. #grindtillweshine*

* * *

In “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” Eve Tuck writes about what she calls “damage-centered” research frameworks, often used when theorizing indigenous communities:

Though connected to deficit models—frameworks that emphasize what a particu-

¹¹ Ris, E W. "Grit: A short history of a useful concept." *Journal of Educational Controversy* (2015): 3, 1-18.

lar student, family, or community is lacking to explain underachievement or failure—damage-centered historical research is distinct in being more socially and historically situated. It looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy. Common sense tells us this is a good thing, but the danger in damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community.¹²

It is easy to see, then, how the original grit narrative is a deficit-based theory, locating in low-income students a specific *lack* of certain psychological qualities.

The counter-narrative that has developed, in contrast, in damage-centered, pointing to political oppression and economic policies to “explain contemporary brokenness”—in this case, a failure to persevere—among low-income youth. Even those critics that point to survival in poverty as a demonstration of grittiness define low-income youth and their communities by their brokenness and what they make of it.

Tuck conceives a third way, a “desire-based” framework, one “concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives... [and] intent on depathologizing the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are seen as more than broken”(2009, p. 416). It is within this desire-based framework that I find the truest formation of my students’ grit, their perseverance in pursuit of their chosen goals, their commitment to the passions

they have discovered within the confines of their challenging, exciting, and fascinating lives.

* * *

While Tuck argued primarily from the perspective of an indigenous researcher, her work nevertheless resonates for educators. As a teacher, I have come to understand, it is my obligation to eschew both deficit- and damage-centered frameworks in my classroom, and to embrace instead a desire-based education. A desire-based education will not ignore the structural inequalities that impact students; nor will it condescend to students as broken or unable to achieve. Rather, this framework views students, their families, and their communities as ripe for empowerment, as empowered, in fact, already in many ways we may not see.

As we seek out what students truly care for, we can, in turn, begin to develop schools that truly respond to these strengths—schools that are connected to their communities, schools that provide a range of vocational options and training, schools that rely on project-based learning.

It is our job, as educators, to understand when, where, and why students demonstrate certain affects and to empower students to channel their energies and passions in healthy, positive ways. This does not mean that youth must be left alone to do whatever they want; rather, we must acknowledge the abilities and strengths they possess, and find ways to acknowledge and cultivate them.

Their strengths may not be in areas that are traditionally rewarded in schools, or even in society at large, but they exist. As we seek out what students truly care for, we can, in turn,

¹² Tuck, E. "Suspending damage: A letter to communities." *Harvard Educational Review* 75 (2009): 409-427.

begin to develop schools that truly respond to these strengths—schools that are connected to their communities, schools that provide a range of vocational options and training, schools that rely on project-based learning.

In a similar vein, too often, teachers dismiss our students' caregivers as apathetic, unwilling to help, and actively interfering with their children's education.

Simply acknowledging human complexity is a good start.

But caregivers, like students—like all humans—are complicated. Some work; some struggle with mental health issues or physical disabilities; some are disenfranchised from years of mistreatment by educational systems. Adults are involved in community groups, churches, families, or informal neighborhood watch groups; if they are not involved in school, we must ask why—and find new ways to reach out.

Finally, as with caregivers, low-income or urban communities—especially those home primarily to people of color—are often described in dismissive terms. We might call communities “broken,” “ghetto,” “poor,” or “abandoned.” And certainly, economically and politically, many of our communities suffer from neglect. But often, they remain vibrant and necessary to the people who live there, and while crime, drugs, and homelessness may be problems, they are not necessarily the defining qualities of someone's home.

Simply acknowledging human complexity is a good start.

And once we begin to recognize that *all* students, families, and communities must be viewed not with a single lens, but through a complex series of lenses, we can begin to effect the change we need: a change not in our students' characters, but in the way we recognize, honor, and develop the strengths they already have.

These changes matter for two reasons: first, because our students deserve to be seen as truly and fully human, as they really are; and second, because our society's continued strength—economically and politically—requires the investment of its citizens, which we cannot have without a mutual investment in them first.

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My students find their passions in any number of circumstances. For Daniel, his passion is his music, and he works hard to find time to rap and record. For Sam, her son has inspired her to commit to a long-term job, to move into a new apartment, to look into school again as she considers what will make him happy, proud, and healthy.

Whether located in people or causes, hobbies or careers, my students' passions are wide-ranging and worthy. Their efforts cannot be ignored simply because they are not prestigious or lucrative; nor can they be degraded into mere “survival skills.” My students' passions are real, and their efforts are intense.

Bout to get on my studio grind, school grind, work grind, Daniel posted on a recent Monday morning. But he's *been* on his grind, and he knows that. It's time for the rest of us to stop looking for grit and start recognizing—and honoring, and developing—the grind that's been there all along.

Karen Zaino earned her B.A. from Swarthmore College and her M.A. from Villanova University. Now in her eleventh year in public education, she teaches in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program at Holmes High School in Covington, Kentucky. She has published articles in Education Policy and American Journal of Education and has contributed chapters to several books, including Queer Voices from the Classroom.